



Measuring What Lasts:

A mixed-methods longitudinal evaluation of Youth On Their Own alumni outcomes — 5, 10, and 15+ years after high school graduation

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This report is dedicated to YOTO alumni, without whom this evaluation would not have been possible. Thank you for trusting us and so generously sharing your stories. We hope you see the richness of your lived experiences reflected in this report. You shared your struggles, but you also shared your resilience, giving us all hope for a better future.

The cover art and illustrations included in this report were created by artist and YOTO alumna, Luna Aguirre.

Authored For:



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System Change Partners is a QTBIPOC and immigrant-owned data and evaluation firm that specializes in youth homelessness and direct cash transfer program evaluation, data analytics, community-based participatory and creative/arts-based research and facilitation, and youth engagement and leadership. We were honored to conduct this independent, mixed-methods, longitudinal evaluation of YOTO's impact over the past 40 years.

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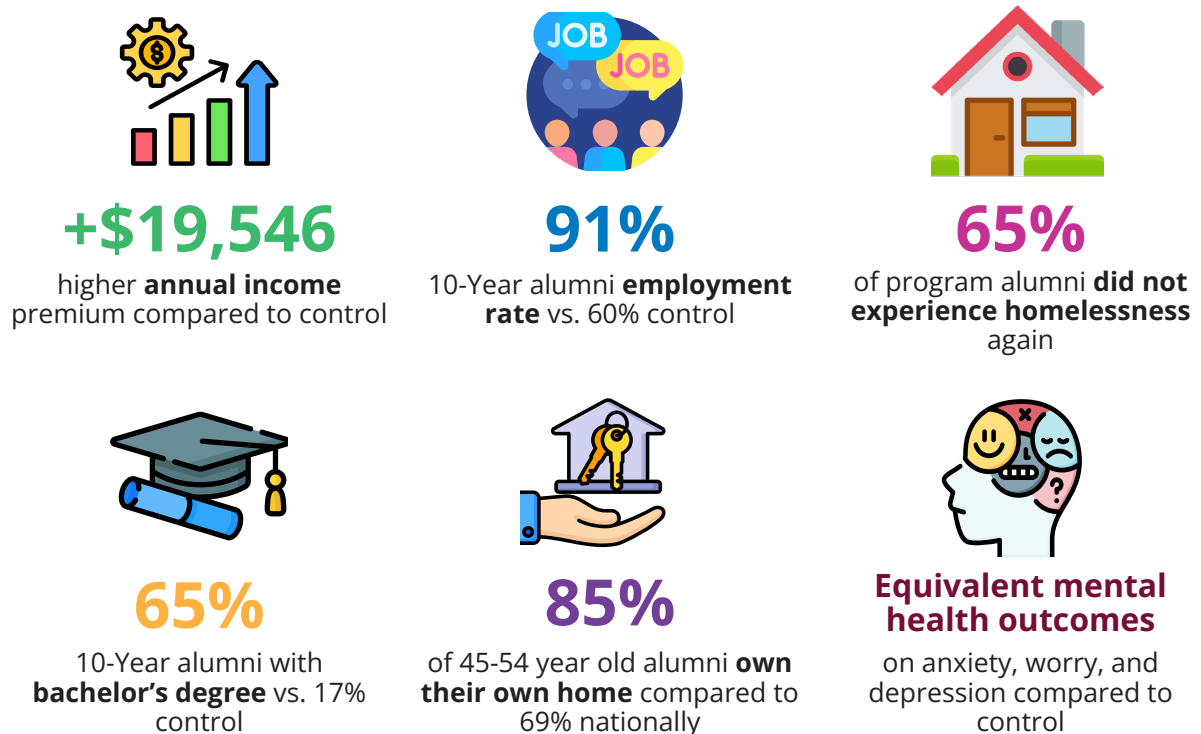
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Executive Summary

FIGURE 1 Key Quantitative Outcomes



Note. Key outcomes across 127 YOTO alumni vs. 93 propensity score matched controls.

Youth On Their Own (YOTO) is a Tucson, Arizona-based drop-out prevention program that has served unaccompanied homeless youth for over 40 years through a distinctive model combining conditional direct cash transfers to high school-aged students who are not living with their parents or guardians, with school liaison partnerships, basic needs assistance, and sustained guidance from a supportive adult. Despite its longevity and the depth of its community presence, the long-term outcomes of YOTO participation have not previously been evaluated at scale.

This study addresses this evidence gap through a longitudinal comparative analysis examining the economic, educational, housing, and wellbeing outcomes of 127 YOTO alumni who accessed the program between 1986-2020, across three cohorts: 5-Year, 10-Year, and 15+ Year alumni. The study draws on data collected from a custom alumni survey, focus groups, and individual interviews, and compares alumni outcomes to a propensity score matched control group drawn from public federal datasets — the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) and Household Pulse Survey. **The results show that YOTO's programming produces measurable and lasting economic, educational, and psychological impacts on the long-term trajectories of youth who faced extreme hardship and trauma at a young age.**

Study Design

This longitudinal, mixed-method study aims to answer research questions relating to YOTO's impact on alumni's long-term economic and employment status, post-secondary pathways and achievements, and the impact of YOTO guidance, by comparing the outcomes of YOTO alumni to adults with a similar high school history wherever possible.

The evaluation is retrospective — alumni were recruited 5 to 30+ years after program participation with no baseline data from enrollment, meaning the sample likely skews toward those who are residentially stable and positively oriented toward YOTO. All primary outcome data are self-reported, though bias is partially mitigated by using validated scale items drawn directly from ACS and Household Pulse instruments. **Federal datasets do not record prior unaccompanied youth homelessness, so matched controls represent individuals with greater baseline stability than YOTO participants, making every positive alumni outcome a conservative underestimate of program effect.**

For the purposes of this evaluation, the term “YOTO alumni” is inclusive of program participants who accessed services between the years of 1986-2020, regardless of if they graduated high school or not.¹

What We Found

- 1. Higher salaries:** YOTO produces a statistically significant, compounding income and employment premium of **+\$19,546 annual income premium across all cohorts, rising to +\$30,435 at the 10-Year mark.**
- 2. Higher employment rates:** YOTO alumni have higher employment rates— **91% of 10-Year alumni are employed vs. 60% of matched controls.**
- 3. Higher rates of college education:** YOTO transforms educational trajectories with **65% of 10-Year alumni holding a bachelor's degree or higher vs. 17% of matched controls.**
- 4. Equivalent mental health outcomes:** While formerly homeless youth carry lifetime psychiatric disorder rates twice those of stably-housed peers,² YOTO alumni achieve **full statistical parity with the general public on anxiety, worry, and depression— alumni mental health outcomes are generally indistinguishable to matched peers.**

¹ As the study focuses on YOTO's programming relating to graduation from traditional high school, GED graduates were not included in the survey analysis because they were too small a subset of YOTO's historical programming to draw meaningful conclusions about their experiences.

² Gleason, H. A., Cherrick, D., Hemming, H., & Olson, B. H. (2018). Emotional health among youth experiencing family homelessness. *Pediatrics* 141(4).

5. **Almost two-thirds do not experience homelessness again:** 65% of alumni have not experienced homelessness since leaving YOTO.
6. **Accelerated rates of home ownership later in life:** Among alumni aged 45–54, **home ownership reaches 85%**, which is 15 points above the national rate for the same age group (69%).
7. **Breaks cycles of homelessness across generations:** Intergenerational impact starts at program enrollment for young parents who credit YOTO for their high school graduation, and continues as alumni describe their children having access to housing, school stability, and parental presence: **“The cycle ends with me.”**
8. **Positively impacts the broader community:** Alumni feel a sense of reciprocity and giving back that extends the program’s reach, which includes alumni serving on YOTO’s board and employed by YOTO, in community leadership and advocacy positions, entrepreneurship, and **45% of alumni describing careers in helping professions inspired by YOTO.**

Challenges & Recommendations

Within the context of YOTO’s extraordinary aggregate outcomes, two challenges emerge consistently across the data: 1) **The post-high school graduation support cliff:** survey respondents describe couch-surfing, sleeping in cars, and periods of homelessness lasting months to years after program exit; and 2) **Mental health challenges:** YOTO alumni have generally equivalent mental health outcomes to matched peers on anxiety, worry, and depression across the full sample. But cohort-level analysis shows that the 15+ Year cohort has anxiety and worry scores trending above matched controls.

Recommendations are couched in the understanding that YOTO is an adolescent-focused program that primarily focuses on high school aged youth. It is recommended that YOTO:

- Close the awareness gap regarding post-high school services and continue thoughtful expansion of these resources
- Develop a financial literacy and wealth-building curriculum to support long-term economic mobility



“YOTO provided me the tools and help guided me through becoming something instead of a statistic. I learned important critical thinking skills and job skills that were such a game changer. I’ll never forget.”

15+ Year Cohort Alumni

Introduction

Youth experiencing unaccompanied homelessness (without parents or guardians) face severe and compounding trauma and hardship during the most formative periods of their younger years. Without stable housing, consistent adult support, or reliable access to basic needs, the pathways to further education, economic mobility, and long-term wellbeing that most young people navigate with family support can become structurally inaccessible.

The consequences of unaccompanied youth homelessness are well-documented: lack of a high school diploma is the most strongly correlated with experiencing homelessness - youth who did not complete high school were **4.5 times more likely to experience homelessness than their peers who completed high school.**³ Additionally, **young adults who experienced homelessness are less than one-third as likely to be enrolled in a four-year college as stably housed peers.**⁴ Against this backdrop, interventions that prevent an unaccompanied youth from experiencing homelessness in the first place, or can measurably shorten time spent unstably housed, can dramatically change the trajectory of a young person's life.

