

Building the Evidence for Impact and Expansion

Youth Guidance Strengthens Becoming A Man

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Introduction

Young people need developmental opportunities to help them thrive, both now and into adulthood. Effective and engaging social programs for disadvantaged young people are challenging to develop, operate, and sustain. Moreover, experimental evaluations of such programs often show limited impact and replicability. To address the challenges and opportunities in the youth development field (and in many other fields), a growing number of nonprofit leaders, funders, and researchers have embraced the use of research to demonstrate, understand, and improve the impacts of social programs.

This case study draws on the experiences of one organization, Youth Guidance, and one of its programs, Becoming A Man (BAM™), to illustrate how the organization's leadership and staff use diverse evaluation findings to generate important questions in a continuous process of strengthening its evidence base.¹

BAM is a program for young men in high school, particularly young men of color living in disadvantaged communities. The program supports the young men's abilities to navigate a healthy transition to manhood by providing cognitive behavioral therapy, a peer group led by a facilitator they can relate with, and development of social emotional skills and important values. Program participants attend weekly group sessions for at least a year, receiving individual counseling, and they are exposed to a 30-lesson curriculum with diverse activities. To date, BAM has been implemented in schools in both Chicago and Boston. From 2009 to 2015, BAM was evaluated through several randomized controlled trials (RCT), with each RCT extending the program's reach to serve more and more youth across more schools, and a qualitative study to assess its impacts.

This case study shows that understanding and improving a program is an ongoing process—one that does not end with one or even multiple RCTs. The BAM program complemented impact studies with qualitative methods to more deeply understand the program's core components and mechanisms. BAM has undergone several well-designed RCTs, and the overall positive results show increases in high school graduation rates and decreases in arrests. But the results vary across different BAM sites, programs of different length, and different studies. These variations have driven Youth Guidance staff members to ask questions that are key

“We are committed to using data to drive decisions to improve our impact. We are learning about what we do that does and doesn't work. Our staff is all part of the continuous process of becoming a stronger, more effective organization. We know if we do this right that we save and transform lives.”

Michelle Adler-Morrison
Chief Executive Officer
Youth Guidance

¹ The primary author of this brief was a member of BAM's evaluation advisory group. Some of her knowledge of the program comes from previous conversations with the group, Youth Guidance staff, and Urban Labs researchers.

to understanding how to achieve greater impact. Therefore, instead of seeing the RCT results as the summation of evaluation efforts, staff see them as crucial indicators that guide the program's ongoing development.

Becoming A Man

Becoming A Man (BAM) is an innovative program for low-income adolescent boys and young men—predominantly young people of color—in grades 7 to 12 who are growing up in disadvantaged urban communities that often have high crime rates. BAM is innovative because it builds students' ability to navigate challenging environments by providing them with adult supports that includes therapeutic practice, rites of passage work, and opportunities for these young men to learn, practice, and internalize social-emotional skills. BAM addresses the challenges that hamper the potential for these young people to navigate the transition to adulthood successfully, including their lack of opportunities, their actions, and the ways that institutions, such as schools, interact with low-income youth of color. For example, common adolescent behaviors (e.g., risk-taking) are more likely to result in suspension, expulsion, or arrest for young men of color compared with young white men (Loveless, 2017).



Photos courtesy of: Youth Guidance

Becoming A Man: History and Details of the Program

In developing BAM's theory of change, Anthony Ramirez-Di Vittorio, LCPC, staff member at Youth Guidance, drew on his knowledge of key developmental tasks for adolescents, program practices for which there is substantial evidence, and his own experiences. The program has three key components. The first component, cognitive behavioral therapy, can reduce youth aggression and violence, particularly if both the program and youth engagement in it are high quality (Hoogsteder et al., 2015; Lipsey, Howell, Kelly, Chapman, & Carver, 2010). The second component includes several characteristics of programs that successfully engage adolescents. These include making the program activities engaging and safe, and fostering caring relationships among the young men with competent adult role models who have skills and knowledge that adolescents wish to develop (Greene, Lee, Constance, & Hynes, 2013; Grossman, Campbell, & Raley, 2007). The third component incorporates men's work, which Mr. Di Vittorio adopted from the men's movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

