

# **New Leash on Life USA's Young Adult Reentry & Diversion Program**

**Cohorts 11 and 12 Survey Results**

Prepared by:  
Caitlin J. Taylor, Ph.D.  
La Salle University  
Department of Sociology & Criminal Justice  
December 2025

## **Overview**

In response to the rise in gun violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, the City of Philadelphia implemented a comprehensive public safety strategy. A key aspect of this approach involves investing in community-based programs that work directly with individuals most at risk of involvement in firearm-related violence—often shaped by factors such as age, gender, race or ethnicity, economic status, and neighborhood. These investments represent a shift away from relying solely on law enforcement, instead supporting community organizations that tackle the deeper, systemic causes of violence through more holistic interventions aimed at long-term change.

## **About This Report**

This report presents findings from a research collaboration that evaluated a diversion program led by New Leash on Life USA (hereafter referred to as New Leash), which is part of Philadelphia’s broader violence prevention effort. The study had two primary goals:

1. To identify participants’ background factors that may influence their risk of firearm-related violence and contact with the justice system.
2. To assess which aspects of the program participants found helpful or in need of improvement in achieving violence and recidivism reduction goals.

## **About New Leash on Life USA**

New Leash is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit that aims to interrupt cycles of incarceration by offering justice-involved individuals personalized, holistic support—centered around the healing power of the human-animal bond. The organization’s mission is to provide a “fresh start” to those reentering society, helping them avoid future justice system contact, while also rescuing dogs most at-risk of euthanasia.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, New Leash’s work focused on an in-custody program at the Philadelphia Department of Prisons (PDP), which continued through reentry. When COVID-19 limited access to PDP and other correctional facilities, New Leash created the Young Adult Reentry and Diversion (YARD) program, extending its work into the community. The YARD program serves young adults aged 18–24 from historically oppressed neighborhoods, with its diversion arm focusing on those facing criminal charges for the first time. Referrals come from agencies like the Defender Association of Philadelphia and the District Attorney’s Office. The program targets young people who show early warning signs of involvement in gun violence.

YARD offers an alternative to traditional prosecution or incarceration, providing participants with job readiness training, behavioral therapy, life skills coaching, and opportunities for personal growth through dog care and training. Over a five-to-six-month period, the program supports participants in developing self-regulation and emotional

awareness. Those who complete the program without re-arrest are eligible for case dismissal and record expungement. In doing so, YARD aims to tackle the root causes of gun violence and reduce recidivism through targeted, individualized services.

## **Research Design and Methods**

This report presents findings from intake and exit surveys administered to participants in YARD Cohorts 11 and 12. The survey included questions about participants' social backgrounds, neighborhood conditions, perceptions of safety, program experiences, and expectations for the future. Given the sensitivity of these topics, all surveys were administered confidentially and analyzed anonymously.

Intake surveys were distributed on paper at the New Leash office during participants' initial weeks in the program. Exit surveys were distributed on paper at the New Leash office as well as at the final status hearing at the Philadelphia courthouse. As compensation for their time, participants received a \$10 gift card. They were assured that their decision to complete the survey was entirely voluntary, would remain confidential, and would have no impact on their program standing or legal case. Informed consent was obtained through a paper consent form included with the survey. Paper responses were securely stored and later entered into a secure digital platform for analysis.

All research procedures were reviewed and approved by La Salle University's Institutional Review Board.

## **Results**

The following section presents findings from the intake and exit surveys administered to participants in YARD Cohorts 11 and 12. These findings shed light on the program's reach and relevance for young adults at risk of criminal justice involvement, highlighting both successes and areas for growth.

Out of a total 28 participants across the two cohorts, 24 participants completed the intake survey and 22 completed the exit survey.

### **Participant Demographics**

Table 1 below displays the demographic characteristics of YARD participants in Cohorts 11 and 12. Among the participants who completed the demographic section of the intake survey, 18 identified as male and 2 identified as female, with an average age of 20. For those who completed the exit survey, 19 identified as male and 2 as female, with an average age of 21. The majority of participants identified as Black (80 percent in both surveys), with 40 percent of intake survey participants and 18 percent of exit survey participants identifying as Hispanic or Latino. This demographic profile is consistent with the program's targeted efforts to serve those

most impacted by systemic inequality and overrepresentation in the criminal legal system. The racial and ethnic composition of these cohorts highlights the urgency of culturally responsive programming that acknowledges and addresses the historical and structural contexts shaping participants' lives. These data also reflect broader patterns of disproportionate criminal justice system contact among young Black and Brown men in urban settings like Philadelphia.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

	Intake Survey		Exit Survey	
	N	Average or Percentage	N	Average or Percentage
Age	19	20	21	21
Male	20	90%	21	91%
Race: Black	20	80%	20	80%
Ethnicity: Hispanic or Latino	18	40%	16	19%

### **Criminal Case and Entry into the YARD Program**

The intake survey prompted participants to share information about their current criminal case and their entry into the YARD program. All 24 of the respondents indicated that they entered the program as diversion (as opposed to early parole). Sixty three percent of respondents reported that they had spent time in a Philadelphia jail either for their current case or a prior a case.

