

# At·A·Glance



The Annie E. Casey Foundation

## FAITH AND ACTION: IMPROVING THE LIVES OF AT-RISK YOUTH

Several years ago, the United Way of Massachusetts Bay began to notice that good youth work was being done throughout Boston by non-traditional social service organizations, institutions as common in many low-income communities as the corner store: churches. These small community-based ministries were reaching out to youth and making a difference in their lives.

The United Way found that faith-based organizations – although less visible than mainstream human service organizations – were better able to understand and respond to the needs of their communities. With their 24/7 approach to service delivery, these small inner-city ministries were creating supportive environments for neighborhood youth and their families.

U.S. government research shows that one young person in two faces some

traditional methods of treatment, correction or incarceration.

### Supporting Communities Through Faith

The United Way and the Annie E. Casey Foundation believe that children do well when their families do well, and families do better when they live in supportive neighborhoods. They also believe that by funding faith-based organizations and helping them measure the results of their work, these organizations can

helped young people improve their academic performance, others helped youth stay in school. Some programs focused on the entire family, others worked at reconnecting at-risk youth to their communities. Each of the programs thought it could, and would, make a difference in the lives of at-risk youth.

### Faith and Action

The Faith and Action initiative has received praise for its focus on at-risk youth, its commitment to encouraging the use of spiritual resources, and its emphasis on outreach into communities and neighborhoods. The increased capacity of faith-based organizations has strengthened the human and social service capacity of entire communities. As faith-based institutions become more competent at delivering services in formal and predictable ways, communities are assured diverse and increasingly comprehensive means of addressing the needs of children and families. A variety of points of entry into the social services increase the likelihood that needs are being met and that neighborhoods are healthy. This *At a Glance* documents the process of helping faith-based groups measure program outcomes, the outcomes achieved by the faith-based groups and the valuable contribution they make to the lives of at-risk youth and other vulnerable populations.

50% of youth in the U.S. face some need for special attention to make it safely through childhood.



need for special attention to make it safely through childhood. One young person in four is at serious risk. The vast majority of at-risk youth have one of the following risk factors:

- they come from a family with a history of criminal violence;
- they have been a victim of abuse or neglect;
- they live in violent neighborhoods; or,
- they abuse drugs and alcohol.

Because of these factors, it has been difficult to get sustained positive results for the millions of at-risk youth, using

improve their ability to have an impact on young people, their families and their communities.

Many faith-based organizations, while doing good work, experience difficulty documenting the impact of that work. They don't have the capacity to demonstrate they are making a difference, or they don't recognize the value of measurement.

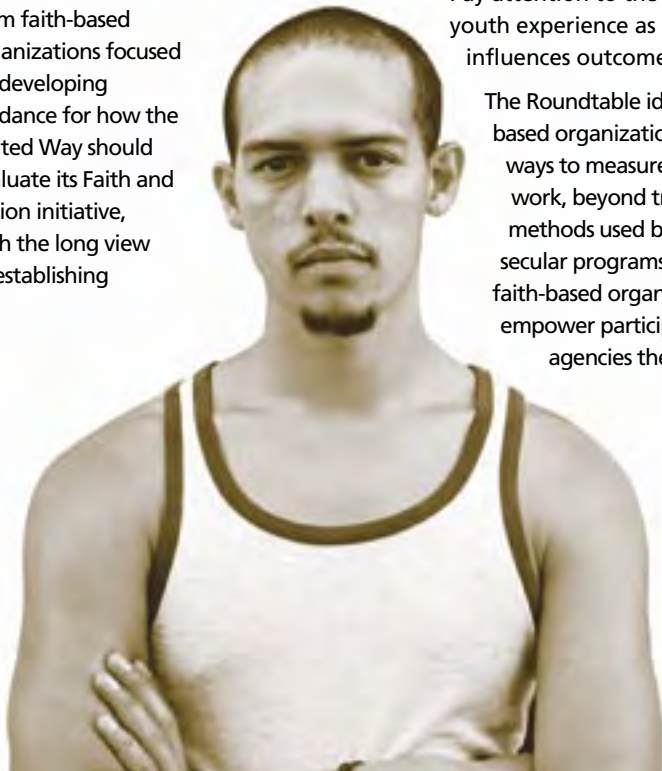
With funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the United Way worked with faith-based organizations it funded in the Boston area to build the capacity for measuring outcomes and the results of their work. Some of these programs

Through its Faith and Action initiative, the United Way funded 22 faith-based organizations that delivered programs and services for at-risk youth. While often offering the same services as non-faith-based organizations, faith-based institutions are unique in that they identify themselves as living out some form of faith commitment to God.

Faith-based programs acknowledge they are accountable to their congregations, their clients, their communities and to God, to show that their work has value in transforming the lives of at-risk youth.

