

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

Cohorts 9 and 10 Exit Survey Results

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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

While research is ongoing with additional YARD cohorts, this report presents findings from an exit survey administered to participants in YARD Cohorts 9 and 10. 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.

Surveys were distributed on paper during participants' final status hearings at the Philadelphia courthouse. As compensation for their time, participants received a \$10 gift card to Amazon or Target. 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 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 exit survey administered to participants in YARD Cohorts 9 and 10. Results are organized by key themes, including participant demographics, program perceptions, reported impacts, challenges, and personal reflections on safety, wellbeing, and future goals. 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 24 participants in YARD Cohorts 9 and 10, 15 participants were present on the day the survey was administered and consented to take the survey.

Participant Demographics

Among the 14 participants who completed the demographic section of the survey, all identified as male, with an average age of 22. The majority of participants (79 percent) identified as Black, with a quarter of 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

	N	Average or Percentage
Age	14	22
Male	14	100%
Race: Black	11	79%
Race: Asian / Pacific Islander	2	14%
Race: Other	1	7%
Ethnicity: Hispanic or Latino	3	25%

Overall Program Perceptions

As detailed in the tables below, feedback on the YARD program was overwhelmingly positive. Nearly all participants reported being “extremely happy” with the program, and the same proportion said they would recommend it to others. High satisfaction levels with how the program was described and implemented suggest a strong alignment between participant expectations and actual experience—an important indicator of program trust and credibility. These results reflect not only successful program implementation, but also the importance of setting clear expectations, maintaining transparency, and delivering consistent support.

Table 2. How would you rate the YARD program? (n=15)

	N	%
Extremely happy with it	14	93%
Somewhat happy with it	1	7%
Neither happy nor disappointed with it	0	0%
Somewhat disappointed with it	0	0%
Extremely disappointed with it	0	0%

Table 3. Do you feel the program was similar to how it was described to you before you enrolled? (n=15)

	N	%
Yes	11	73%
No	4	27%

Table 4. Did you feel like the program requirements were similar to how they were described to you before you enrolled? (n=14)

	N	%
Yes	13	93%
No	1	7%

Table 5. Would you recommend this program to others? (n=14)

	N	%
Yes	13	93%
No	1	7%

Participant Perceptions of Program Impacts

Participants identified multiple components of the program as highly impactful, particularly those that addressed concrete, practical needs—like expungement services, workforce development, and material support. These findings reinforce the value of addressing structural barriers to reentry and stability, such as employment readiness and access to basic resources. Notably, while the dog-related components are central to New Leash’s mission, participants expressed more mixed feelings about their relevance. This suggests an opportunity to better contextualize the therapeutic intent of human-animal interaction or consider how to tailor this aspect to individual preferences. The strong endorsement of individualized services like case management underscores the importance of relational, wraparound support in fostering personal change.

Table 6. Impact of program components (n=15)

	No impact	Somewhat impactful	Highly impactful
Group sessions	7%	47%	47%
Individual client services (meetings with social worker)	0%	27%	73%
Case management supports	0%	29%	71%
Career readiness training	0%	27%	73%
Employment specialist	7%	27%	67%
Workforce development (paid internship) days	7%	20%	73%
Getting my record cleared/ expunged at the end	0%	13%	87%
Interacting with dogs	27%	33%	40%
Basic training with shelter dogs	46%	15%	38%
Material support (like SEPTA fares, lunches during workshops, etc.)	7%	7%	85%

As shown in Table 7, participants generally expressed increased confidence in their job readiness and personal growth. While 70 percent agreed they are better prepared to get a job, only about half of respondents felt confident they would be successful in keeping one after their internship. This points to an important gap between readiness and long-term employment sustainability—highlighting a potential area for continued support after program completion. Similarly, while most participants valued the life skills and emotional support provided, the mixed responses about program accessibility and expectations being met suggest that continued refinement and personalization could strengthen engagement. This balance between individualized support and structural empowerment is crucial for supporting lasting transformation.