Participants shared that their arrest and criminal case affected their ability to manage daily responsibilities in multiple areas of life. Specifically, 17 percent reported negative impacts on childcare, 29 percent on education, 75 percent on employment, 33 percent on family relationships, and eight percent on access to healthcare.

The majority of participants entered the program as a result of their defense attorney (12 by a private defense attorney, 8 by a public defender, 1 by a district attorney, and 1 by a judge).

### **Urgent Needs and YARD Program Goals**

The intake survey also documented the extent to which participants entered the program with a variety of urgent needs and concerns. One survey question invited participants to identify their top five current needs. As detailed in the table below, the most commonly selected needs were staying out of jail, avoiding being arrest or violated on probation or parole, finding and keeping a job, and feeling safe in the community.

Table 2. Urgent Needs and Concerns at Intake (n=24)

	N	%
Staying out of jail	24	100%
Feeling safe in my community	10	42%
Avoiding being arrested or violated on probation/parole (if applicable)	15	63%
Finding and/or keeping housing	5	21%
Finding and/or keeping a job	14	58%
Getting social services, therapy, or treatment	2	8%
Getting healthcare/health services	0	0%
Family reunification	1	4%
Childcare and/or family care	2	8%
Reliable and/or affordable transportation	5	21%
Reliable and regular food access	2	8%
Personal care/hygiene items	3	13%
Reliable and/or consistent internet connection	0	0%
Getting a cell phone	2	8%
Meeting your probation/parole officer (if applicable)	0	0%

Presumably in an effort to address some of these concerns, over half of participants were receiving at least some services from other providers. Three participants were already receiving general reentry support, five employment services, one housing assistance, two mental health support, two physical health support, eight education services, four mentorship, and two support for accessing benefits.

With the most urgent needs and existing supports identified, participants were then asked to share their goals for the YARD program. Table 3 demonstrates that the most common goals were avoiding future criminal justice system involvement (arrest and incarceration), feeling ready to start a career, and getting a full-time job.

Table 3. YARD Program Goals at Intake (n=24)

	N	%
Getting a full-time job	15	63%
Getting a part-time job	3	13%
Enrolling in school (GED program, college)	9	38%
Improving my mental health	10	42%
Avoiding getting arrested in the future	21	88%
Avoiding getting incarcerated in the future	15	63%
Feeling ready to start a career	17	71%
Becoming financially literate	11	46%
Learning life skills	5	21%
Feeling safer in my community	8	33%
Getting stable housing or being on a pathway to stable housing	12	50%
Meeting my basic daily needs for food, clothing, and shelter	4	17%
Learning how to care for and bond with dogs	2	8%

### Gun Carrying Behaviors

The intake survey also invited respondents to share their prior, current, and future expectations for carrying a firearm. Indicating that this is a population with high levels of gun carrying behaviors, 91 percent of respondents reported having been arrested and/or charged with a gun possession offense and 95 percent reported that it was a gun possession offense that lead to their participation in the YARD program. A third of respondents shared that they had carried a gun in the three months prior to being arrested and enrolled in the YARD program.

Table 4 below presents the most commonly cited reasons participants reported carrying a gun, with self-protection emerging as the dominant motivation. Considering that the majority of YARD participants reside in environments marked by persistent violence, community instability, and constrained access to reliable sources of safety, concerns about personal security are not surprising (see section titled Perceived Safety and Victimization History below for further detail on perceptions of safety and exposure to violence).

Table 4. Reasons for Carrying a Gun (n=22)

	N	%
Self-protection / out of personal fear	21	96%
Family or friend protection / out of fear for others	9	41%
To enhance my social status	1	5%
To commit crime	0	100%

## Neighborhood Disorder

While exposure to violence and perceptions of safety are examined in greater detail in a later section, the intake survey also asked participants to report on their experiences with various forms of neighborhood disorder. As shown in Table 5, participants largely reside in communities characterized by relatively high levels of disorder, which are conditions that are frequently associated with elevated violence and broader social instability. Notably, a majority of respondents reported the following types of disorder were either often or sometimes present in their neighborhoods: cigarettes/cigars in the gutter, empty beer bottles, garbage or litter on street or sidewalk, painted over graffiti, abandoned cars, condoms on the sidewalk, adults loitering or congregating, drinking alcohol in public, peer groups with gang indicators present, public intoxication, adults fighting or arguing in a hostile manner, and people selling drugs.