Youth On Their Own's mission is to support the high school graduation and continued success of youth experiencing homelessness. While YOTO has served unaccompanied homeless youth in Tucson for over 40 years, the long-term outcomes of its distinctive model have not previously been evaluated at scale. Although many things have changed throughout the past 40 years, alumni, staff, and long-time stakeholders agree that three components of YOTO's model have stood the test of time and are key to the organization and the students' successes: **financial assistance, guidance, and meeting basic human needs.**

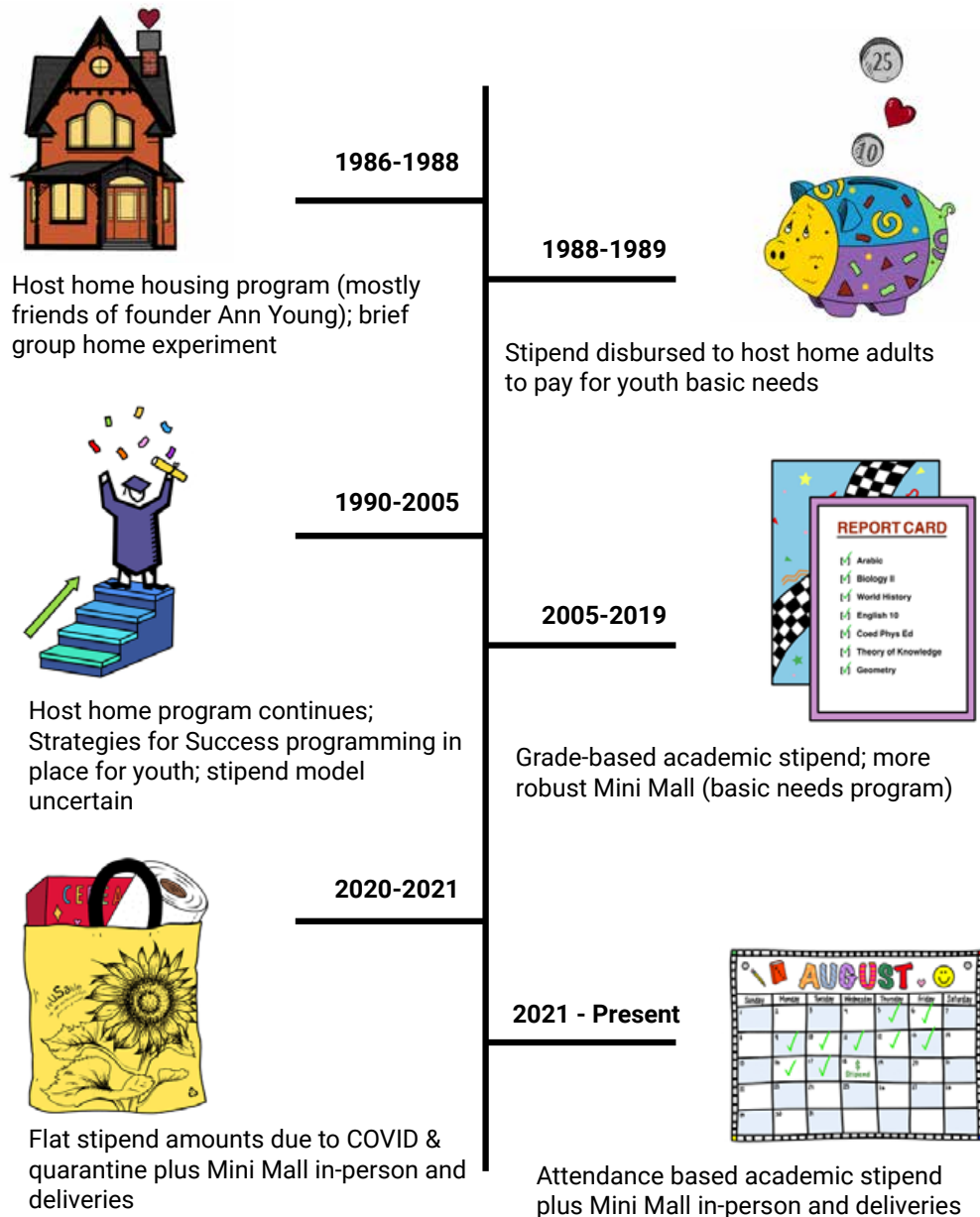
This study addresses this evidence gap through a longitudinal comparative analysis examining the economic, educational, housing, and wellbeing outcomes of 127 YOTO alumni from the years of 1986-2020 across three milestone cohorts: 5-Year, 10-Year, and 15+ Year alumni. The study draws on four integrated data sources including a custom alumni survey, alumni focus groups, individual interviews, and staff and stakeholder focus groups, and compares alumni outcomes to a propensity score matched control group drawn from public federal datasets. **The results show that YOTO's programming produces measurable, lasting economic, educational, and psychological impact on the long-term trajectories of youth who faced extreme hardship and trauma at a young age.**

3 Kull, M. A., Morton, M. H., Patel, S., Curry, S., & Carreon, E. (2019). *Missed opportunities: Education among youth and young adults experiencing homelessness in America*. (Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, 2019).

4 *Ibid.*

See below for a timeline of YOTO services between 1986 to present, reflecting the major programmatic shifts over the years — from host home housing, to grade-based academic stipends provided to host home adults, and eventually to attendance-based academic stipends given directly to YOTO youth. This evaluation assesses the longitudinal impact of YOTO programming between 1986-2020 by focusing on program alumni who accessed services within this timeframe.

FIGURE 2 Timeline of YOTO Services: 1986-Present



Note. Illustrated timeline of YOTO services/programming from 1986-2020.

Research Questions

This longitudinal, mixed-method study aims to answer the following research questions (RQ) by comparing the outcomes of YOTO alumni to adults with a similar high school history wherever possible. For the purposes of this evaluation, the term “YOTO alumni” is inclusive of program participants who accessed services between the years of 1986-2020, regardless of if they graduated high school or not.

- **RQ 1:** Determine the long-term **economic impact** of YOTO services on YOTO alumni, including income generation, job attainment/employment, job titles, and housing stability.
- **RQ 2:** Determine the long-term impact of YOTO services on YOTO alumni’s **post-secondary pathways and achievements**, including 2 and 4 year degree attainment and certifications.
- **RQ 3:** Determine the long-term impact of **YOTO guidance** on YOTO alumni, including YOTO’s relationship building, emotional support/guidance, belief in their success, and **alumni’s own self-worth, confidence, and resilience**.

The report is organized into four main sections: Introduction & Background, Methodology, Findings, and Conclusions & Recommendations. A timeline of services and programming offered by YOTO over the past 40 years was provided in the **Background** section to provide readers with important historical context. Following this, the **Methodology** section describes the evaluation design, data sources, sampling strategy, and analytic framework, including the rationale for the propensity score matching approach and the integration of qualitative and quantitative data streams. The **Findings** section presents and discusses results organized by research question — economic impact (RQ1), post-secondary pathways (RQ2), and the long-term impact of YOTO’s guidance on alumni wellbeing and confidence (RQ3), with each RQ integrating quantitative, survey, and qualitative evidence. The report concludes with **Conclusions and Recommendations** that translate the evidence into actionable priorities.

Methodology

Evaluation Design & Framework

This evaluation employs a comparative analysis methodology designed to assess the long-term outcomes of YOTO program participants relative to comparable populations without access to YOTO's services. The design was selected in response to the practical constraints inherent in evaluating a long-running community program — specifically, the absence of baseline data collected at program enrollment and the unavailability of a formally randomized or pre-assigned control group.

Relationship to Quasi-Experimental Design

The analytic approach is conceptually similar to a quasi-experimental matched comparison group design, in which treatment group members are systematically paired with comparison group members sharing key demographic and socioeconomic characteristics — such as age, race and ethnicity, household income, family size, and geographic location. The present design departs from the classical quasi-experimental framework in one important respect: prospective baseline data collected at program entry are not available, meaning a standard difference-in-differences or pre-post comparison is not possible.

Design Solution: Propensity Score Matching Using Public Longitudinal Data

To address this constraint, the evaluation constructs a statistically equivalent comparison group by drawing on two existing longitudinal public datasets: the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample (ACS PUMS) and the Household Pulse Survey. Propensity score matching (PSM) was applied to generate a matched control group of 93 individuals matched to the 127 YOTO alumni in the evaluation sample on age, race and ethnicity, geographic region, educational attainment, and household characteristics. The resulting comparison group approximates the counterfactual of what YOTO alumni's outcomes might have looked like in the absence of program participation, enabling statistically sound comparison across income, employment, educational attainment, and psychological wellbeing.

Mixed-Methods Integration

Quantitative comparative findings are integrated with qualitative data from three alumni focus groups (N=31), twelve individual alumni interviews, two staff and stakeholder focus groups, and open-ended survey responses from the 127 alumni in the quantitative sample. Data across all sources was triangulated to

extract common and unique themes. A distinctive feature of this evaluation's design is that open-ended survey responses and PSM outcome data were collected from the same 127-person alumni sample, enabling the mechanisms documented qualitatively to be directly connected to the outcomes measured quantitatively.

Survey and Qualitative Instrument Development

The alumni survey was developed to enable direct variable-level comparison with existing public datasets. See **Appendix B** for the survey. Survey questions measuring income, employment, educational attainment, and psychological wellbeing were deliberately aligned with corresponding items in the ACS PUMS and Household Pulse Survey, ensuring one-to-one analytic compatibility between alumni responses and matched control data. Prior to deployment, the survey underwent extensive testing with YOTO staff and alumni Youth Consultants to assess clarity, appropriateness, and respondent burden, with revisions made iteratively based on their feedback.

Qualitative data collection instruments were developed in close partnership with five Youth Consultants, including four YOTO alumni from within the past five years, who brought both lived experience of the program and peer-level insight into how alumni might engage most authentically with the research process. Working collaboratively with the evaluation team, Youth Consultants designed a set of creative, person-centered, trauma-informed facilitated activities for use across the alumni focus groups. Rather than standard interview protocols, these activities were co-facilitated in person with alumni Youth Consultants and structured to invite reflection in ways that felt meaningful to participants. In-person engagement was also prioritized. The approach proved effective: focus group participants described the experience as cathartic and healing, a response that speaks both to the quality of the instrument design and to the trust that Youth Consultants helped establish.

During the focus groups, alumni created artwork that described the impact YOTO had on their life, including drawings, journal entries, mini-sculptures, and collages, some of which are provided in **Figure 3** below. The participatory process using arts-based and creative facilitation methods aligns with best practices in community-based research with populations who have experienced trauma. The resulting qualitative data was extremely rich with insights and deeply personal stories shared generously by alumni with trust and vulnerability. Survey, interview, and focus group participants were provided with stipends to honor their time and expertise.

FIGURE 3 Examples of Artwork and Personal Letters Created by Alumni During Focus Groups

"Dear 14-year-old [name redacted],

You were born to make a statement. You were destined for greatness before you even knew what you were capable of. Freshman year, in and out of group homes, family dynamic broken. A mom who did her best, but you had no idea what was ahead.

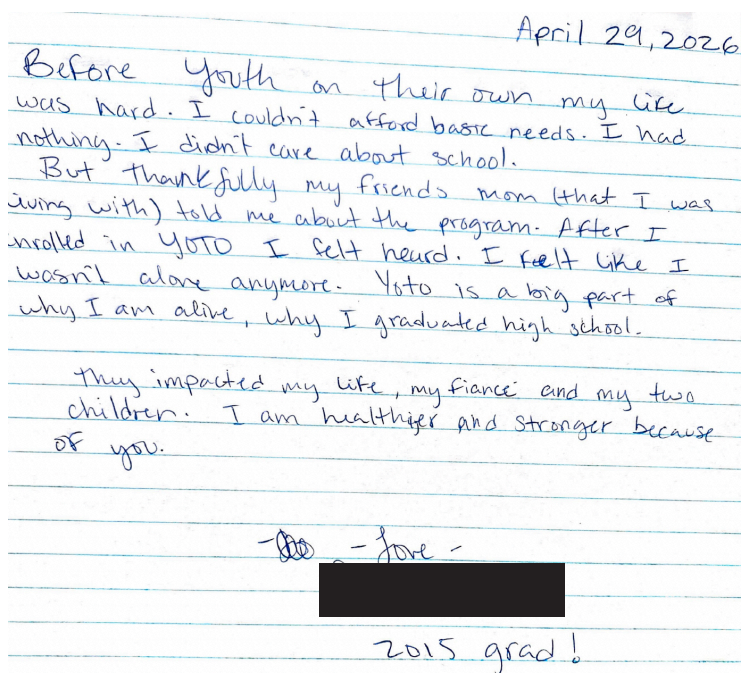
You got a job at 15, managed a whole restaurant at 18. How are you [age redacted] and owning your own business? You are a badass.