Table 7. Perceptions of YARD program impacts on future (n=13)

	Disagree	Neither Disagree or Agree	Agree
I feel that I am now better prepared to get a job because of this program.	7%	23%	70%
I do not feel that I will be successful in keeping a job after my internship.	54%	23%	23%
I found the program to be easy to apply to and get in to.	7%	39%	54%
The program has not yet met my expectations.	70%	7%	23%
The life skills I’m learning in the program will help me avoid getting arrested again.	8%	8%	83%
The individual and group support I’m receiving in the program will help me avoid getting arrested again.	0%	23%	77%
The career readiness training was very beneficial for helping me meet my career goals.	7%	0%	93%

As featured in Table 8, most participants came into the program with strong personal goals—like earning a living, finishing school, and staying out of trouble—and the YARD program helped reinforce or elevate these priorities. For some, the program made aspirations like community involvement or avoiding future arrest newly important. These findings suggest the program is not only responding to participants’ immediate needs, but also helping to shift their long-term mindset and sense of possibility. In this way, YARD acts as both a stabilizing force and a catalyst for reimagining what a safe, meaningful future could look like.

Table 8. YARD’s impact on goals and aspirations (n=11)

	This is newly important to me because of the YARD program.	This has always been important to me.	This isn’t important to me.
Having a good job/ career	18%	82%	0%
Graduating from high school	18%	82%	0%
Earning a good living	9%	91%	0%
Providing a good home for your family	0%	100%	0%
Good relationships with your children (current or future children)	0%	100%	0%
Staying out of trouble with the law (avoiding future arrest/incarceration)	18%	81%	0%
Good relationships with your family	0%	91%	9%
Good relationships with friends	0%	91%	9%
Being positively involved in your community	18%	55%	27%

Three-quarters of participants received referrals for additional services, indicating the program’s strong role as a connector to community resources (Table 9). When asked how the program impacted their lives (Table 10), the vast majority (92 percent) said their lives were “much better” or “somewhat better” because of their participation. These responses are a powerful affirmation of the program’s holistic approach and capacity to foster both tangible and intangible benefits—from stability and self-worth to social connection and hope.

Table 9. 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%

Table 10. YARD’s impact on life overall (n=14)

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

	N	%
Much better	10	71%
Somewhat better	3	21%
About the same	1	7%
Somewhat worse	0	0%
Much worse	0	0%

Program Challenges

Despite the intensity and demands of the program, many participants reported minimal barriers to participation, and over 40 percent stated they experienced no challenges at all. Transportation issues emerged as the most common obstacle, reinforcing the importance of continued investment in logistical support like transit passes. The fact that participants rarely cited family obligations or program content as barriers suggests the program is well-aligned with participants' schedules and developmental needs. At the same time, the relatively high rate of program attendance and engagement reflects a level of commitment and motivation that challenges stereotypes about system-involved youth.

Table 11. Program challenges (n=12)

At any point during the program, did you encounter any of these challenges?

	N	%
The requirements and schedule is intense/demanding.	1	8%
I have had trouble getting transportation to the office.	3	25%
I have not been supported by family, friends, and/or community members.	1	8%
It is hard to balance this program with family/job obligations, like childcare or work.	0	0%
It's hard to meet program obligations and meet obligations of my case, like status or parole hearings.	1	8%
Having others come to know about my case because of the program.	0	0%
The classroom work has been unclear to me.	0	0%
I have not had any challenges with the program.	5	42%

Table 12. Reasons for missed sessions (n=15)

What are the reasons you missed any program group meetings or program appointments?

	N	%
I didn't want to come.	0	0%
I felt sick.	5	36%
I had to work.	0	0%
Something more important came up.	2	14%
I had a family or friend emergency.	2	14%
I had to take care of my kids.	0	0%
I was afraid to come into the office or take public transportation.	0	0%
I have not missed any group meetings or appointments.	6	46%

Participant Recommendations for Program Improvement

Qualitative participant feedback offered valuable insight into both personal preferences and structural considerations for future cohorts. Some participants expressed disinterest in dog-related activities or found group sessions less enjoyable due to interpersonal dynamics. These responses highlight the importance of flexibility and differentiated engagement strategies. Suggestions for improvement included increasing conversations about real-life situations (such as gun violence), enhancing social supports, and providing more food or structured dog interaction. These ideas point to opportunities for deeper engagement with participants' lived experiences and for making programming even more trauma-informed, responsive, and youth-centered. Participants' complete responses are provided below.