Table 5. Neighborhood Disorder (n=21 to 23)

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Presence of cigarettes/ cigars in the gutter	57%	17%	17%	9%
Empty beer bottles	44%	26%	17%	13%
Garbage or litter on street or sidewalk	76%	5%	19%	0%
Graffiti painted over	43%	19%	24%	14%
Gang graffiti	29%	14%	29%	29%
Abandoned cars	38%	38%	10%	14%
Condoms on the sidewalk	29%	29%	19%	24%
Needles/syringes on street or sidewalk	29%	5%	27%	38%
Political message graffiti	19%	19%	19%	43%
Adults loitering or congregating	46%	27%	18%	9%
Drinking alcohol in public	50%	32%	32%	5%
Peer groups with gang indicators present	46%	23%	18%	14%
Public intoxication	62%	14%	19%	5%
Adults fighting/arguing in hostile manner	30%	35%	30%	4%
Selling drugs	64%	23%	9%	5%
Sex workers	23%	32%	14%	27%

## Perceived Safety and Victimization History

Both the intake and exit surveys offered insight into YARD participants' perceptions of personal safety and histories of victimization. As shown in Table 6, more than one quarter of respondents to the intake survey reported feeling either not at all safe or somewhat unsafe in their daily lives. By the time of the exit survey, this proportion had declined to 10 percent. Given the study's design -- specifically, the use of anonymous surveys that were not linked at the individual level between intake and exit surveys -- it is not possible to determine whether participation in the YARD program directly contributed to changes in perceived safety.

Nonetheless, the observed shift suggests the possibility of a meaningful program-related impact on perceived safety.

Table 6. Perceived Safety  
*On a daily basis, how safe do you feel?*

	Intake Survey (n=22)		Exit Survey (n=20)	
	N	%	N	%
Not safe at all	3	14%	1	5%
Somewhat unsafe	3	14%	1	5%
Somewhat safe	10	46%	11	55%
Fully safe	6	27%	7	35%

Both surveys also invited participants to share their exposure to violence and trauma. Table 7 below indicates that close to a third of participants have been the victim of a violent crime, over a quarter have been in a serious car or work accident, and over 40 percent have had a close family member die violently.

Table 7. Exposure to Violence and Trauma  
*Have you ever...*

	Intake Survey (n=19)		Exit Survey (n=20)	
	N	%	N	%
been a victim of a violent crime	6	32%	6	30%
been a victim of a property crime	2	11%	5	25%
been in a serious car or work accident	5	26%	6	30%
been in a natural disaster	4	21%	4	20%
had or have a life-threatening illness, like cancer, AIDS, or a heart attack	0	0%	0	0%
been physically harmed by a parent, family member/friend, caretaker, or teacher before turning 18	3	16%	3	15%
been attacked, beaten, or mugged	5	26%	4	20%
been made or pressured into having some type of unwanted sexual contact	1	5%	2	10%
been in any other situation in which you were seriously injured or feared you might be seriously injured or killed	7	37%	2	10%
had a close family member or friend die violently, like in a serious car crash, assault, or shooting	8	42%	9	45%
witnessed someone get seriously injured or killed, or you feared someone would be seriously injured or killed	8	42%	7	35%

## Mental and Physical Health

Participants also shared their self-ranked levels of physical and mental health on both the intake and exit surveys. As shown in Table 8, participants reported generally positive perceptions of their physical health at both time points, with the majority rating their health as good, very good, or excellent. Notably, the exit survey reflects a modest shift toward higher self-rated physical health, including increases in the proportion of participants reporting excellent or very good health and a decline in fair or poor ratings. While the small sample size and unlinked surveys preclude causal conclusions, these patterns are consistent with a slight improvement in perceived physical well-being over the course of the program.

Table 8. Physical Health  
*In general, how is your physical health?*

	Intake Survey (n=20)		Exit Survey (n=20)	
	N	%	N	%
Excellent	3	15%	5	25%
Very good	4	20%	5	25%
Good	9	45%	8	40%
Fair	3	15%	2	10%
Poor	1	5%	0	0%

Given the challenges participants faced, it is also noteworthy that respondents reported fairly high levels of mental wellbeing. Table 9 shows that responses to the mental health items suggest generally positive emotional well-being among many participants, alongside persistent experiences of stress and distress for some. Comparisons between the intake and exit surveys indicate an increase in the proportion of participants reporting frequent feelings of happiness and calmness by the end of the program, with fewer respondents indicating that these positive states occurred only some or little of the time. At the same time, reports of nervousness and depressive feelings remained present for a subset of participants at exit, underscoring that while improvements in positive affect are evident, emotional distress was not eliminated.