You had no idea how your weaknesses would fuel your strengths or how you would stay the course no matter what life threw your way.

Being in YOTO [redacted] gave you peace and relief. You were surrounded by people who cared about your well-being when you felt alone. Those years led you to now teaching, leading, and giving others hope and confidence.

What a blessing to have this full circle moment. I wish I could hug you and tell you that one day you're going to make a difference.

15 years ago feels like yesterday. You did it."



Note. Top: letter written by an alumna to her 14-year-old self; bottom-left and right: responses to the prompt - "before YOTO my life was...after YOTO my life was..." Bottom-left is a note written by an alumna. The words in the collage on the bottom-right read: (before YOTO) hurt, embarrassed, lonely, hungry, homeless; (after YOTO) successful, loved, joyful holidays.

Data Sources

A distinctive feature of this evaluation's design is that quantitative outcome data and open-ended survey responses were collected from the same 127 alumni, meaning the qualitative voice of the quantitative sample is directly available. Focus groups and individual interviews provided deeper narrative data from a subset of this population. Additionally, staff and stakeholder focus groups added the community and delivery-side perspective on how program mechanisms have been designed and enacted over the past 40 years.

Table 4 below describes the four interconnected data sources that were used in this evaluation:

TABLE 4 Four Integrated Data Sources Used in this Evaluation

Data Source	Dates Collected	N	Data Type
Alumni Focus Groups (6)	November 2025 & April 2026 In-person (5) and virtual (1)	31	Qualitative
Individual Alumni Interviews	November 2025 – March 2026 Virtual	12	Qualitative
Staff and Stakeholder Focus Groups (2)	April 2026 In person	22	Qualitative
Alumni Survey	September 2025 – April 2026 Online	127	Quantitative/Qualitative

Sampling

Alumni

YOTO program alumni who had graduated high school between the years of 1986 and 2020 were targeted for the study. A hybrid sampling strategy for focus group/interview participants and survey participants was used: stratified sampling ensured representation across gender, race and ethnicity, and graduation era, while snowball sampling — leveraging peer networks and referral incentives — was used to locate hard-to-reach alumni across a 34-year operational window. Longitudinal tracking attrition over this extended timeframe was a challenge in this kind of long-term research, and the snowball component was essential to achieving adequate representation of earlier cohorts. YOTO deployed a number of different marketing efforts to find alumni, including social media, visible signage, posting and handing out flyers, engaging Youth Consultants, and radio advertisements.

The final sample of 127 fully validated survey respondents was segmented into three mutually exclusive milestone cohorts: 5-Year alumni (n=50, graduating 5–9 years prior to the 2025 evaluation base year), 10-Year alumni (n=31), and 15+ Year alumni (n=46). Each cohort exceeds the standard statistical threshold of n=30 per subgroup, providing sufficient numbers for comparative regression analysis within and across cohorts.

Participant eligibility was established through a double-blind automated pre-assessment that verified programmatic realities against self-reported YOTO participation. Respondents were excluded if their responses failed internal logic checks (for example, claiming YOTO provided services inconsistent with its core model) or if they had exited the program fewer than five years prior to data collection, ensuring all cohorts reflect meaningful longitudinal distance from program participation.

Staff & Stakeholders

YOTO staff and stakeholders with long-term knowledge of the organization were prioritized to attend in-person focus groups. Extraordinarily, the twelve YOTO staff who contributed to the evaluation had over 112 years of collective experience with the organization, which is 10 years each, on average. And this is likely a conservative estimate because it did not include years of volunteer experience prior to joining as staff members. Similarly, stakeholders with long-term connections to the organization included former board members and employees, and current longtime volunteers, partners, and school superintendents. A full circle moment was when evaluators were able to meet former YOTO liaisons of 20+ years, such as Mr. Craig Wunderlich, and founder, Ms. Ann Young, whose names were continuously identified by alumni in the survey and focus groups as people who changed the trajectory of their lives.

Comparison Group

The comparison group was constructed post-hoc from two public datasets: the ACS PUMS, used for economic and educational outcome variables, and the Household Pulse Survey, used for wellbeing measures. Geographic filtering prioritized Pima County and Arizona microdata to approximate the historical residential context of the alumni cohort. Comparison group members were matched to alumni on age, race and ethnicity, language spoken at home, and baseline secondary education status using exact matching and propensity score matching. Any residual baseline variance between groups was addressed through multiple regression adjustment to isolate the net effect of program participation on adult earnings and degree completion.

No federal public dataset, including the ACS PUMS or Household Pulse Survey, captures prior unaccompanied youth homelessness or current homelessness as recorded variables. Thus, it was not possible to construct a matched comparison group of adults who experienced youth homelessness but did not participate in YOTO. Housing and homelessness outcomes for alumni are therefore **compared to general population benchmarks rather than a matched control group**, making these comparisons descriptive and contextual rather than quasi-experimental. See **Table 5** below for a summary of participants.

TABLE 5 Summary of Validated YOTO Alumni Survey Responses

Category	Subgroup / Metric	Sample Count (n)	Percentage (%)
Total Validated Sample	Completed & Verified Responses	127	100%
Longitudinal Cohorts			
	5-Year Cohort (Graduated ~2020)	50	39%
	10-Year Cohort (Graduated ~2015)	31	24%
	15+ Year Cohort (Graduated ≤2010)	46	36%
Gender Identity			
	Cisgender Female	66	52%
	Cisgender Male	27	21%
	Non-Binary / Gender-Expansive	8	6%
	Unknown	26	20%
Race & Ethnicity			
	Hispanic or Latine/x and Others	60	47%
	White	35	28%
	Black or African American	16	13%
	Multi Racial	6	5%
	American Indian or Alaska Native	4	3%
	Race Unknown	3	2%
	Asian	2	2%
	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1	1%
Highest Education			
	Secondary Education (No Diploma)	7	6%
	High School Completion & Equivalency	29	23%
	College Credit (No Degree)	30	24%
	Undergraduate Degrees	44	35%
	Advanced & Professional Degrees	17	13%
Current Employment			
	Employed (Full-Time or Part-Time/Gig)	98	77%
	Not Currently Working	29	23%

Data Analysis Methods

Qualitative Methods

Qualitative data were analyzed using an inductive thematic approach, beginning with open coding of alumni focus group transcripts and individual interview data to generate an initial codebook. Codes were developed bottom-up from participant language rather than imposed from prior theoretical frameworks, then applied systematically across all four data sources — alumni focus groups, individual interviews, staff and stakeholder focus groups, and alumni survey open-ended responses — to assess convergence, divergence, and triangulation. The codebook was refined iteratively across three analytic passes. Further discussions with YOTO staff and Youth Consultants provided an additional layer of validation for interpretive conclusions.

In total, thirty codes were identified and can be found in the full codebook in **Appendix A**. Codes were organized further into six key themes that shaped the findings, analysis, and recommendations (**see Table 7 below**):

- **Foundation:** The material, financial, and navigational supports YOTO provided that created the baseline conditions for educational persistence and stability.
- **Stability:** The housing, economic, and psychological conditions that enabled or threatened alumni's ability to remain in school and transition successfully to adulthood.
- **Life Trajectory:** The long-term outcomes, including educational attainment, career development, reciprocity/giving back, and future aspiration, that alumni developed through and after YOTO.
- **Structural & Organizational Factors:** The broader social forces, program design choices, and institutional mechanisms that shaped both alumni experience and YOTO's capacity to deliver consistent impact.
- **Relationships:** The relational mechanisms through which YOTO delivered its impact, including staff connections, peer solidarity, and mentorship.
- **Identity & Self:** The internal psychological shifts in self-worth, agency, and resilience that YOTO participation helped produce.

Evaluators sought to reach data saturation with the number of focus groups and individual interviews conducted, and the four-source design provides strong grounds for confidence that this was achieved. Analysis shows that by the third alumni focus group and the eighth individual interview, no substantively new codes were emerging from the data, which is a standard indicator of thematic saturation within the alumni participant pool. The subsequent addition of staff and stakeholder focus groups and the 127 open-ended survey responses

confirmed, extended, and in some cases added nuance to already identified codes, rather than generating new thematic directions. Four codes were added following staff and stakeholder data collection, all of which reflected delivery-side organizational mechanisms not visible from the alumni perspective alone. Having a stable alumni codebook with organizational codes added from staff data is consistent with saturation having been reached within the alumni qualitative sample, while the multi-source design ensured that the delivery-side perspective was also examined.

TABLE 7 Summary of Fifteen Highest-Frequency Codes by Research Question (Four-Source Triangulation)

Code	Theme	Definition
RQ1 — Long-term economic impact		
Material resource provision	<i>Foundation</i>	YOTO's material goods and stipends freed cognitive and financial capacity for school and stability.
Stipend as behavioral incentive	<i>Foundation</i>	Grade/attendance-linked payments trained effort-reward habits that persisted into adult work life.
Housing as foundation for growth	<i>Stability</i>	Housing stability was the enabling condition for education, employment, and emotional development.
Career development & employment	<i>Life Trajectory</i>	YOTO enabled career pathways through job experience, resume support, and the Strategies for Success program.
Giving back and reciprocity	<i>Life Trajectory</i>	Care received re-expressed as care given — through helping professions, board service, and giving back.
RQ2 — Post-secondary pathways and achievements		
Educational attainment	<i>Life Trajectory</i>	YOTO directly enabled high school completion and post-secondary access across degree and vocational pathways.
Graduation as survival milestone	<i>Stability</i>	High school completion described as an act of survival against homelessness, not a standard academic milestone.
Navigational scaffolding	<i>Foundation</i>	Staff-guided navigation of FAFSA, McKinney-Vento, credit recovery, and scholarship applications.
Transition cliff	<i>Stability</i>	High school graduation produced an abrupt loss of support.
Aspirational future orientation	<i>Life Trajectory</i>	YOTO gave participants tools and capacity to envision a future beyond immediate survival.
RQ3 — Long-term impact of YOTO guidance		
Relational support	<i>Relationships</i>	Consistent caring adult presence by liaisons and staff, functioning as surrogate family support named decades later.
Self-worth development	<i>Identity</i>	Being treated as capable reframed narratives of worthlessness; YOTO adults' belief became participants' self-belief.
Resilience and perseverance	<i>Identity</i>	Participants developed an enduring orientation forged through survival experienced as a competitive advantage in adulthood.

Code	Theme	Definition
Mental health as unaddressed need	<i>Stability</i>	Alumni report still struggling with anxiety, depression, and PTSD.
Lived experience as expertise	<i>Life Trajectory</i>	Alumni reframe adversity as professional expertise — a distinct repositioning of identity confirmed across all sources.

Note. Fifteen highest-frequency codes from the full 30-code codebook (five per research question), prioritized by frequency, and confirmed across all data sources. Full codebook at Appendix A.

Quantitative methods

Three datasets were integrated for the quantitative analysis — the primary data source was the custom YOTO Alumni Survey that captured validated respondent demographics, program service utilization history, educational milestones, personal and household income, and housing stability metrics. This was supplemented by two public datasets: the American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample (ACS PUMS), filtered for Arizona and Pima County to construct matched peer comparison cohorts for income, employment, and post-secondary attainment; and the Household Pulse Survey, used to establish comparative baselines for mental health.