BAM includes an explicit focus on moral development and core values. BAM's six core values encompass integrity, accountability, self-determination, positive anger expression, respect for womanhood, and visionary goal setting. Some of these values are often incorporated into social-emotional learning programs (SEL) and youth development programs (CASEL, 2015; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004); however, BAM presents them as values to be shared, practiced, and integrated into one's moral landscape and identity, rather than just as social skills to be learned. In a recent article on SEL programs, Yeager (2017) notes that SEL programs that focus on skills development are less effective for adolescents than younger children. He hypothesizes that adolescents' heightened focus on status, respect, and peer relationships suggest that effective programs may need to align "adult sanctioned healthy choices—not getting pregnant, not getting arrested, etc.—with peer-sanctioned sources of status and respect" (p.10). According to Yeager, BAM is a program that promotes this alignment. (Yeager, 2017)

BAM's focus on men's work—unusual in youth programs—is the process through which young men internalize core values that provide a strong foundation for positive masculine identity. A key component of men's work, through rites of passage, is to ask challenging questions of the youth—questions that guide them to examine their behaviors, attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs with deeper insight. These rites of passage activities are incorporated into the program to support the participants' positive transition to adulthood. They also serve an important psychological function by increasing affiliation to the new group into which an adolescent is being accepted. If, as some researchers have argued, rites of passage are critical to human development, then the absence of rites of passage, or the presence of incomplete or anti-social rites of passage, pose a challenge to individuals and society (Pinnock, 1997).

BAM is primarily a school-based intervention, staffed by a BAM counselor, and is a hybrid of group counseling and mentoring interventions. The young men who participate leave class once each week to attend a group session. They also receive individual attention as needed from the counselor, who typically works full-time in the school. The BAM counselor follows a 30-lesson curriculum that centers around the six core values and includes a mixture of information, discussion, skill-building activities, and activities designed to spur reflection, group sharing, and group achievement.

BAM provides a safe place where young men can have fun, feel that they belong and are understood, and be challenged to grow. The BAM Counselor sets clear expectations for young men's interpersonal behavior in the classroom and offers them opportunities to share with one another. Preparation for taking on a new status is a fundamental element of rites of passage, and BAM provides this preparation by separating young men from their regular school life and offering them a space in which they have opportunities to practice positive masculine behavior and values with their peers. BAM participants emphasize the importance of the group discussions—which BAM calls “check-ins” (Lansing & Rapoport, 2016). BAM emphasizes the use of therapeutic approaches, which counselors often employ during check-ins or in one-on-one discussions with participants, to encourage the young men to reflect on their feelings about their experiences, their actions, and the person they want to become. But unlike counselors in typical therapeutic settings, BAM counselors also self-disclose, as a way of forging strong relationships with the young men based on shared experiences. Mr. Di Vittorio notes that by showing vulnerability, counselors become role models for participants, normalizing the experience of authentically sharing their thoughts and emotions in a safe, non-judgmental space.

Scaling Up BAM During Randomized Controlled Trials

For Youth Guidance, the experience of undergoing multiple RCTs and a qualitative interview study in a seven-year period was exciting—and difficult. As the Chief Executive Officer noted:

We expanded so rapidly—each expansion was accompanied by an RCT—that's hard. . . we had to work on individual school relationships, hiring, training staff, working out management structures while the program was operating at the schools.

To provide some idea of the pace of how Youth Guidance expanded BAM during the RCTs, BAM had one counselor (its developer)—Mr. Di Vittorio—working in one high school from 2000 through spring 2009, with occasional work in a few elementary schools. In spring 2009, Youth Guidance responded to a request for proposals from the Urban Labs at the University of Chicago (at the time called the Crime Lab) for organizations interested in undergoing a randomized controlled trial. Together, the Urban Labs and Youth Guidance raised funds from public and private sources to expand BAM and conduct the study.