Table 9. Mental Health  
*During the past month, how much of the time...*

Intake Survey (n= 17 to 19)						
	All of the time	Most of the time	A good bit of the time	Some of the time	A little of the time	None of the time
were you a happy person?	11%	47%	21%	21%	0%	0%
did you feel calm and peaceful?	17%	39%	17%	22%	6%	0%
were you a very nervous person?	11%	6%	11%	33%	17%	22%
did you feel downhearted and blue?	6%	6%	12%	47%	18%	12%
did you feel so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer you up?	6%	11%	11%	33%	11%	28%
Exit Survey (n= 20)						
	All of the time	Most of the time	A good bit of the time	Some of the time	A little of the time	None of the time
were you a happy person?	35%	35%	25%	0%	5%	0%
did you feel calm and peaceful?	30%	35%	25%	5%	0%	5%
were you a very nervous person?	10%	15%	25%	15%	20%	15%
did you feel downhearted and blue?	5%	5%	25%	20%	20%	25%
did you feel so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer you up?	5%	5%	16%	21%	21%	32%

**Cognitive Orientations Related to Crime, Authority, and Responsibility**

The intake and exit surveys also invited participants to provide insight into their cognitive orientations related to crime, authority, and responsibility, capturing a range of beliefs about entitlement, control, perceptions of harm, views of authority, and future orientation. As detailed in Table 10, overall patterns suggest some shifts in responses over time, though these should be interpreted cautiously given the anonymous and unlinked survey design. Notably, between intake and exit there was a decline in agreement with several statements reflecting entitlement and present-oriented thinking (e.g., *“Why plan to save for something if you can have it now”* and *“I deserve more than other people”*), as well as reduced endorsement of harm-minimizing beliefs such as *“When you commit a crime the only one affected is the victim.”* Agreement also declined for the statement *“I have no other options but to commit crimes,”*

Table 10. Cognitive Orientations

*How well do these statements describe your current thinking?*

	Intake Survey (n=23)		Exit Survey (n=19)	
	Strongly Agree or Agree	Strongly Disagree or Disagree	Strongly Agree or Agree	Strongly Disagree or Disagree
When I want something, I expect people to deliver.	39%	61%	37%	63%
Bad childhood experiences are partly to blame for my current situation.	43%	57%	76%	24%
The future is unpredictable and there is no point planning for it.	24%	76%	11%	89%
My crime(s) did not really harm anyone.	91%	9%	74%	26%
I feel like what happens in my life is mostly determined by powerful people.	30%	70%	37%	63%
I will never be satisfied until I get all that I deserve.	73%	27%	58%	42%
A theft is all right as long as the victim is not physically injured.	9%	91%	16%	84%
Even though I got caught, it was still worth the risk.	39%	61%	26%	74%
Because of my history I get blamed for a lot of things I did not do.	45%	55%	42%	58%
Most of the laws are good.	38%	62%	53%	47%
Victims of crime usually get over it with time.	5%	95%	32%	68%
When you commit a crime the only one affected is the victim.	81%	19%	16%	84%
Most police officers and correctional officers abuse their power.	14%	86%	16%	84%
Society makes too big of a deal about my crime(s).	30%	70%	16%	84%
Sometimes I cannot control myself.	58%	42%	58%	42%
I expect people to treat me better than other people.	100%	0%	47%	53%
People in authority usually look out for my best interest.	39%	61%	47%	53%
Why plan to save for something if you can have it now.	70%	30%	58%	42%
I insist on getting the respect that is due to me.	45%	55%	16%	84%
If a police officer/ correctional officer tells me to do something, there's usually a good reason for it.	100%	0%	58%	42%
People in positions of authority generally take advantage of others.	39%	61%	53%	47%
I have no other options but to commit crimes.	0%	100%	0%	100%
I deserve more than other people.	11%	89%	5%	95%
I think it is better to enjoy today than worry about tomorrow.	90%	10%	37%	63%
I do not like to be tied down to a regular work schedule.	90%	10%	37%	63%

indicating less endorsement of inevitability narratives by the exit survey. In contrast, views related to authority and power remained mixed, with relatively modest changes across items. While causal conclusions cannot be drawn, these item-level patterns are consistent with possible shifts toward greater reflection on responsibility, future orientation, and the consequences of behavior over the course of program participation.