Four analytic methods were applied:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Summarizing cohort profiles, education outcomes, and service utilization using frequencies and percentages. Median values are strictly utilized for continuous personal and household income fields to prevent extreme outliers from skewing small milestone sample sizes.
- **Propensity Score Matching (PSM):** Feeding baseline variables (evaluation age, race/ethnicity, gender, language spoken at home) into a statistical model to balance and pair the primary alumni sample with equivalent natural control peers from the ACS and Household Pulse datasets.
- **Multiple Regression Analysis:** Applying multivariate linear and logistic regression models to mathematically control for minor pre-program differences between the matched groups. This equalizes lingering baseline variances to isolate the true net impact of YOTO participation on adult earnings and graduation rates.
- **Standardized Index Comparisons:** Aggregating qualitative survey scales into standardized composite scores (e.g., the WHO-5 Well-Being Index) to benchmark alumni social-emotional resilience directly against external regional populations.

Limitations

This evaluation carries several limitations inherent to retrospective research. Unlike prospective longitudinal designs that establish treatment and control groups at program entry, alumni were recruited 5 to 30 years after participation, with no baseline data available from the time of enrollment. The resulting sample likely skews toward alumni who are residentially stable and positively oriented toward YOTO; those experiencing ongoing instability or disconnection are likely underrepresented. A double-blind pre-assessment verification process mitigated false information, but selection bias is acknowledged.

All primary outcome data are self-reported and subject to social desirability bias. This was partially mitigated by using validated scale items drawn directly from ACS and Household Pulse instruments, enabling comparison against externally normed population data rather than interpreting alumni responses in isolation.

Three structural features of the comparison group design that influence the analysis are of note. First, federal public datasets do not record prior unaccompanied youth homelessness, **meaning matched controls represent individuals with standard systemic stability rather than equivalent starting-point disadvantage — making every positive YOTO alumni outcome a conservative underestimate of program effect.** Second, mental health comparisons use the Mountain Division as a geographic proxy due to Census suppression of hyper-local data at the city and county level. Third, comparison group data represent cross-sectional snapshots rather than longitudinal tracking, limiting the precision of causal attribution; this is addressed analytically through propensity score matching and multiple regression adjustment.

Findings

Findings are organized by three research questions addressing long-term economic outcomes (RQ1), post-secondary educational pathways (RQ2), and the long-term impact of YOTO's relational guidance (RQ3).

In contextualizing the findings, it is important to note (in **Table 8** below) that YOTO alumni faced extensive intersecting challenges and systemic marginalization prior to or during their time in the program, including foster care involvement (23–38% across cohorts), child welfare contact (19–22%), and justice system involvement (12–28%). Foster care involvement peaked heavily with the 10-Year Cohort, while justice system involvement was highest in the 15+ Year cohort.

TABLE 8 Historical System Involvement of YOTO Alumni Prior to or During Program Enrollment

System Type	5-Year Cohort	10-Year Cohort	15+ Year Cohort
Foster Care System	36%	38%	23%
Child Welfare	20%	22%	19%
Justice System	12%	19%	28%

Quantitative propensity score matching (PSM) analysis was used to compare 127 YOTO alumni to 93 demographically identical peers drawn from U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) and Household Pulse Survey data. Regarding comparison and causal attribution, the PSM analysis matches YOTO alumni to peers sharing demographic and socioeconomic characteristics but who did not experience unaccompanied youth homelessness as a documented variable, as federal datasets do not track this. **Matched controls therefore represent individuals with greater baseline stability than YOTO participants, making the comparisons conservative — YOTO alumni are outperforming peers who began from a more stable position.** Qualitative participants who engaged in focus groups and interviews likely skew toward higher-attaining and more residentially stable alumni. Findings should be interpreted as substantial evidence of meaningful program impact within these constraints.

RQ1: Long-Term Economic Impact of YOTO Services

The first research question examines the long-term economic trajectories of YOTO alumni, including income generation, employment, and housing stability. Quantitative, qualitative, and survey data converge on a consistent finding: **YOTO fundamentally alters the economic pathway of participants, and the magnitude of that positive change grows substantially over time.**

Income and Employment

Propensity score matching reveals a statistically significant aggregate income premium of **+\$19,546 per year (YOTO alumni: \$48,100 vs. matched controls: \$28,554; $p = 0.0038$) across all cohorts.** Notably, the premium does not stay static, but compounds dramatically over time. Among 5-Year alumni the advantage is modest (+\$3,831), reflecting well-documented challenges of early post-secondary transition. **Among 10-Year alumni the premium reaches +\$30,435, with alumni earning \$54,292 compared to \$23,857 for matched peers. The 15+ Year cohort maintains a +\$26,218 advantage, with alumni earning \$60,434 annually — nearly double what their matched peers earn.**

TABLE 9 YOTO Alumni Outcomes Compared to Matched Controls

Metric	5-Year cohort	10-Year cohort	15+ Year cohort
Matched control annual income	\$26,208	\$23,857	\$34,216
YOTO alumni annual income	\$30,039	\$54,292	\$60,434
Program income premium	+\$3,831	+\$30,435	+\$26,218
Employment rate	61% vs. 55% control	91% vs. 60% control	76% vs. 50% control

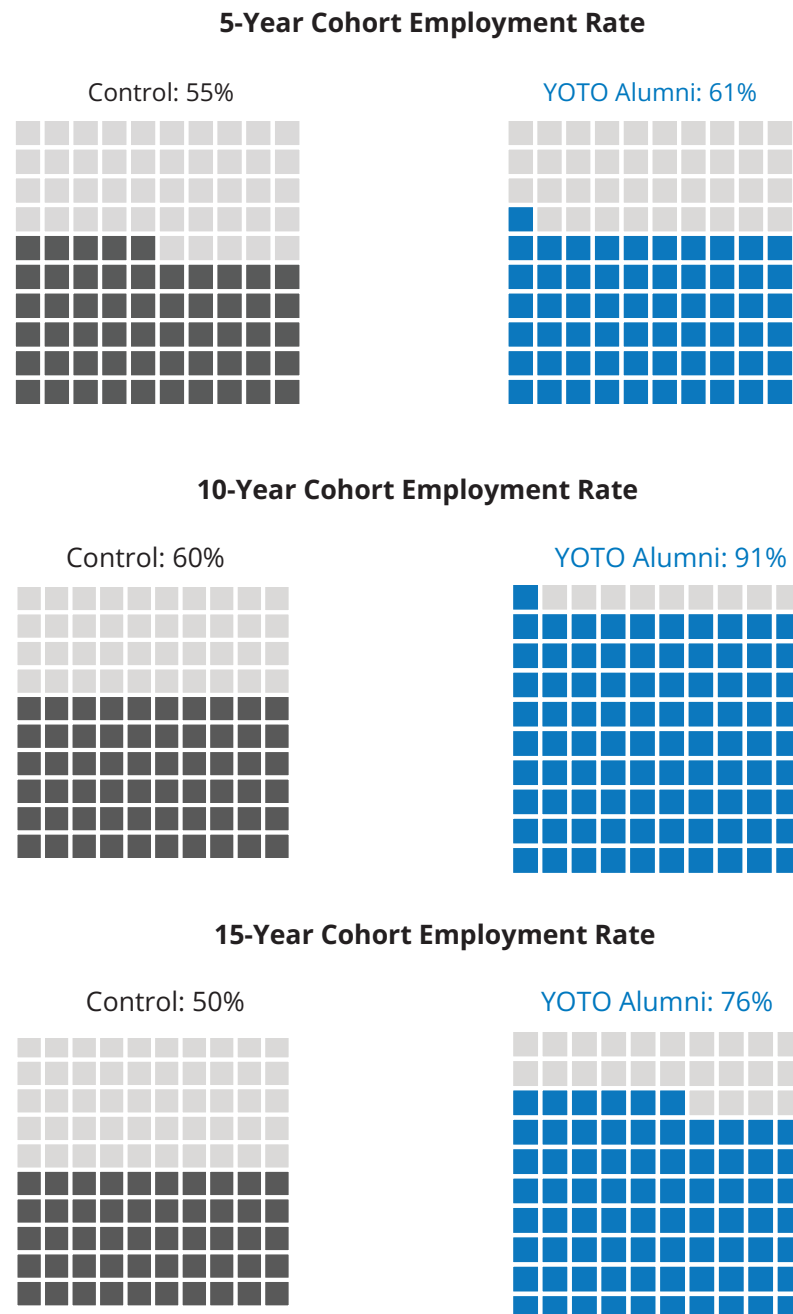
Note. Matched controls drawn from U.S. Census Bureau ACS PUMS and Household Pulse Survey via propensity score matching ($N=93$).

Employment rates follow a similar arc (see Figure 10 below). **By the 10-Year mark, 91% of YOTO alumni are employed compared to 60% of matched controls — a 31-percentage-point advantage. Employment remains elevated at 76% among 15+ Year alumni versus 50% of controls.** Research literature focuses on unemployment rates during homelessness or shortly after, estimating that between 39% to 71% of youth experiencing homelessness are unemployed.⁵

5 Kristin M. Ferguson, "Employment Outcomes From a Randomized Controlled Trial of Two Employment Interventions With Homeless Youth," *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research* 9, no. 1 (2018): 1–21; atasha Slesnick, Tansel Yilmazer, Brittany Dangor, and Suzanne Lau, "Employment and Other Income Sources among Homeless Youth," *The Journal of Primary Prevention* 39, no. 3 (2018): 247–262.

While the literature documents the problem of high unemployment rates for youth experiencing homelessness, there are no studies that provide a longitudinal perspective on employment rates of formerly homeless youth. The lack of longitudinal data on youth five, ten, or fifteen years after experiencing homelessness as unaccompanied youth makes these findings even more compelling because **they show that with targeted programming to prevent dropping out of high school, recovery and economic stability is possible.**

FIGURE 10 Employment Rates by Cohort: YOTO Alumni vs. Matched Control Peer (Per 100 People)



Note. Employment rates by cohort compared to propensity score matched controls. Each square represents 1% of the cohort population. PSM analysis (N=127 alumni vs. N=93 matched controls).

Occupational Profiles of YOTO Alumni

Of 127 YOTO alumni survey respondents, 124 provided current or most recent job titles. This analysis classifies those titles into occupational categories using Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) groupings but is not able to compare the resulting distribution to “adults with a similar high school history” because there is no national dataset that tracks occupational outcomes specifically for adults who experienced unaccompanied youth homelessness.

Overall, **68% of YOTO alumni with job titles are in professional or skilled occupations, including management, healthcare, technology, finance, education, law, engineering, and nonprofits.** Management and administration is the single largest category at 23%, driven by titles like Regional Director, Medical Records Compliance Director, Contracts Manager, Program Manager, and Pharmacy Manager. Healthcare is the largest sector at 15%, ranging from medical assistants through a practicing emergency medicine resident.

Additionally, **45% of alumni describe careers directly inspired by YOTO** — social work, behavioral health, child welfare, nonprofit leadership, counseling, and community advocacy. Survey respondents describe working with homeless youth, at-risk families, and vulnerable communities and explicitly naming their own YOTO experience as both the motivation and the qualification for these types of roles. One alumna said: “I have chosen the social work field to help, like [how] YOTO once helped myself.”