Between 2013 and 2015, the Urban Labs and Youth Guidance undertook additional RCTs to replicate the initial study's findings and evaluate BAM under different conditions, again raising private and public funds to support both the research and the program. About half of the schools that had been involved in the original RCT were included, and additional schools were recruited to ensure that there were enough young men in the studies.

In 2013, Youth Guidance also received a Social Innovation Fund sub-award from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation to help it strengthen its organizational capacity to expand BAM, both in Chicago and elsewhere. By the end of the RCTs in 2015, BAM was serving 2,200 Chicago-area youth, and that number grew to over 7,000 young people in two cities in the 2018-2019 school year. The organization addressed some of the

challenges of scaling up so quickly by expanding training and other program supports. Despite the challenges, the CEO observed that the RCTs offered enormous opportunities to expand BAM:

Opportunities for program expansion are few and far between. For us, the opportunity came when we participated in a gold standard evaluation that demonstrated impact. We couldn't possibly [have done it] beforehand. We had one BAM counselor, now we have 128 across two cities.

Evaluation Results

To better illustrate how BAM has used evaluations to drive its inquiries about how to improve the program, we present brief summaries of the impact studies and the qualitative study.

The Impact Studies

BAM has been evaluated in four separate RCTs since 2009. The RCTs were implemented in schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods primarily on the south and west sides of Chicago (Heller et al., 2017; University of Chicago Crime Lab, 2018).

- **BAM 1:** The first RCT (2009-2010) randomized 2,740 students in Grades 7 to 10 in 18 schools to BAM or a control group. The intervention ran for one year. The average age of participants was 16 years, 69 percent of participants were black and 30 percent were Latino, and over one third had prior arrests.
- **BAM 2:** The second RCT (2013-2015) randomized 2,064 students in Grades 9 and 10 in nine schools to BAM for a two-year intervention. The average age of participants was 15 years, 68 percent of participants were black and 30 percent were Latino, and approximately one quarter had prior arrests.
- **BAM 2X2:** The third RCT (2013-2015) randomized 2,633 students in Grades 9 and 10 in 12 schools. Students were randomized to one of four intervention conditions: BAM only, tutoring only, BAM and tutoring, and control. The tutoring program, run by an organization separate from BAM, was implemented along with BAM at the request of Chicago Public Schools, which thought the schools were sufficiently well run to host both programs. The average age of participants was 15 years, about 48 percent of participants were black and 46 percent were Latino, and approximately one fifth had prior arrests.
- **BAM Expansion:** The fourth RCT (2014-2015) randomized an additional 2,367 students in Grade 9 to receive BAM in 21 schools, the same schools as BAM 2 and BAM 2X2. The intervention was implemented for one year. The average age of participants was 14 years, 61 percent of participants were black and 36 percent were Latino, and approximately one fifth had prior arrests.

Results

When the data from the four RCTs were pooled by the Urban Labs at the University of Chicago, several promising results emerged. BAM is associated with a 1.7 percent to 5.1 percent increase in graduation rates and a decrease of 19 percent to 35 percent in violent crime arrests. For both of these estimates, the lower end of the range is not statistically significant, while the upper end is. Variability across the results of the four RCTs emerges when they are examined individually. The BAM 2 study replicated the BAM 1 study's results showing that BAM had positive impacts on reducing arrests for violent crime by 45 to 50 percent and other crime by 37 to 43 percent, and on significantly improving school engagement (Heller et al., 2017). The other two studies showed no effects or negative impact. Table 1 outlines the individual results for each of the four RCTs.

Table 1. BAM RCT Results^A

BAM Participants compared to Control Group

STUDY	SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT ^B	ARRESTS ^C
BAM 1	Better	Better (violent and other arrests)
BAM 2	Better	Better (violent and all arrests)
BAM 2X2	No Findings	Worse (all and other arrests)
BAM EXPANSION	Worse	No Findings

^A “Better” or “Worse” are used to indicate the direction of statistically significant change at the $p < 0.10$ level.

^B School engagement is a composite measure of GPA, days present, and enrollment.

^C Arrests included all arrests, violent arrests, and other arrests. Other arrests included violations such as disorderly conduct, trespassing, and weapons offenses.