**Perceived Value of Program Components**

The intake and exit surveys assessed participants’ perceptions of key program components. At intake, participants were asked to identify which elements they anticipated would be most beneficial, while the exit survey invited reflection on which components they ultimately found to be most valuable over the course of program participation. As displayed in Table 11, participants reported generally positive perceptions of multiple YARD program components at both intake and exit, with several elements viewed as particularly valuable over

Table 11. Value of Program Components  
*Which elements of the program do you think will be most beneficial for you? (Intake)*  
*Please rate the impact of the following program components. (Exit)*

Program Element	Intake Survey (n=22)			Exit Survey (n=22)		
	Not beneficial at all	Slightly or somewhat beneficial	Very beneficial	No impact	Somewhat impactful	Highly impactful
Group sessions	0%	54%	46%	0%	18%	82%
Individual client services (1 on 1 meetings with social worker)	0%	54%	46%	0%	18%	82%
Case management supports	9%	59%	32%	0%	24%	76%
Career readiness training	9%	24%	67%	0%	36%	64%
Employment specialist	23%	18%	59%	0%	41%	59%
Workforce development (paid internship) days	5%	32%	64%	9%	36%	55%
Getting record cleared/ expunged at end of program	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	100%
Interacting with dogs	32%	36%	32%	21%	53%	26%
Basic training with shelter dogs	29%	43%	29%	32%	42%	26%
Material support (like SEPTA fares, lunches during workshops, etc.)	9%	32%	59%	5%	15%	80%

time. At intake, group sessions, individual client services, career readiness training, workforce development days, and material supports were most frequently anticipated to be very beneficial, while expungement services were unanimously identified as highly valuable.

By the exit survey, perceptions of impact were even more favorable for many components, especially group sessions and one-on-one client services, which were most often rated as highly impactful. Case management, career readiness training, and material supports also continued to be viewed as meaningful contributors, with a majority of participants reporting high impact. In contrast, components involving interactions with and training of shelter dogs elicited more mixed responses at both time points, suggesting greater variability in how participants experienced these elements. Taken together, these findings indicate strong alignment between participants’ initial expectations and their retrospective assessments of program components, particularly for services directly related to legal relief, employment, and individualized support.

**Program Challenges**

The intake survey invited respondents to identify any challenges they had encountered with the program up to that point. Similarly, the exit survey asked participants to reflect on challenges they experienced over the course of their program involvement. Participants reported relatively few challenges with the program at both intake and exit, with nearly half indicating at each time point that they had not experienced any challenges. Among those who

Table 12. Program Challenges

	Intake Survey (n=21)	Exit Survey (n=21)
The requirements and schedule is intense/demanding.	33%	14%
I have had trouble getting transportation to the office.	19%	10%
I have not been supported by family, friends, and/or community members.	5%	0%
It is hard to balance this program with family/job obligations, like childcare or work.	33%	19%
It's hard to meet program obligations and meet obligations of my case, like status or parole hearings.	0%	5%
Having others come to know about my case because of the program.	0%	5%
The classroom work has been unclear to me.	0%	0%
I have not had any challenges with the program thus far.	48%	50%

did report difficulties, the most commonly cited issues at intake were the intensity of the program's requirements and schedule and challenges balancing program participation with family or work obligations. By the exit survey, the proportion of participants identifying these challenges declined, suggesting that these demands may have become more manageable over time. Transportation barriers were reported by a smaller share of participants at both time points and also decreased by exit. Very few participants reported challenges related to lack of social support, case obligations, privacy concerns, or clarity of classroom work, and these remained minimal across surveys. Overall, the findings indicate that while some structural and logistical challenges were present, the majority of participants reported limited or no difficulties with program participation.

The exit survey also provided respondents with an opportunity to share the reasons why they missed any program group meetings or appointments. An impressive 48 percent of participants indicated that they did not miss any group meetings or appointments. Among those who did miss sessions, the most common reasons identified were feeling sick, needing to work, and having something more important come up.

### **Program Expectations and Anticipated Outcomes**

Table 13 compares participants' expectations at intake with their reflections at exit regarding program outcomes. At intake, participants expressed high levels of optimism about the program, particularly with respect to employment readiness, decision-making, and reducing future justice system involvement. Large majorities anticipated that the program would help them obtain and retain employment and avoid re-arrest through the development of life skills and the availability of individual and group support, while few believed the program would fail to meet their needs. Exit survey responses generally aligned with these initial expectations. Most participants reported feeling better prepared to obtain a job and viewed the program's life skills, supportive services, and career readiness training as beneficial. While responses related to long-term job retention and post-internship success were more mixed, a majority of participants indicated that the program met or exceeded their expectations. Taken together, these findings suggest substantial consistency between participants' anticipated and perceived benefits of the program over time, particularly in areas related to employment preparation, personal decision-making, and support.