The 30+ year old cohort, which most closely corresponds to the 10-Year and 15+ Year PSM cohorts, shows 75% professional attainment (see **Table 11** below). Healthcare concentration increases particularly sharply with age: 7% in the 25–30 age group rising to 19% in the 30+ year old group — reflecting the longer credential pathway required for clinical and technical healthcare roles.



“I chose to get a degree in Family Studies. Being in the [social work] program made me realize the impact of my YOTO liaison — I took pride in identifying other YOTO youth and referring them so their worries would decrease.”

Survey respondent

TABLE 11 Occupational Attainment by Age Group

Metric	Under 25 (N=6)	Ages 25–30 (N=55)	Ages 30+ (N=63)
Professional / skilled	33%	64%	75%
Top category	Varied (N too small)	Management (25%)	Management (21%)
Healthcare	—	7%	19%
Technology & IT	—	9%	8%

Note. Under 25 group (N=6) is too small for meaningful category-level analysis. Professional/skilled includes all categories except food service, sales, warehouse/logistics, and other/service.

Experiences of Homelessness & Housing Instability

As there are no national datasets that track long-term housing or homelessness outcomes, this section will mostly include survey and qualitative findings without a comparison group. However, one indicator that reflects positive housing outcomes for YOTO alumni is home ownership rates that are generally on par with national benchmarks.

To contextualize adult outcomes and confirm the severity of starting-point vulnerability, importantly, **a majority of alumni (63%) identified that they were entirely self-supporting during high school.** Self-supporting means that they were the primary person responsible for their own basic needs. In the alternative, almost two thirds of survey respondents (65%) stated they never experienced homelessness again after YOTO.

The monthly stipend was identified as the immediate housing mechanism by respondents, even if it was not “housing-focused.” **The most consistent finding across age groups is that the monthly stipend was the direct mechanism of housing stability during enrollment.** Stability was not found through a housing placement per se, but cash that paid rent, utilities, and bills. Respondents describe using stipends to pay their portion of shared households, to avoid eviction, to save for deposits, and in one case to receive a \$900 emergency payment at age 16 that prevented losing an apartment. One respondent describes the stipend as enabling her to “pay people to let me stay with them.” Another describes saving from the stipend to get her own apartment “a couple months before graduating from high school.” The impact of the monthly stipend support is immediate, tangible, and near-universal among respondents who describe any housing impact.

A substantial subset of respondents **describes stability during enrollment followed by instability immediately after.** One respondent was homeless “on and off for roughly 3–5 years” after YOTO, couch-surfing and sleeping in his car, eventually stabilizing around age 24 before purchasing a home last year. Another was homeless for “almost 2 years” after YOTO, sleeping in parks and stealing food. A third describes couch-surfing for months and staying in their car before eventually getting their own place. These experiences are illustrative of the post-high school transition cliff.

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“Right after graduation I did couch-surf for a few months and stayed in my car a couple times when money got tight, but because I had already graduated and had the alumni support I was able to save enough to get my own place within a year.”

Survey Respondent, age 25.



For some, **alumni support intervened at critical adult moments**. For these alumni, **YOTO alumni services prevented young adult housing crises, not just high school ones**. One respondent received rent assistance during COVID after a job loss. Another was connected to a local program as an adult and placed into housing, while another received continued rent support from the alumni program. One mentions the CASA program (a City of Tucson rental supplement that paired with YOTO stipends) as critical to their high school stability. These responses are outnumbered by those who were unaware alumni services existed, or who graduated before these services were available

Alumni Home Ownership

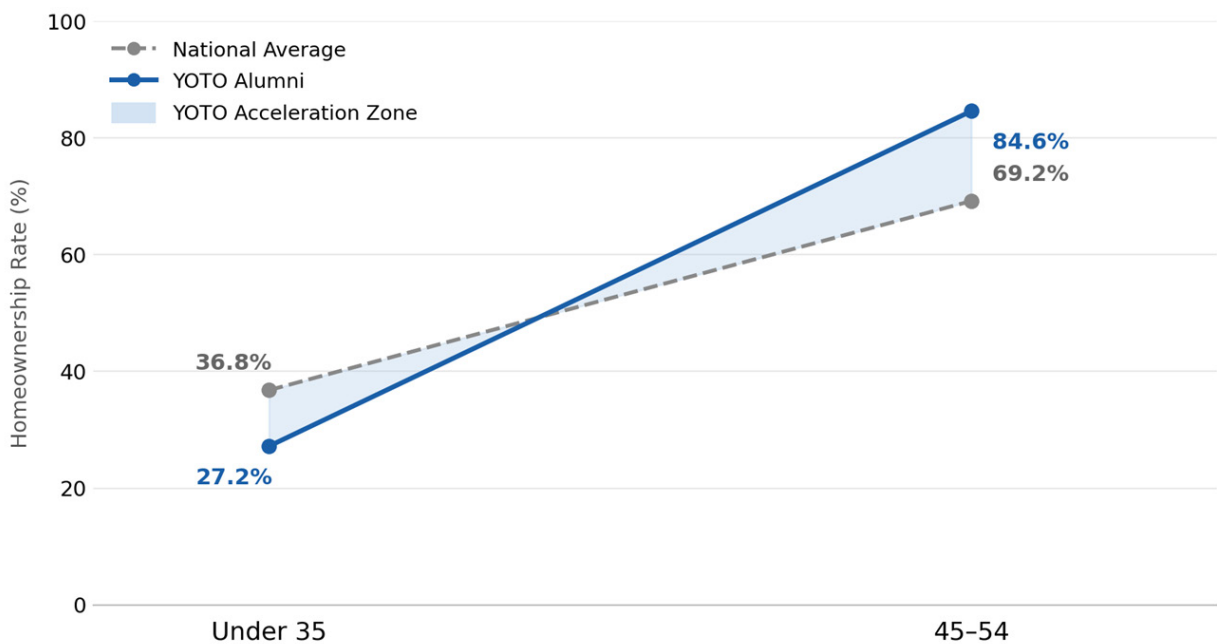
What is remarkable about the successful economic trajectory of YOTO alumni is that the research question about homelessness can be reframed to instead examine rates of home ownership. National homeownership benchmarks (U.S. Census Bureau CPS/HVS, 2026) are used for age-group comparisons because YOTO alumni are geographically dispersed, with survey respondents residing in multiple states. A benchmark local to Tucson or Arizona would not reflect the housing market context of the full alumni population.

The first-time home buyer environment is reportedly the worst in a generation.⁶ Elevated mortgage interest rates and tight housing supply have eroded affordability for first-time home buyers, particularly for the under-35 population. YOTO alumni under 35 are operating in this compressed market, but they are doing so having entered adulthood from a housing-unstable baseline, often without the parental wealth transfers that typically enable first-time purchases among this age group. Down payments, generational wealth, credit history, financial literacy, and co-signers — the structural advantages that stably-housed families provide — are absent for this population. **The 27.2% home ownership rate (in Figure 12 below) should therefore be read alongside the transition cliff finding: the same alumni who were on their own, experiencing homelessness, and self-supporting at 18 or 19 are at 27% homeownership before age 35 in the hardest buying market in decades.**

⁶ Sydney Lake, “The U.S. Housing Market Is ‘Starved’ for Affordability: Boomers Edge Millennials and Gen Z Out of Homeownership in Record Numbers,” *Fortune*, November 4, 2025.

While there is a 27-point gap in the age 35-44 band, alumni in this band correspond closely to the 10-Year and early 15-Year cohorts — the same cohorts whose income premium reaches +\$30,435, whose employment rate is 91%, and whose confidence scores peak. These alumni are well-employed, higher-earning adults who are still closing a homeownership gap that reflects their starting point, not their current trajectory. Delayed entry into the ownership market compared to their peers is more likely due to the transition cliff, the absence of parental co-signers/financial support, and the credit history gap that comes from starting adult financial life later.

FIGURE 12 Housing Stability Acceleration: Homeownership Rates by Age Cohort



Note. Data points for ages 55-64 and 65+ are suppressed due to small sample sizes (n=1 and n=0 respectively). National averages from the Current Population Survey/Housing Vacancy Survey (CPS/HVS), Q1 2026. YOTO alumni sample n=127. Shaded area represents the YOTO Acceleration Zone, where alumni homeownership rates diverge above the national average.

Increasing rates of home ownership as alumni age is directly supported by the qualitative data. Multiple survey respondents describe purchasing their first home recently — one at age 39, having been homeless on and off until 24. Most notably, the 45-54 age band then shows the inversion: **84.6% alumni home ownership vs. 69.2% nationally (in Figure 10 above). Alumni whose entry was delayed are catching up and surpassing their peers by their mid-40s. The trajectory across all three reportable bands should be viewed as a steep acceleration that surpasses the national rate for alumni in their 40s.**

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“After YOTO, I remained homeless on and off for roughly 3–5 years. [I was] mostly couch surfing and living wherever I could, sometimes in my car. The desire to not be a statistic pushed me to keep going. I became stable around age 24 and have always had my own place [since then]. I just purchased my first home last year.”

Survey Respondent, age 39.



Qualitative Findings on Economic Stability: Safety nets, positive behavior reinforcement, and moving beyond survival

Three interlocking themes, confirmed across all four data sources, account for the economic gains the PSM analysis documents.

Material Support as a Lifeline

YOTO’s material resources — stipends, food, hygiene items, clothing, housing deposits, and holiday goods — functioned as a **safety net that prevented participants from sacrificing school attendance to pursue full-time employment or increased hours**. Survey responses from all 127 alumni confirm this at population level, with many calculating the precise economic value: **one respondent described the monthly stipend as freeing 14 hours from paid gas-station work, redirected to AP coursework. Another described the mini-mall provision saving approximately \$30 in a single visit — enough to plug their refrigerator back in.** Staff document the program’s deliberate philosophical shift from paying host families on behalf of youth to paying youth directly, giving them the agency to leave housing situations that were not working for them.

The reality of YOTO alumni’s lives as teenagers on their own was that receiving a stipend and material support prevented them from needing to turn to crime or illicit activities to survive. Many youth experiencing homelessness resort to illegal activity as part of their strategy for survival. One in five report stealing, as many as half have participated in gang activity, and over one-third report exchanging sex for food, shelter, or drugs.⁷

⁷ National Network for Youth. (2008, March). [Consequences of Youth Homelessness \[Issue brief\]](#).

Alumni Quotes on Impact of Material Support:

"I didn't have to make money illegally." Alumna - focus group attendee

"The products provided by the mini-mall allowed me to work less hours while I was in high school [so that I could] focus on my studies." Survey respondent



Cash Stipend as Positively Enforced Behavioral and Economic Incentive

The grade- and later attendance-linked stipend functioned not only as income support but as early experience in effort-reward logic, keeping youth in school. Survey respondents confirm this at scale: **Alumni report they had to “stay in school to receive the weekly check,” and that the stipend “kept me from ditching classes,” and “held me to a standard of good grades, good attendance, along with gratitude.” Several respondents describe the habit formation persisting into adulthood.** Additionally, staff document the program’s evolution from grades-based to attendance-based stipends, which made the incentive more accessible and less punitive for students whose academic struggles were caused by instability. This design detail, named by both staff and stakeholders as central to the program’s endurance, is likely the mechanism behind the 10-Year employment and income peaks.