**Defining Measurement**

At the outset of the evaluation, the United Way convened a Roundtable to determine program outcomes. Funding agencies, key researchers and evaluators, program managers and representatives from faith-based organizations focused on developing guidance for how the United Way should evaluate its Faith and Action initiative, with the long view of establishing



models for the funding and evaluation of faith-based programs more widely.

The Roundtable determined that faith-based programs should:

- Measure spiritual outcomes, new knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors achieved by the programs.

1/4 of young people are at serious risk.



- Seek to better understand the importance of relationship building, along many dimensions, in the structure of faith-based programs.
- Pay attention to the level of difficulty youth experience as a factor that influences outcomes.

The Roundtable identified that faith-based organizations need different ways to measure the results of their work, beyond traditional research methods used by the majority of secular programs. Methods used by faith-based organizations need to empower participants and the agencies themselves.

**Evaluating Results**

Because of the importance in determining how participants feel about the way the faith component of the program changed their lives, personal testimony becomes a critical factor in faith-based program measurement. Consequently, the Faith

and Action initiative employed an ethnographic research method – storytelling – through the Youth Storytelling Project.

The United Way also contracted a researcher to conduct a community impact assessment to determine whether the programs were making an impact and delivering positive outcomes. A sample of Faith and Action programs was compared to a sample of non-Faith and Action programs – all delivering programs and services for at-risk youth. To determine community impact, researchers also interviewed community agents including local residents, local business and service providers, police, government workers, and the clergy, as well as each program director. In addition to evaluating the organizations themselves, the United Way ensured that each Faith and Action program had the skills to collect outcomes measurement data. Each faith-based organization received outcomes measurement training and technical assistance, and could attend a train-the-trainers workshop to build their capacity to train other faith-based groups.

► Questions for *Making Connections* sites and community leaders to address

- 1 Have you set goals and outcomes for your faith-based organization?
- 2 How do you collect program feedback from clients? from staff? from program directors?
- 3 How do you measure program results?
- 4 How can your *Making Connections* site team work together with other faith-based organizations to measure program outcomes?
- 5 How can you get the community involved in measuring faith-based initiatives?
- 6 How can your *Making Connections* site teams share what they learn with each other?

# The Impact of Faith and Action

Faith-based organizations are afforded opportunities that traditional secular institutions are not; they can reach sub-cultures of at-risk youth and families who may view the church or a ministry as the most accessible means of having their needs met. Because of this, they are successful in meeting the needs of at-risk youth.

Faith-based organizations connect youth to services and supports that are culturally appropriate. They connect young people and their families to social networks, to role models and mentors. They help youth develop positive social relationships with adults, with peers, with parents, teachers and school. They connect youth to their families and their communities. And community agencies have the opportunity to connect to one another. Most of all, Faith and Action programs connect youth to themselves.

## Youth Storytelling Project

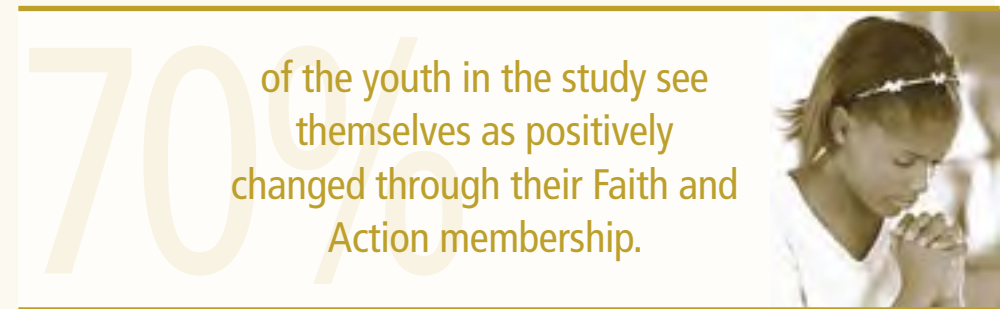
Through the Youth Storytelling Project, ethnographic researchers conclude there is a generation of young people who have, and believe they have, a prosperous future. They are connected to others and value these connections. They believe and act on the belief that they can achieve great things and reach new heights.

Seven out of 10 at-risk youth see themselves as positively changed people through their Faith and Action membership. Most often, the young people who experience positive change identify their past undesirable behavior as a result of a lack of communication skills, including language ability, comprehension and listening skills. They see themselves changing for the better when they are able to communicate with others, co-operate on shared projects, listen, control their emotions and become accountable to parents, other adults and God.

Through Faith and Action programs, young people have improved their grades, learned social skills, found and practiced new ways to explore their faith and meet new people who positively impacted their lives. Some youth have found their voice and started believing in themselves and others.

When asked to name the most important things about their program that contribute to personal success, youth talk about the faith factor more than anything

Through the community impact assessment, researchers conclude that four elements significantly contribute to a faith-based program's success:



else. They name a number of faith resources as key factors in their growth, such as feeling loved, having hope for the future, learning about God and one's vocation in life, and gaining trust in the adult community around them.

Of equal importance is what youth learned about themselves. They frequently credited the program with "hooking it up" and making life seem possible for them.