The alignment between participants' expectations at intake and their reported outcomes at exit is perhaps unsurprising given the clarity with which the program was initially presented. At intake, all respondents indicated that both the program overall and its requirements were clearly explained at the time of referral. Consistent with this, exit survey responses suggest strong continuity between expectations and experience, with 86 percent of participants reporting that the program was similar to how it had been described prior to enrollment and 91 percent indicating that the program requirements matched what they were originally told.

Table 13. Expectations and Outcomes

Intake Survey (n=20 to 22)			
	Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Agree
I will be better able to get a job after this program.	5%	18%	77%
I will be better at keeping a job after this program.	5%	20%	75%
The program will not meet my needs.	86%	14%	0%
The life skills I will learn in the program will help me avoid getting arrested again.	4%	4%	91%
The individual and group support I'm receiving in the program will help me avoid getting arrested again.	4%	22%	74%
This program will help me make better decisions.	4%	4%	91%
Exit Survey (n=22)			
	Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Agree
I feel that I am now better prepared to get a job because of this program.	9%	5%	86%
I do not feel that I will be successful in keeping a job after my internship.	64%	14%	23%
I found the program to be easy to apply to and get in to.	9%	36%	55%
The program has not yet met my expectations.	64%	18%	18%
The life skills I'm learning in the program will help me avoid getting arrested again.	0%	14%	86%
The individual and group support I'm receiving in the program will help me avoid getting arrested again.	5%	9%	86%
The career readiness training was very beneficial for helping me meet my career goals.	0%	18%	82%

### Life Priorities

As presented in Table 14, participants reported their life priorities in both intake and exit surveys. At intake, respondents overwhelmingly identified employment, financial stability, family relationships, and staying out of trouble with the law as very important, indicating a strong orientation toward conventional and prosocial goals at the outset of the program. Exit survey responses suggest substantial continuity in these priorities, with most participants reporting that these areas had always been important to them. At the same time, a notable share of participants indicated that several priorities—particularly graduating from high school, staying out of trouble with the law, and being positively involved in the community—had

become newly important during their involvement in the YARD program. While causality cannot be established, these findings are consistent with the possibility that program participation coincided with increased salience of educational attainment, legal compliance, and community engagement for some participants.

Table 14. Life Priorities

Intake Survey (n=16 to 18)			
	Not at all important	Slightly to moderately important	Very important
Having a good job/ career	0%	5%	95%
Graduating from high school	11%	17%	72%
Earning a good living	0%	5%	95%
Providing a good home for your family	0%	0%	100%
Good relationships with your children (current or future children)	0%	0%	100%
Staying out of trouble with the law	0%	0%	100%
Good relationships with your family	0%	17%	83%
Good relationships with friends	5%	22%	72%
Being positively involved in your community	18%	24%	59%
Exit Survey (n=20)			
	This isn't important to me.	This has always been important to me.	This is newly important to me because of the YARD program.
Having a good job/ career	0%	75%	25%
Graduating from high school	0%	70%	30%
Earning a good living	0%	80%	20%
Providing a good home for your family	0%	75%	25%
Good relationships with your children (current or future children)	0%	80%	20%
Staying out of trouble with the law	0%	70%	30%
Good relationships with your family	0%	80%	20%
Good relationships with friends	0%	80%	20%
Being positively involved in your community	5%	60%	35%

### Obstacles to Desistance from Crime

Table 15 summarizes participants' perceptions of obstacles to desistance from crime at intake and exit. At intake, respondents most frequently identified concerns related to personal safety, financial insecurity, job instability, and limited social support as factors holding them back from avoiding future involvement in the criminal legal system. By the exit survey, the

proportion of participants reporting many of these obstacles had declined, particularly with respect to job insecurity, financial strain, housing instability, and feelings of safety in their neighborhood or the city. Reports of inadequate or negative social relationships also decreased, though these remained salient challenges for some participants. Other barriers, such as substance use and food insecurity, were reported less frequently at both time points and showed relatively modest change. The overall pattern suggests a reduction in several self-identified obstacles to desistance from crime over the course of program participation, alongside the persistence of certain personal and structural challenges.