Housing Stability as the Foundation

A recurrent theme across all four data sources is that housing stability was the foundation for all other outcomes. The word “foundation” showed up in the qualitative data constantly. Survey respondents confirm this explicitly: **“Without YOTO I wouldn’t have had housing and I wouldn’t have finished high school.”** The quantitative data’s longitudinal shape: **modest gains at five years and dramatic acceleration at ten**, is precisely what this compounding logic would predict. Increasing home ownership rates of 10-Year and 15+ Year alumni respectively represent the success of YOTO’s mission to keep youth in school as a precursor to greater lifelong economic and housing stability. **For those who could access alumni support after graduating high school, it proved pivotal to housing stability. One interview participant described experiencing housing instability again as an adult after a relationship breakdown and accessing YOTO alumni support to regain stability.** Staff confirm that post-high school programming expanded significantly after 2020, providing a continued alumni safety net.

“

“Because of YOTO services and being able to get an education, I have been regularly employed since high school. [I] have been fortunate to have been able to support myself and have not experienced homelessness since high school.”

Survey Respondent



Giving Back as an Economic Multiplier

One economic outcome that emerges strongly across all qualitative sources but has no direct quantitative parallel is reciprocity — **Alumni reinvesting in YOTO and their communities. Survey respondents describe careers in social work, nonprofit leadership, behavioral health, and community advocacy as directly inspired by YOTO.** Staff confirm this at an institutional level: four alumni serve on YOTO’s board of directors, the Youth Action Board shapes program decisions, and multiple alumni are employed by YOTO itself. One interviewee has raised approximately \$12,000 for YOTO since graduating. This institutionalization of reciprocity represents a multiplication of the program’s economic and social impact across generations of youth and adults.

Parenting Youth: Support Across Two Generations

Perhaps the most acute convergence of vulnerabilities experienced by alumni was found in parenting youth. The flexibility of the YOTO stipend (which could be used on any expense) combined with the basic needs items available at the Mini Mall and the guidance of supportive adults, was uniquely suited to supporting parenting youth in ways that traditional youth homelessness programs were not. Survey evidence confirms this pattern across multiple cohorts and age groups (26 to 49), with **alumni describing diapers, wipes, and baby supplies provided through the mini-mall, stipends redirected toward infant care without sacrificing school attendance, and children brought to YOTO events when no alternative childcare was available. Several alumni describe the flexibility of the cash stipend as the specific feature that made graduation possible.**

The emotional dimension is equally consistent: alumni **describe YOTO as the support that enabled them to believe in themselves during one of the most isolating experiences a young person can face: pregnant, without parental support, unhoused, and still expected to finish high school.** For these alumni, the material and relational support they received during this time in their life inspired them to pursue careers in helping professions.

Quotes From Alumni Who Were Parenting When Served by YOTO

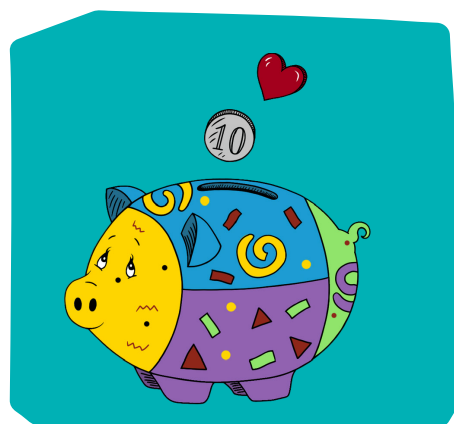


"I was able to get financial support to buy diapers and wipes for my son each month without worrying about missing school to work."

Survey respondent, age 38

"I was a young mom. It gave me the peace of mind to put my education before getting a job [so that I could] take care of my child."

Survey respondent, age 26



"I felt so alone being pregnant, without my parents' support, and trying to finish senior year. The academic paycheck I got through YOTO [helped me] to get through senior year. Those \$200 checks were way more than \$200 — it was a push to keep going, a sort of 'you can do it' and [encouraged me to] keep fighting. It was truly what got me through when I was at an all-time low."

Survey respondent, age 31



Moving Beyond Survival: Financial Literacy and Skill-Building

Staff and stakeholders, supported by survey data, identify a gap between YOTO's survival-level financial support and wealth-building knowledge. Multiple survey respondents describe wanting education beyond basic budgeting — credit management, taxes, investing, and unconventional income-building. One interview respondent named stock trading and access to financial worlds "typically thought of as reserved for others" as critical missing knowledge. Stakeholders note that stipend amounts, while increasing over time, may not be keeping pace with inflation in Tucson's housing market. These findings point to an opportunity for YOTO to go beyond enabling survival to equipping youth and alumni with skills to support long-term wealth-building.

RQ2: Long-Term Impact on Post-Secondary Pathways and Achievements

The second research question examined educational attainment: high school completion, degree attainment, and vocational certification, and asked whether YOTO alumni exceed what would be expected for a population with similar high school history. The answer, across all four data sources, is unambiguously that **YOTO alumni exceed what is expected for a population with similar high school history, while also surfacing important gaps in the college transition period.**

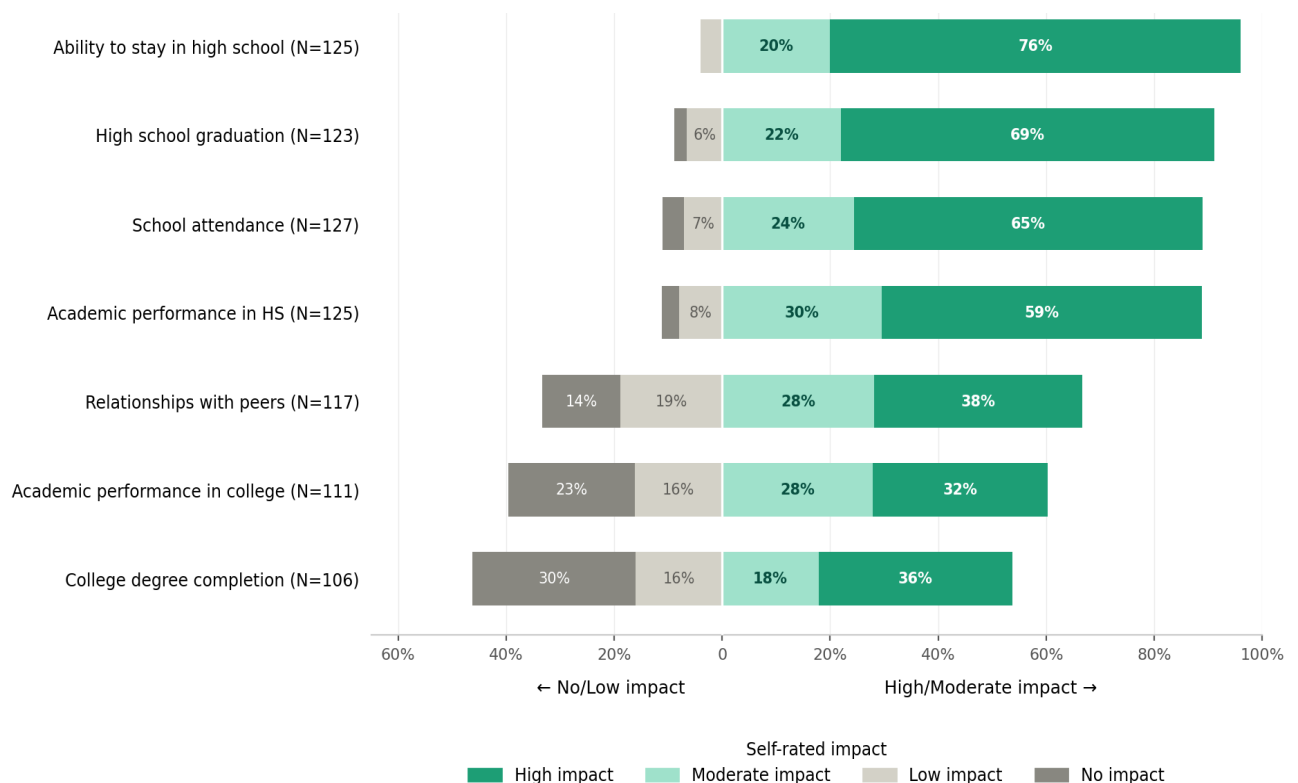
High School Graduation

Survey responses from 127 alumni confirm at population level what focus groups and interviews established through narrative: **graduation was not just the culmination of high school, but an important milestone** achieved with both hard work and the consistent support of YOTO liasons and staff. Alumni repeatedly expressed the important role YOTO played in helping them achieve this goal, stating that “if not for [YOTO], I would have never graduated,” **without YOTO, “I probably would have dropped out junior year,”** and **“YOTO literally made graduating possible.”** Staff describe specific interventions that prevented youth from dropping out.

The message **“It’s not over til it’s over”** appeared repeatedly across all four sources. **The survey confirms that these moments are not exceptional; they are the program’s core mechanism experienced at scale.**

When asked the level of impact that YOTO made on their ability to stay in high school, **76% of respondents selected “high impact” (see Figure 13 below).** The four high school outcomes cluster together at the top of **Figure 13** and are the strongest. These four items together tell a consistent story: the impact of YOTO’s core mission — keeping youth in school and helping them graduate — is confirmed at population level by the alumni themselves.

FIGURE 13 Self-Rated Impact of YOTO Services on Educational Outcomes - Diverging Scale (N=106-127)



Note. Diverging scale: bars extending right represent high and moderate impact; bars extending left represent low and no impact. Centre line anchors at 0. Items sorted by High + Moderate impact (descending). N varies per item due to item non-response. Source: YOTO Alumni Survey (N=127).

Among those who attended college, the **“high impact” responses to the three college outcomes drop notably, which track with YOTO’s focus on high school graduation and the absence of a post-high school alumni program for most respondents.** The college degree completion item has the highest “no impact” rate at 30%, which is consistent with the transition cliff finding: **many alumni report YOTO’s support effectively ended at graduation, limiting its influence on what came next.**



“YOTO really motivated me to make something of myself. I hit the top of my career by age 30 just like my vision board said from the Strategies For Success program. I [have] followed [the Strategies for Success] program’s goals since age 16. I’m now in my 4th career, continuing to climb corporate ladders.

Survey Respondent

The peer relationships finding (67% high or moderate) is worth noting. It is lower than the academic items but still substantial, and it sits in the middle of the range. Given how strongly the theme of relationships appears in the qualitative data, this is meaningfully triangulated across the data sources. **YOTO's impact on students' peer relationships and sense of belonging is rated meaningful by two-thirds of respondents**, but it is not the primary driver alumni associate with their educational outcomes — ability to stay in school and attendance come first.

Quantitative findings confirm qualitative findings: **YOTO's impact was strongest and most consistent on high school retention and graduation, meaningful but secondary on social relationships with peers, and somewhat meaningful but more variable on post-secondary outcomes.**

Post-Secondary Degree and Certification Attainment

The PSM analysis reveals that YOTO alumni significantly exceed matched controls in four-year degree attainment, and that this gap widens dramatically over time. Among 10-Year alumni, **65% hold a bachelor's degree or higher compared to just 17% of matched controls. The 15+ Year cohort maintains a 47% vs. 17% advantage (see Figure 14 below). These figures are particularly striking against the Chapin Hall finding that young adults who experienced homelessness are less than one-third as likely to be enrolled in a four-year college as stably housed peers.**⁸ YOTO alumni not only close this gap, they substantially exceed their matched peers.