The results indicate that BAM can have a positive effect on important outcomes. The variability in impacts seen among the four studies leads to additional questions about *how* the program works, through what mechanisms, and under what circumstances.

The Qualitative Study

In 2015, Youth Guidance commissioned Chapin Hall to conduct a qualitative study of BAM to better understand how the program works (Lansing & Rapoport, 2016). The authors focused on how young people and counselors formed relationships that permitted the work of the intervention—which requires sharing of personal stories and emotions, and therefore a high level of trust—to proceed. The study included interviews with 29 high school youth and 10 BAM counselors. By the time of their interviews, almost all the young men were in their second year of BAM, though the young men varied in other domains that might influence their experiences in the program (e.g., their program attendance, the credentials of their BAM counselors).

The qualitative study asked four major questions:

- What is BAM? What are the experiences of young people who attend BAM?
- How is BAM working? What are the relationships like within the program?
- What are the potential program mechanisms that foster young men’s development?
- What are the challenges and opportunities of implementing BAM?

The study’s authors found that the BAM youth viewed the authentic relationships that the BAM counselors forged with them as fundamental to their experience in BAM. Those relationships developed through several program practices. BAM counselors offer youth a safe space, consistency, fun and engaging activities, respect, and security. The program’s engaging activities introduced participants to new experiences and BAM’s core values. Those new experiences included check-ins, which were critical for allowing young people to explore and share their physical, intellectual, cognitive, and emotional states. Both the program staff and the youth reported that the activities contributed to the development of strong

relationships with the BAM counselor and a strong sense of belonging in the group. This finding is in line with other empirical findings in the psychological literature regarding how a sense of belonging contributes to growth in self-awareness, empathy, integrated identity, personal agency, and decision-making (Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, 2009).

Questions Raised by the Evaluations

Inconsistent results across experimental evaluations such as those seen in the BAM RCTs are not unusual, but they do need to be understood. Scientists across many disciplines are concerned about the challenges of replicating experiments (Nosek, 2015; Valentine et al., 2011). There are multiple hypotheses to explain results that do not replicate across studies. Increasing evidence demonstrates that the same programs can show different impacts across studies depending upon program features; these features include how often the program meets, where meetings take place, what levels of participation are obtained, and how well program staff are trained (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). Other evidence demonstrates that contextual factors, such as characteristics of the population and the surrounding environment, influence program impacts (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). In addition, if there are changes in local conditions during the time between studies for reasons other than the intervention under consideration, then the relative size of the effects on the intervention participants compared with the control group also changes.

The evaluations also raise important new questions for Youth Guidance to answer. By doing so, Youth Guidance can better understand BAM's effects, deepen its impact, understand its program mechanisms, and scale up effectively. Questions posed by the BAM staff include:

1. How much exposure to BAM do youth require to achieve positive outcomes?

The BAM RCTs rely on intent-to-treat (ITT) analyses of the BAM participants. In these analyses, the researchers compare the outcomes of participants randomly assigned to BAM treatment, regardless of whether or not they actually attend BAM, with those who are randomly assigned to a control group. Including treatment participants who do not attend BAM or who only go occasionally and those who go regularly maintains the integrity of the random assignment.

However, ITT analyses cannot tell researchers how much exposure to the program is required in order to observe program effects, and the answer to this question is crucial. Must young people be exposed to all 30 lessons to achieve program results? BAM thinks that they do not since one-year effects from two of the RCTs demonstrate the program's effectiveness, and in any given school, between 17 and 23 lessons were delivered each year. However, the first RCT demonstrated that while the school engagement effects

“As a funder, EMCF values the ongoing learning achieved when organizations like Youth Guidance regard evaluation as a journey that informs and improves practice. Two randomized controlled trials have demonstrated that BAM has profound impacts on youth—both in reducing arrests and improving school engagement. Variability in data across so many studies is unsurprising and underscores the importance of evaluation as part of a continuous learning agenda. Youth Guidance’s inquisitive approach to the variability found in the additional studies illustrates the degree to which the organization is committed to learning and improving through ongoing evaluation.”