Table 15. Obstacles to Desistance

*In your view, what is holding you back from being crime free – either avoiding arrest and/or a conviction in the future?*

	Intake Survey (n=17)	Exit Survey (n=19)
Housing insecurity	12%	5%
Food insecurity	6%	11%
Job insecurity	35%	5%
Not enough support from family, friends, social groups, and/ or community	35%	16%
Negative relationships with family, friends, social groups, and/ or community	24%	11%
Not enough money	47%	16%
No programs that help me with all of my needs	6%	5%
Feeling safe in my neighborhood or the city	65%	32%
Substance use	18%	11%
Social media	6%	5%
Myself	35%	32%
Feeling unable to change my friend groups or where I live	18%	0%

### **Coping Skills**

A new set of questions on participant coping skills was added to the exit survey for these two cohorts. These items will also be added to intake surveys for future cohorts. As shown in Table 16, most participants reported strong coping capacities across multiple domains, including managing past trauma, navigating unsafe situations, and identifying sources of support. Large majorities agreed or strongly agreed that they had developed positive ways to cope with painful or traumatic experiences, felt proud of their healing efforts, and knew how to keep themselves

safe in situations where violence might occur. Participants also frequently endorsed having strategies to manage stress and fear in unsafe environments and being able to identify positive people or places even in challenging contexts. While a smaller subset of respondents expressed disagreement on some items, overall responses suggest relatively high levels of perceived coping skills among participants at program completion. Because these items were only administered at exit, changes over time cannot be assessed; however, the findings provide a useful comparison for future cohorts as these measures are incorporated into intake surveys.

Table 16. Coping Skills (Exit Survey Only, n = 21)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I have found positive ways to deal with painful experiences from my past.	24%	53%	10%	14%
When memories of difficult or traumatic events come up, I have strategies to cope with them.	19%	57%	5%	19%
I am proud of the ways I've worked to heal from my past.	29%	48%	10%	14%
I know how to keep myself safe in situations where violence might happen.	33%	52%	5%	10%
Even when I feel unsafe in my community, I have ways to cope with stress and fear.	20%	55%	15%	10%
Even in tough environments, I can find positive places or people to spend time with.	25%	45%	15%	15%
I know who I can turn to for support when I feel my safety is at risk.	30%	55%	0%	15%

### Overall Program Perceptions

Participants reported very high levels of satisfaction with the YARD program and strong perceptions of its overall impact. As shown in Table 17, all respondents indicated that they were either extremely or somewhat happy with the program, with more than three-quarters reporting they were extremely happy. Consistent with this, all participants indicated they would recommend the program to others (Table 18). Reflections on overall life impact were similarly positive, with nearly all participants reporting that their lives were much better or somewhat better as a result of program participation (Table 19). Among participants who required additional services, most reported that YARD staff provided referrals to external supports (Table 20), suggesting the program also played a role in facilitating access to broader resources. Taken together, these findings indicate high levels of participant satisfaction and perceived benefit across multiple dimensions of program experience.

Table 17. How would you rate the YARD program?

	N	%
Extremely happy with it	17	77%
Somewhat happy with it	5	23%
Neither happy nor disappointed with it	0	0%
Somewhat disappointed with it	0	0%
Extremely disappointed with it	0	0%

Table 18. Would you recommend this program to others?

	N	%
Yes	21	100%
No	0	0%

Table 19. YARD’s Impact on Life Overall

*How would you say the YARD program impacted your life? Is it now...*

	N	%
Much better	15	71%
Somewhat better	5	24%
About the same	1	5%
Somewhat worse	0	0%
Much worse	0	0%

Table 20. YARD’s Impact on Access to Additional Services (n=12)

	N	%
YARD staff provided referrals for additional services	9	75%
YARD staff did not provide referrals for additional services	3	25%

On the exit survey, participants were also given two open-ended questions about the overall program perceptions. The first question asked “What part of the program did you find least enjoyable or beneficial and why?” All responses are provided below.

- The part of the program I found least enjoyable is nothing. I feel as though the program was very helpful and great.
- Probably doing paper work lol
- When the group session ended and 1 on 1 started
- The least beneficial part of the program has to be when WSFS bank came in. They didn't help us learn stuff that we don't know about. Everything they were teaching was common sense.
- None
- To be honest everything about this program I really enjoyed and I also thought it was very beneficial and helpful.

- When we use to do art
- I didn't find anything least enjoyable or beneficial because everything I got was good for me.
- I believe the entire program was beneficial. Everything they provided was appreciated and needed.
- I think the whole program was impactful. The most enjoyable thing was the dogs.
- The part I found beneficial was the people coming in helping us with credit
- The ride to program
- Getting up and going at 10am it was drawlin because I'm not a morning person
- Everything was enjoyable
- Where we talked about our feelings, I felt like it was kid stuff.
- Coming in every week was a bit extreme
- Nothing about the program
- N/A
- None everything was good understanding

The second open-ended question asked "How do you think this part of the program can be improved for future participants?" Respondents offered the following suggestions:

- I don't think the program could be improved.
- Just great how it is
- Keep giving food till grad
- None. This was a well put together program.
- It's awesome
- More food
- N/A
- Substitute art class with something more useful in our environment
- I feel like the program is at its best right now.
- No, it was good.
- Helps you set up and look for job and future goals.
- Never stop looking for a job if you don't already have one.
- N/A
- Change the time for the people that's not morning people
- Not sure
- Learning more about other important things
- Limit meetings to at least twice a month
- Staying out of trouble and staying on track
- Nothing this is perfect
- This part is a new step for me in life. I been giving a second chances in life.