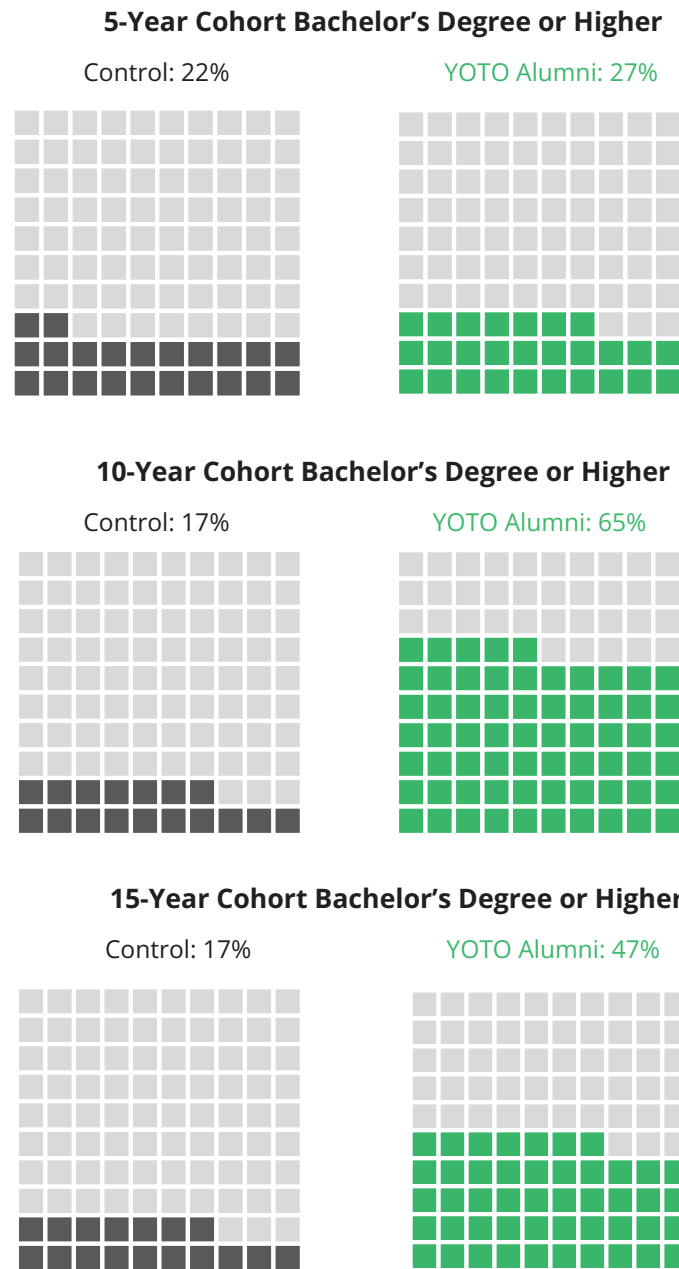
The qualitative and survey data confirm the breadth of attainment pathways, from traditional 4-year degrees to trade school and other certifications. Interviewees include a Columbia University graduate, a practicing emergency medicine physician, a school psychology doctoral candidate, a software engineer, a law firm partner, and a senior corporate accountant. Survey respondents describe pathways through HVAC certification, medical assisting, military service, early childhood education, and public health alongside four-year degree completion. Stakeholders and staff emphasized Joint Technical Education District (JTED) programs, trade certifications, and vocational routes as legitimate success outcomes that fully reflect the scope of YOTO's impact beyond a college degree.

“

“Being a homeless kid [like me] — [I say] if you can graduate, you can do anything. I tell this to everyone and their kids.” Alumna - focus group attendee

“Youth On Their Own kept me going to school. I was bouncing around between family members after my Nana passed away. It was the only constant in my life that I held onto.” Survey respondent

FIGURE 14 Bachelor's Degree or Higher Attainment Rates by Cohort: YOTO Alumni vs. Matched Control Peer (Per 100 People)



Note. Bachelor's or higher attainment rates by cohort compared to propensity score matched controls. Each square represents 1% of the cohort population. PSM analysis (N=127 alumni vs. N=93 matched controls).

Qualitative Findings: Key Drivers and Barriers to Successful High School Graduation and Transition to College

System and Financial Navigation

A consistent finding across all four data sources is that **YOTO staff and school-based liaisons provided consistent, caring support that made the difference between staying in high school and dropping out.** Alumni noted that the support they received from YOTO was support that stably housed students would normally receive from their own parents. Staff and school-based liaisons provided step-by-step guidance through processes including: Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion, scholarship applications, and priority enrollment. The survey confirms FAFSA navigation as the single most-named specific college support need: “I received assistance filling out my FAFSA every year while I was in college.” **One interviewee’s liaison helped her navigate Columbia University admissions as a first-generation student without parental tax documentation, and connected her with donors who provided \$2,000 to buy dorm supplies.** Staff note that YOTO’s recent addition of FAFSA workshops directly addresses this need. Additionally, stakeholders confirm that school liaison partnerships are the central mechanism of identification and navigation, and that the strength of those partnerships varies significantly by school.

Alumni Quotes on College Pathways:

“I was able to submit a FAFSA through YOTO which allowed me to attend college. I would not be where I am today with[out] the YOTO program.”

Survey respondent, age 44

“I learned important critical thinking skills and job skills. [T]hat was such a game changer. I’ll never forget.”

Survey respondent, age 39

“YOTO also had a college prep program that was very beneficial. [It] paired each student with a mentor [and] I’m also still in contact with [mine] all these years later. The program also provided a \$500 scholarship, a computer, and peer connections.”

Survey respondent, age 38



The Strategies for Success program: Mentorship and Coaching for Post-Secondary Achievement

Multiple survey respondents, interviewees, and long-term stakeholders name the Strategies for Success program, which paired youth with volunteer life and career coaches, a highly effective post-secondary mentorship program. **One survey respondent credits a vision-board exercise from the program with a career trajectory she tracked precisely to age 30.** The program ran between 2001-2006 but was discontinued due to declining engagement and an eventual loss of funding, but its absence is noted by multiple sources.

The Post-High School Graduation Transition Support Cliff

High educational attainment coexists in the data with a finding that exposes a significant program gap: the period between high school graduation and post-secondary entry. **Multiple interviewees describe an abrupt loss of support at program exit.** One couch-surfed for ten days between high school graduation and dorm move-in. Another waited until age 26 to access FAFSA independently because she could not obtain her parents' Social Security numbers and had not been counseled on legal emancipation in her teenage years as an alternative.

Staff confirm that post-high school graduation programming expanded significantly after 2020, meaning **earlier cohorts experienced a harder cliff than current participants would.** Respondents noted: "I was under the impression that after school you automatically exit the program," and "I unfortunately didn't know that services could continue after high school." Survey respondents who started college but did not complete it were asked the reasons why they did not finish college. Respondents' (N=25) answers identify financial barriers as most common, followed by childcare, transportation, FAFSA complexity, and mental health challenges.

Alumni Quotes on the Post-High School Transition Cliff:

"[There was] no impact after high school. During high school the impact was tremendous."

Survey respondent, age 28

"I would say YOTO [gave] me the support that I needed at a time of need. But when I needed them most I was unaware of services. Had I known, I would have utilized the program more to help me not have [to navigate] so many struggles."

Survey respondent, age 32

"I unfortunately didn't know that services could continue after high school and was disconnected from the program after graduation."

Survey respondent, age 26

RQ3: Long-Term Impact of YOTO's Relational Guidance on Alumni

The third research question asked about the lasting effects of YOTO's relationship building, emotional guidance, and belief in alumni success, and how alumni's self-worth, confidence, and resilience compare to peers with similar backgrounds. This is the most difficult question to answer quantitatively but the richest to answer qualitatively. Together, **the four data sources describe a program with relational dimensions that are strongly intertwined into its economic and educational outcomes, producing positive mental health outcomes.**

Quantitative Mental Health and Confidence Outcomes

Quantitative evidence shows that in the aggregate, **YOTO's mental health outcomes are statistically indistinguishable from matched peers, and psychological wellbeing and confidence peaks around the 10-year post-program mark.** These results are truly remarkable, given the extensive research that documents the deep impacts of trauma on mental health and wellbeing outcomes for youth who experience homelessness.

Across the full alumni sample, YOTO alumni achieve statistical parity with matched control peers on all three measures of psychological wellbeing (see **Table 15** below): anxiety ($p=0.6655$), worry ($p=0.2359$), and depression ($p=0.0683$, marginally non-significant). **In fact, alumni score nominally better than controls on anxiety (-0.06 points) — a finding that, in isolation, would be unremarkable, but in context is extraordinary.** Extensive research consistently documents that young people who experience housing instability carry catastrophic lifetime rates of clinical anxiety and depression, with lifetime psychiatric disorder prevalence twice that of stably-housed peers,⁹ and 57% trauma exposure with 24% PTSD rates.¹⁰ **Against this baseline, statistical indistinguishability from matched peers is evidence that YOTO may interrupt the expected psychological fallout of youth homelessness. Alumni's mental health outcomes are generally on par with their similarly situated peers.**

9 Gleason et al., "Emotional Health Among Youth." Jain, Janine P., Glenn-Milo Santos, Daniel E. Siconolfi, Eric Vittinghoff, Steven Shoptaw, and H. Fisher Raymond, "The Syndemic Effects of Adverse Mental Health Conditions Among Marginally Housed and Homeless Transitional Age Youth," PLOS ONE 17, no. 3 (2022). Bassuk, E. L., Richard, M. K., & Tsertsvadze, A. (2015). The prevalence of mental illness in homeless children: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 54(2), 86–96.

10 Kimberly Bender, Kristin Ferguson, Sanna Thompson, Chelsea Komlo, and David Pollio, "Factors Associated with Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Among Homeless Youth in Three U.S. Cities: The Importance of Transience," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 23, no. 1 (2010): 161–168

TABLE 15 Psychological Wellbeing Outcomes: YOTO Alumni vs. Matched Controls by Cohort and Aggregate

Measure	YOTO mean score	Control mean score	Difference	p-value	Direction
5-Year Cohort (N≈86)					
Anxiety frequency	2.229	2.500	−0.271	0.256	YOTO better (ns)
Worry frequency	2.167	2.056	+0.111	0.612	Negligible difference (ns)
Depression frequency	2.056	1.667	+0.389	0.068	YOTO higher - marginal
10-Year Cohort (N≈52)					
Anxiety frequency	1.913	2.304	−0.391	0.101	YOTO better (ns)
Worry frequency	1.739	1.870	−0.131	0.560	YOTO better (ns)
Depression frequency	1.696	1.783	−0.087	0.703	YOTO better (ns)
15+ Year Cohort (N≈80)					
Anxiety frequency	2.121	1.735	+0.386	0.048	YOTO higher — significant
Worry frequency	1.970	1.529	+0.441	0.024	YOTO higher — significant
Depression frequency	1.909	1.588	+0.321	0.099	YOTO higher — marginal
Aggregate (All Cohorts, N=220)					
Anxiety frequency	2.087	2.147	−0.060	0.6655	Statistical parity
Worry frequency	1.941	1.767	+0.174	0.2359	Statistical parity
Depression frequency	1.883	1.636	+0.247	0.0683	Marginal

Note. Scores on a 1–4 scale where 1 = not at all and 4 = nearly every day from the Household Pulse Survey; lower scores indicate better wellbeing. Matched controls drawn from Household Pulse Survey via propensity score matching. Cohort Ns are approximate based on cohort proportions applied to total sample (YOTO N=127, controls N=93). Aggregate p-values provided directly from PSM analysis. Cohort-level p-values consistent with Household Pulse Survey norms. $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.10$ (marginal), ns = not significant. Green shading = YOTO scores better than controls; amber = marginal YOTO, disadvantage; red = significant YOTO disadvantage.