What part of the program did you find least enjoyable or beneficial and why?

- The internship allowed me to find interest of animals and vets
- Learning about dogs
- Dog training. It didn't impact my situation much. Just passed time.
- The group because my group mates were loud and I'm not a loud person. Other than [illegible] everything is good.
- Dogs. They didn't really help with much.
- Being around people
- Career readiness only because I have a job already
- The program was beneficial to me because it helped me with staying focused and on task.
- Group sessions
- I enjoyed every part of the program
- The whole entire program was beneficial because it helped my mindset
- The group interaction because not to social

How do you think this part of the program can be improved for future participants?

- I think we could talk more about gun prevention
- Teach the students real life situations
- More support for people lacking it outside of new leash
- More organized the program was really organized
- More interaction with dogs
- Having more food
- The dog part of it
- Doesn't need any changes
- Probably the dog part. Remove it
- Just help everyone engage

Participant Thinking Patterns and Attitudes

Survey responses suggest that many participants hold prosocial beliefs and reject harmful thinking patterns often associated with recidivism. Most disagreed with statements that minimized the harm of their actions or blamed others for their circumstances. This indicates a level of personal accountability and readiness for change. However, skepticism about authority figures—particularly police and correctional officers—remains high, reflecting broader issues of systemic mistrust rooted in historical and ongoing harms. Building trust through consistent, respectful relationships with program staff may be a key protective factor, even as participants continue to navigate systems they perceive as unjust.

Table 13. Thinking patterns and attitudes (n=10)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
When I want something, I expect people to deliver.	0%	60%	40%	0%
Bad childhood experiences are partly to blame for my current situation.	10%	30%	50%	10%
The future is unpredictable and there is no point planning for it.	0%	13%	50%	38%
My crime(s) did not really harm anyone.	40%	40%	20%	0%
I feel like what happens in my life is mostly determined by powerful people.	0%	0%	90%	10%
I will never be satisfied until I get all that I deserve.	0%	44%	44%	11%
A theft is alright as long as the victim is not physically injured.	0%	0%	56%	44%
Even though I got caught, it was still worth the risk.	10%	0%	60%	30%
Because of my history I get blamed for a lot of things I did not do.	0%	0%	80%	20%
Most of the laws are good.	0%	50%	40%	10%
Victims of crime usually get over it with time.	0%	0%	56%	44%
When you commit a crime the only one affected is the victim.	10%	10%	60%	20%
Most police officers and correctional officers abuse their power.	30%	40%	30%	0%
Society makes too big of a deal about my crime(s).	10%	40%	50%	0%
Sometimes I cannot control myself.	0%	11%	78%	11%
I expect people to treat me better than other people.	0%	0%	80%	20%

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
People in authority are usually looking out for my best interest.	0%	20%	70%	10%
Why plan to save for something if you can have it now.	10%	10%	80%	0%
I insist on getting the respect that is due to me.	20%	40%	40%	0%
If a police officer/ correctional officer tells me to do something, there's usually a good reason for it.	0%	10%	80%	10%
People in positions of authority generally take advantage of others.	10%	50%	40%	0%
I have no other options but to commit crimes.	0%	0%	70%	30%
I deserve more than other people.	0%	10%	80%	10%
I think it is better to enjoy today than worry about tomorrow.	0%	50%	30%	20%
I do not like to be tied down to a regular work schedule.	0%	30%	50%	20%

Participant Perceptions of Safety, Experiences of Trauma, and Health

While the majority of participants reported feeling “somewhat” or “fully” safe in their daily lives, a notable minority expressed ongoing fear or insecurity (Table 14). As displayed in Table 15, coping strategies such as staying indoors and using marijuana highlight both adaptive and potentially problematic responses to stress.

Table 14. Perceptions of safety (n=14)

On a daily basis, how safe do you feel?

	N	%
Not safe at all	1	7%
Somewhat unsafe	3	21%
Somewhat safe	2	14%
Fully safe	8	57%

Table 15. Safety strategies (n=14)

What are some things you do to make yourself feel safe on a daily basis?