## Community Impact Assessment

Through the community impact assessment, researchers conclude that the United Way, by funding Faith and Action programs, is serving the needs of its target population – Boston's youth most in need.

Community agents find there is little difference between the approaches of non-faith-based organizations and Faith and Action agencies regarding the task of youth development. When talking about success indicators, community agents leave out any reference to religious or spiritual language and tend to view the two groups identically, with prevention being an important part of what both faith-based and secular programs offer. The key difference is the explicit appeal to religion and theological resources as a way to get and sustain behavior change.

Faith-based programs are seen as having at least one faith-oriented goal, and researchers conclude that having a faith-oriented goal component is absolutely central to the community's understanding of this type of organization.

- leadership: a person who is humble and compassionate and sees training as important
- program: continually changing to meet youth where they are
- community: knowledgeable about the program and refers youth to it
- organization: a strong and engaged board of directors that understand the value of program outcomes measurement

Community agents also recognize the value of the faith component in bringing about positive change in the lives of at-risk youth. They discern that elements of a religious nature weave throughout Faith and Action agency goals, ground the motivations of agency personnel and inform the ways these organizations achieve their goals.

## A Definition of Faith

Faith-based groups in the Faith and Action initiative differ from non-faith-based organizations in that they identify themselves as living out some form of faith commitment to God. How these commitments are manifested vary from faith-based agency to agency.

Faithfulness takes many forms, some of which make the worth of faith-based groups and non-faith groups appear similar. What differentiates the two groups, however, is that Faith and Action programs also focus on faith as a means of transformation and sustained change.

# ▶ ▶ ▶ Addressing the problems, fulfilling the needs

Many practices, programs and policies exist that help faith-based organizations reach out to at-risk youth.

To learn more about how organizations can gauge program success, please see the full report at

[www.aecf.org/publications](http://www.aecf.org/publications)

## Inside Out: tools to help faith-based organizations measure, learn and grow

In the spirit of giving back to faith-based groups and the community, the United Way of Massachusetts Bay took what it learned from its Faith and Action initiative and, with support from the Casey Foundation, developed a guide to help faith-based groups measure the social and inspirational results of their programs for at-risk youth and people in need.

Presented in an easy-to-use manual, *Inside Out* offers faith-based organizations a common way to understand program measurement and the important role it can play in helping groups learn and improve their service delivery. The guide is based on the premise that measuring the results of faith-based programs is unique. While *Inside Out* shares some of the processes used in secular program measurement, it focuses on the role that faith, religion and spirituality can have in making positive change in the lives of young people.

The guide provides tools to help faith-based programs capture what their programs have accomplished and share this learning with others.

The capacity to do program measurement already exists within faith-based organizations. By harnessing what many programs do informally in an intentional way, *Inside Out* provides

many organizations with a mechanism to improve, to learn, to grow and to celebrate the impacts being made on the physical, emotional and spiritual lives of our most precious resource – our youth.

### ▶ Six key steps for program planning and measurement

#### 1. Define community needs

Start by identifying a program need. What social or community problem will your program address? Be as specific as possible and include stakeholders and program participants in the discussion. For faith-based programs, having youth or other vulnerable populations experience faith, spirituality or a closer relationship with God might be one way to address your community's need.

#### 2. Search for solutions

Define your program's vision by imagining what a positive outcome could look like for your target audience. Vision ties spiritual and secular goals together – you may want youth to develop a personal relationship with God as a way to avoid at-risk behaviors. Give stakeholders an opportunity to provide a sense of the current reality and include them in brainstorming solutions.

#### 3. Develop a plan

Define goals and outcomes so you'll know what success looks like. Determine what you expect to happen, what activities you will be doing to meet these expectations, and the resources required to carry out the activities.

#### 4. Implement the plan

Put your plan in to action and ensure faith-related values and resources find their way into implementation. Have faith in what you're doing, but be flexible if minor adjustments are required or actions need to be fine-tuned.

#### 5. Assess the outcomes

Outcomes are what your program is all about. Prepare outcome and impact evaluations by tracking your planning process from inputs to outcomes. Be sure to measure the faith factor by tracking what role faith played in the transformation. By clearly defining your outcomes and collecting data you can and will use, you can better reflect on how the program ran.

#### 6. Share the lessons learned

Make your report comprehensive and useful, and be sure to collect feedback from your stakeholders. Distribute your report to other faith-based organizations serving youth and other at-risk populations so they can benefit from your experience.



## Read the complete reports

To obtain copies of the full reports, visit: [www.aecf.org/publications](http://www.aecf.org/publications)

### Faith and Action: Improving the Lives of At-Risk Youth, Final Report, August 2003

### InsideOut: Tools to Help Faith-based Organizations Measure, Learn and Grow

Reports Prepared by the United Way of Massachusetts Bay with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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### The Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for vulnerable children and families in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of United Parcel Service, and his siblings, who named the foundation in honor of their mother.



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