In sum, the majority of respondents indicated that there was *nothing* they found least beneficial as they frequently described the program as helpful, impactful, and well put together. When critiques were offered, they tended to focus on logistical or preference-based concerns,

such as paperwork, early start times, transportation, or the frequency of meetings, rather than core program content. A small number of participants identified specific activities, such as art sessions or a particular financial workshop, as less engaging or less relevant to their needs. Suggestions for improvement similarly reflected modest, practical adjustments, including changes to scheduling, additional food or material support, greater emphasis on employment and future planning, and substituting certain activities with content viewed as more directly applicable to participants' environments. Overall, these open-ended responses suggest high levels of satisfaction with the program, with feedback largely oriented toward fine-tuning delivery rather than calling for substantive changes to program structure or goals.

## **Conclusion**

Findings from the intake and exit surveys for YARD Cohorts 11 and 12 suggest that New Leash on Life USA's Young Adult Reentry and Diversion (YARD) program is making a meaningful and multidimensional difference in the lives of participating young adults. Across nearly every domain examined—program satisfaction, perceived life impact, employment readiness, coping skills, and obstacles to desistance—participants reported overwhelmingly positive experiences and outcomes by the end of the program.

Perhaps most striking are the consistently high levels of overall program satisfaction. All participants reported being either extremely or somewhat happy with the YARD program, and 100 percent indicated they would recommend the program to others. Moreover, nearly all respondents reported that their lives were now better as a result of participation, with more than two-thirds stating that their lives were “much better.” These findings reflect not only satisfaction with program delivery, but a broader sense that YARD contributed to meaningful, positive change during a critical developmental period.

Beyond global perceptions, the data suggest that YARD may be helping participants address key risk factors associated with continued involvement in the criminal legal system. Participants reported declines in several self-identified obstacles to desistance, including job insecurity, financial strain, housing instability, and concerns about personal safety. While some challenges persisted, the overall pattern suggests a reduction in both structural and interpersonal barriers that participants themselves identified as increasing risk for re-arrest or conviction.

The program also appears to support cognitive and emotional shifts that are central to long-term desistance. Exit survey responses indicate reduced endorsement of entitlement-based thinking, present-oriented decision-making, and harm-minimizing beliefs about crime. At the same time, participants reported strong coping capacities at program completion, including strategies for managing trauma, navigating unsafe situations, and identifying supportive relationships. Although coping skills were only measured at exit for these cohorts, the findings

provide a strong baseline for future intake–exit comparisons and suggest that YARD may play a role in strengthening emotional regulation and resilience.

Participants’ reflections on specific program components further underscore the value of YARD’s holistic model. Group sessions, one-on-one client services, case management, career readiness training, and material supports were consistently rated as highly impactful. Expungement services were universally viewed as valuable, reinforcing the importance of legal relief as a cornerstone of diversion programming. While dog-related components elicited more varied responses, the overall pattern suggests strong alignment between participants’ expectations at intake and their assessments at exit, particularly for components directly tied to stability, employment, and individualized support.

Taken together, these findings suggest that YARD is functioning as more than an alternative to prosecution. For many participants, it represents a stabilizing intervention that addresses immediate legal needs while also fostering longer-term skills, coping strategies, and prosocial orientations. While the study’s design does not allow for causal claims, the consistency of positive patterns across domains, combined with exceptionally high levels of participant satisfaction, point to YARD as a promising community-based diversion model for young adults at risk of firearm-related justice system involvement.

These findings underscore the broader importance of community-based diversion programs like YARD in centering the lived experiences of young adults who are too often defined solely by their criminal cases rather than their histories, strengths, and aspirations. By prioritizing connection, dignity, and individualized support, YARD offers an alternative to punitive approaches that have fueled mass incarceration without addressing its root causes. Programs grounded in humanity and relationship-building—rather than surveillance and punishment—create space for healing, accountability, and growth, while acknowledging the structural conditions that shape participants’ choices and opportunities. In doing so, YARD not only supports individual desistance and wellbeing, but also contributes to a more just and effective response to public safety that challenges the logics of punishment at the heart of mass incarceration.