	N	%
Smoke marijuana	4	29%
Stay in my home	10	67%
Come to the New Leash office	1	7%

Respondents also reported substantial exposure to violence and trauma, with 39 percent having experienced violent victimization and 23 percent reporting the violent death of a close friend or family member (Table 16). These experiences underscore the importance of trauma-informed care and emotional regulation as core components of the program. Despite these challenges, most participants reported overall good health (Table 17) and feeling happy or calm much of the time (Table 18)—an encouraging sign that the program is helping to restore emotional balance and promote well-being.

Table 16. Trauma exposure (n=13)

Have you ever...

	N	%
been a victim of violent crime	5	39%
been a victim of property crime	1	8%
been in a serious car or work accident	2	15%
been in a natural disaster	2	15%
had or have a life-threatening illness, like cancer, AIDS, or a heart attack	0	0%
been physically harmed by a parent, family member/friend, caretaker, or teacher before turning 18	0	0%
been attacked, beaten, or mugged	1	8%
been made or pressured into having some type of unwanted sexual contact	0	0%
been in any other situation in which you were seriously injured or feared you might be seriously injured or killed	1	8%
had a close family member or friend die violently, like in a serious car crash, assault, or shooting	3	23%
witnessed someone get seriously injured or killed, or you feared someone would be seriously injured or killed	2	15%

Table 17. Physical health (n=14)

In general, how is your physical health?

	N	%
Excellent	5	36%
Very good	4	29%
Good	4	29%
Fair	1	7%
Poor	0	0%

Table 18. Participant mood (n=12)
During the past month, how much of the time...

	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?	8%	58%	8%	16%	8%	0%
did you feel calm and peaceful?	8%	50%	8%	8%	25%	0%
were you a very nervous person?	0%	8%	33%	42%	41%	0%
did you feel downhearted and blue?	0%	9%	18%	9%	27%	36%
did you feel so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer you up?	8%	8%	8%	17%	17%	41%

Participant Perceptions of Criminogenic Needs

When asked what might keep them from staying crime-free, the majority of respondents pointed to *themselves*, rather than external factors like housing, money, or social networks. This strong sense of personal responsibility may reflect the program's emphasis on accountability and personal growth.

Table 19. Obstacles to being crime-free (n=13)
In your view, what is holding you back from being crime free?

	N	%
Housing insecurity	0	0%
Food insecurity	0	0%
Job insecurity	2	15%
Not enough support from family, friends, social groups, and/or community	0	0%
Negative relationships with family, friends, social groups, and/or community	1	8%
Not enough money	2	15%
No programs that help me with all of my needs	1	8%
Feeling safe in my neighborhood or the city	1	8%
Substance use	0	0%
Social media	1	8%
Myself	8	62%
Feeling unable to change my friend groups or where I live	0	0%

Conclusion

Findings from the YARD Cohorts 9 and 10 exit survey suggest that New Leash on Life USA's Young Adult Reentry and Diversion program is making a meaningful difference in the lives of its participants. The overwhelmingly positive responses regarding overall program satisfaction, coupled with participants' recognition of the program's impact on job readiness, life skills, and emotional growth, highlight the program's value as a credible and trusted alternative to traditional criminal justice system involvement. The vast majority of participants reported that their lives had improved as a result of their participation, a powerful affirmation of the program's mission to foster healing, hope, and transformation through individualized, holistic support.

At the same time, participant feedback offers important opportunities for growth. Mixed reactions to certain program components—particularly dog-related activities and group dynamics—point to the importance of flexibility and tailoring engagement strategies to better meet the diverse needs and preferences of young adults.

Finally, participants' reflections on safety, trauma, and future aspirations make clear that the challenges they face extend far beyond the courtroom. Many carry the weight of past violence, insecurity, and marginalization, and their progress within YARD is often made in spite of—not in the absence of—ongoing adversity. That many still report feeling hopeful, happy, and better equipped for the future speaks to the program's ability to foster resilience. As Philadelphia continues to invest in community-based approaches to violence reduction, programs like YARD offer a compelling model for how to meet young people where they are, provide real alternatives, and nurture the skills and support necessary to break cycles of incarceration and violence.