Jehan Velji

Former Senior Portfolio Director

Edna McConnell Clark Foundation²

² This quote was verified on December 19, 2018

persisted, the arrest results did not. Could that tendency be reversed if young men stayed in BAM for longer periods of time? Although the second round of RCTs was designed with two years of program implementation to help answer this question, the results are not yet available.

2. How can counselors be best supported to ensure that they provide high quality BAM programming?

During the initial expansion in 2009 for the random assignment study, Mr. Di Vittorio enhanced BAM counselor training by providing intensive coaching on the core values and curriculum fidelity. However, subsequent expansions for further studies indicated the need for greater capacity to coach new counselors, and Youth Guidance staff reported that coaching during the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years was cursory. According to Mr. Di Vittorio, “There was a lot of bad BAM going on. There was also a lot of great BAM going on.” The programming quality was inconsistent, and Youth Guidance recognized that it had to think about how to better train and coach BAM staff. In the years since, Youth Guidance has significantly enhanced its training and coaching model by adding Curriculum Specialists who are matched throughout the year with counselors to support high-quality BAM delivery.

3. What contextual factors drive the variability of BAM’s impact?

There are many reasons why the impact of BAM may have varied across the studies and schools [see (Weiss, Bloom, & Brock, 2013) for a good discussion of the factors that can explain differential impacts across evaluation sites]. As the program moves forward, Youth Guidance wants to understand that variation better and put strategies in place to maximize impact. While all youth can likely benefit from BAM, the program is designed for youth who may need targeted support; thus, the variability of the results may reflect differences in student characteristics. A key finding from the impact studies was that BAM’s study participant characteristics varied by study and school site. For instance, the students in the BAM 2X2 and BAM Expansion studies had lower baseline arrest rates than those in the BAM 2 schools as well as in the BAM 1 study. In another example, the schools in the BAM 2 study were majority black, while the schools in the BAM 2X2 study had much higher levels of Hispanic students. The racial or ethnic composition of the samples might matter because Hispanic youth in the United States are generally more likely to live with both parents than are black youth (Wildsmith, Scott, Guzman, & Cook, 2014). An underlying premise of BAM is that young men in urban areas are growing up without either physical or emotional access to fathers, and the program is specifically designed to help those young men.

Another contextual factor potentially driving variability in BAM’s impact could be the schools where the studies were conducted. The schools in the BAM 2X2 studies were better organized, according to school quality ratings assessed by the Chicago Public School central administration, and had a cluster in more highly resourced communities that did not exist with the BAM 2 schools. Also, in the time between the first and second rounds of studies, the Chicago Public Schools showed significant improvements in academic measures including graduation rates, test scores, and college matriculation when compared to other districts both in Illinois and across the country (Kelleher, 2018). Such improvements could have led to lower need, in some schools, for BAM to address the outcomes targeted in the second group of studies (although BAM may have positive effects on youth development in general for all types of students). However, other questions remain despite these considerations. At the individual school level, what role does the school leadership play in the success of the program? What characteristics of the program staff, if any, contribute to stronger program effects? Trying to disentangle which of these differences mattered to BAM’s impact was challenging and inconclusive; this was partly due to data limitations since these research questions were not part of the original design.

4. Why does BAM work?

Understanding why a program works is critical for efforts to monitor it for quality, scale it up, and adapt it when necessary. Programs such as BAM consist of multiple components. We refer to the subset of program components that are responsible for driving key outcomes as the core components. Identifying the subset of core components is one of the most challenging tasks that programs face.

Youth Guidance has some knowledge about BAM's core mechanisms. According to the Urban Labs' study, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is the reason BAM works because it helps the young men in the program to slow their automatic—and highly emotional—responses to situations that can erupt into violence. To test their hypothesis, the researchers conducted an experiment within the BAM 2 study to examine young men's response time to a provocation. They found that response time was slower for BAM-involved youth, indicating reduction in automaticity.

CBT is a complex intervention approach that includes efforts to restructure cognitive processes and provide participants with concrete skills to help them better navigate their daily lives. It is likely that CBT affects the BAM participants' acceptance of the core values, thus supporting behavioral change. As part of BAM, the rites of passage work is intended to work in conjunction with CBT to help young men address trauma in their lives.

The Chapin Hall qualitative study provides evidence that another core component of BAM is the counselor's role in creating a safe space, providing engaging activities, and fostering relationships that permit the young men to share with the counselor and other members of the group. These approaches permit the young men to engage and examine their thoughts and feelings in a non-judgmental setting. However, additional research is needed to determine if and how each of these approaches contributes to outcomes.

The men's work and the development of BAM participants' core values have not been systematically examined as core components. What role does the men's work play in BAM? What is the importance of the core values? Do either of these elements drive outcomes? These are critical questions about the program model for which there is little empirical research and no answers yet.

5. Does BAM improve participants' social-emotional and psychological well-being?

The Youth Guidance staff are also curious about BAM participants' social-emotional development and psychological well-being. Young men in general can struggle in social-emotional development, in part because norms for young men encourage them to hide or restrict their emotions (Jansz, 1995). The Chapin Hall qualitative study describes how BAM develops participants' sense of belonging, which supports them in developing identity, personal agency, decision-making skills, emotional intelligence, and empathy. These are critical competencies for healthy adolescent development and predict future success in school and beyond (Youth.gov, n.d.). Yet the growth of these competencies is notoriously difficult to measure. In fact, the second round of BAM RCTs included surveys to measure differences in treatment vs. control groups for various non-cognitive skills, but failed to identify significant differences. Clearly there are psychosocial factors that underlie the behavioral changes seen in BAM participants. Undertaking a more focused study of these competencies would help Youth Guidance understand the differential impacts of BAM on youth at different risk levels and provide the field with better insight into how positive change can occur for adolescents.

Conclusion

Youth Guidance's process of building an evidence base for BAM is a long-term undertaking that began with the ambitious first step of a randomized controlled trial. Through the various RCTs and the qualitative study, the organization's staff discovered the challenges, risks, and rewards of partnering with external researchers. In particular, Youth Guidance learned how difficult it is to carry out large experimental studies that must be tailored to a program's design, desired outcomes, and participant population. They determined that additional studies, such as the qualitative interview study they commissioned, were needed to address questions that the RCTs could not. They have also developed questions for future research, which include the following:

- Does the program work for young men with varying risk levels, including, for example, both those who have been arrested and those who have not; or those who live in more advantaged communities?
- Does the program work for young men of varying races and ethnicities? In other words, is it broadly relevant to young men from different cultures, or does it need to be tailored?
- Does the program work consistently across different types of schools and districts?
- What is the impact of BAM on youth development outcomes and other social-emotional skills?

Some of these questions may be answered through data already available to Youth Guidance's staff or the Urban Labs study team. But data collected for one set of studies does not necessarily allow researchers to address new research questions that emerge from the studies. Thus it is critical to support the organization's capacity to ask additional questions and collect additional information about its programs, such as the types of outcomes achieved, the training program staff need, the places in which the program can be effectively implemented, and the young men for whom it is most successful. Results of the existing evaluations will inform the approach Youth Guidance takes in new cities, and the results from those evaluations will enable BAM to further expand and develop its evidence base.

Youth Guidance's experiences with evaluation demonstrate that deep engagement with different types of evaluation can profoundly affect how an organization thinks about its programming, the infrastructure needed to support it, and the population the program serves. Organizations with fewer financial resources than Youth Guidance, those that serve small populations, those located far from researchers with experience in RCTs, or those that are obligated to serve everyone eligible for their program may not be able to undertake an RCT. But even with substantial barriers to conducting an RCT, they can use other types of evaluation to better understand and strengthen their programs.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Wendy Fine, Michelle Adler-Morrison, and Anthony Ramirez-Di Vittorio for their helpfulness in the preparation of this brief. They participated in interviews to help us better understand the BAM model, reviewed drafts of the manuscript, and provided access to BAM materials and evaluation results.

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