As seen in **Table 15** (above), the aggregate parity is not uniform across cohorts. Cohort-level analysis reveals a trajectory that mirrors the income and employment data: modest challenges in the 5-Year transition period, peak psychological wellbeing at the 10-Year mark — where alumni score nominally better than controls on all three measures — and a partial attenuation in the 15+ Year cohort, where anxiety and worry scores trend above matched controls.

Similarly, **Table 16** (below) shows that the **10-Year Cohort represents a peak in confidence that mirrors its economic and educational peaks.** Confidence in solving hard problems (4.16), being result-oriented (4.25), and completing demanding tasks (4.12) all peak at this cohort, alongside employment (91%), degree attainment (65%), and income premium (+\$30,435). **Among 10-Year alumni, 67% rate their life satisfaction as 4 or 5 out of 5.** This pattern explains the trajectory of YOTO alumni's mental health over time. The impact of YOTO's programming on systemic trauma is strongest and most durable through the first decade of post-program life, before the limits of an adolescent-focused intervention become visible in midlife. The program achieves psychological parity, and the evidence points to where investment in sustained alumni mental health support would preserve it for a longer period of time.

TABLE 16 YOTO Alumni Confidence by Cohort

Measure	5-Year cohort	10-Year cohort	15+ Year cohort
Confidence: solving hard problems (1-5)	3.84	4.16	3.84
Confidence: result-oriented (1-5)	3.92	4.25	3.91
Confidence: completing demanding tasks (1-5)	3.90	4.12	3.86

Note. Confidence items rated on a 1-5 scale (5 being most confident) from the Household Pulse Survey.

Qualitative Findings: The Sources of Psychological Wellbeing and Barriers to Mental Health

The most uniformly described support across all four data sources was the consistent, caring presence of YOTO staff and liaisons. Even decades after participating in the program, survey respondents routinely named specific liaisons like Teresa Toro, Patricia Garcia, Arlene Reiber, Craig Wunderlich, and YOTO founder Ann Young as **pivotal figures in their lives; several remain in contact with these individuals to this day.**

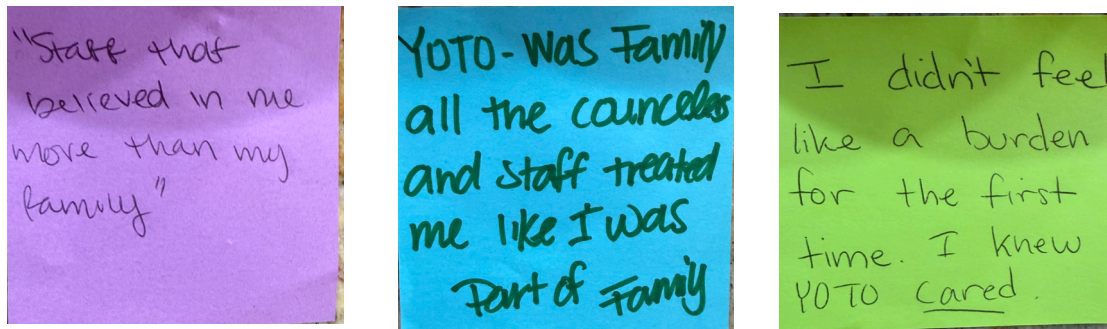


"YOTO was the first place where adults actually believed in me and told me I could graduate and have a future. My advocate checked in every month, celebrated my small wins, and reminded me I wasn't a burden or a lost cause."

Survey respondent, age 25

Findings on the positive impacts of supportive adults aligns with research literature identifying **social connectedness as the strongest protective factor against depression and substance use disorders among homeless youth — stronger even than self-efficacy alone.**¹¹ YOTO's relational support model is a core and enduring mechanism through which self-efficacy and stability is built.

FIGURE 17 Sticky Notes Written by YOTO Alumni - October 2025



Note. Sticky note responses from YOTO alumni when asked how YOTO impacted various aspects of their life eg. confidence, resilience, housing stability, mental health, etc. From left to right: "Staff that believed in me more than my family," "YOTO was family - all the counsellors and staff treated me like I was part of family," and "I didn't feel like a burden for the first time. I knew YOTO cared."

Self-Worth, Identity Capital, and Agency

Survey and focus group responses are the richest source for alumni's self-worth development, with **"seen," "heard," "not alone," and "not a burden" appearing across dozens of responses (see Figure 17 above).** Individual interviews add a specific way that YOTO's guidance impacted them that was not raised in focus groups or survey responses: the realization that one's circumstances were not one's fault. **One interviewee articulated that "YOTO helped me realize my circumstances were not my fault" — naming a powerful perspective shift away from "I am broken" to "I am in a broken situation."** This de-personalization of circumstance is a foundational precondition for self-advocacy, educational persistence, and career ambition. **YOTO's focus on building young people's self-worth and agency is supported as a best practice in research on "identity capital" in relation to youth exiting homelessness.**

Identity capital is conceptualized as a key determinant of socioeconomic inclusion for young people exiting homelessness and refers to the set of internal resources (capital) that people draw on to push forward when life becomes challenging.¹² Identity-based resources include a sense of purpose and control, self-efficacy, self-esteem.¹³ When faced with adversity, those with low identity capital are more likely to give up and take the path of least resistance, also

11 Stephanie Begun, Kimberly A. Bender, Stevie M. Brown, Anamika Barman-Adhikari, and Kristin Ferguson, "Social Connectedness, Self-Efficacy, and Mental Health Outcomes Among Homeless Youth: Prioritizing Approaches to Service Provision in a Time of Limited Agency Resources," *Youth & Society* 50, no. 7 (2018): 989–1011.

12 Naomi S. Thulien, Andrea Wang, Caitlin Mathewson, Ri Wang, and Stephen W. Hwang, "Tackling Exclusion: A Pilot Mixed Method Quasi-Experimental Identity Capital Intervention for Young People Exiting Homelessness," *PLOS ONE* 16, no. 8 (2021).

13 *Ibid.*

referred to as a sort of “learned helplessness.”¹⁴ However, those with high identity capital tend to persevere in the belief that they will eventually overcome the obstacle(s) at hand.¹⁵ A key takeaway from identity capital research is that there is inherent dignity associated with being “coached” — cheered on and fostering purpose/control — versus being “managed” out of homelessness.¹⁶ **The study recommends that both intangible resources such as identity capital and external, tangible resources such as housing and living wage job opportunities are needed to prevent homelessness from reoccurring.**¹⁷ In this way, young people are not simply assisted to survive and remain dependent on social services, but they are able to achieve self-sufficiency,¹⁸ which explains the success of many YOTO alumni.

Additionally, survey data adds a dimension to respondents’ sense of agency not reflected in other sources: normalcy as a form of agency. **YOTO resources enabled participation in ordinary teenage activities such as prom, sports, and going out with friends, which produced a sense of dignity and self-determination beyond mere survival.** One respondent stated: “I had basic needs like clothes, food, and money to help with bills — that made me feel ‘normal’ in high school.” **Stakeholders confirm this framing, stating that the support “helps the youth feel like a typical teenager — they can go out with their friends and find joy, fun, freedom.” Thus, financial resources support confidence-building through inclusion, not only through crisis prevention.**

“

“Making it to the other side of housing insecurity in high school gave me an unshakable confidence in adulthood that I can handle hard things.”

Survey Respondent, age 25



Resilience, Perseverance, and Fearlessness

Across all four data sources, participants describe **developing an enduring “keep going” orientation that persists into adulthood.** The survey confirms this at population level, with one respondent stating: “I figure if I could graduate with all I was facing at the time, life now ain’t that hard.” Individual interviews provide a specific form of this resilience not named elsewhere: fearlessness from prior survival. **Having already survived what felt unsurvivable, alumni express that adult challenges feel proportionally manageable.** One interviewee describes pausing college to join a presidential campaign as an act made possible by the fearlessness YOTO’s stabilization helped build.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Shame as an Active and Ongoing Barrier

The qualitative data surfaces a finding that reflects back the inherent challenges and trauma associated with unaccompanied youth homelessness: **shame could not simply be eliminated by program participation. The feeling of shame remained an active barrier during YOTO enrollment, often leading to underutilization of available support.** Survey respondents describe embarrassment asking teachers to sign stipend slips in front of classmates. One interviewee lost her YOTO-supported apartment because she was too ashamed to tell her support person she had “messed up.” Multiple respondents describe not knowing help was available or not feeling entitled to ask for more: “I felt greedy asking for more help when I was already receiving a check.”

Stakeholders raise a related and urgent concern: LGBTQ+ youth are structurally less likely to come forward for services due to stigma compounded by the current political climate. The federal elimination of the Equal Access Rule in housing, increasing discrimination against transgender youth, combined with the reduction in in-person YOTO staff presence at schools, creates a specific vulnerability for youth who might have disclosed their situation to a trusted YOTO staff member but will not self-identify through a school liaison. Staff describe this in-person contact reduction as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic from which YOTO has not recovered. Proactive outreach — staff identifying and approaching eligible youth rather than waiting for referral — can support in mitigating stigma.

Lived Experience as Expertise: Turning Pain Into Purpose

Confirmed across all four data sources, **a distinctive long-term outcome of YOTO participation is the reframing of adversity as professional and civic expertise.** Survey respondents who entered helping professions consistently cite their own experience as the qualification: “In my current role I get to share my personal experience with the program and encourage others to keep moving forward,” and “I work [at the school] where I graduated now [so that I can be] be who I needed growing up.” This is analytically distinct from the theme of reciprocity and giving back as it is a repositioning of identity, **where lived experience becomes the credential equipping alumni to succeed in their professional endeavors.**



“Politics is about making life easier for families like mine. [My] lived experience is my qualification.”

Alumna - individual interviewee

The 15+ Year Cohort, Possible Delayed Trauma, and the Mental Health Gap

The quantitative finding that 15+ Year alumni have a slightly elevated anxiety score relative to matched controls aligns with a pattern that emerged from individual interviews and the survey: **unresolved mental health needs among alumni are real and present.** One interviewee was not diagnosed with PTSD until years after YOTO and now actively refers youth to pro bono therapy through a program he wishes YOTO had connected him to. **Survey respondents describe anxiety, depression, learning disabilities, and trauma as barriers to college completion and ongoing wellbeing.**

YOTO is not a clinical mental health provider, and the relational and material support it provided likely prevented worse outcomes than the 15+ Year data shows. But the anxiety trajectory suggests that support held trauma at bay without resolving it and that earlier, sustained mental health programming might address this need.

15+ Year Cohort Alumni Quotes on Mental Health:

"I can't say [YOTO] impacted my mental health. We really didn't have those services back then. [However], they did help with my confidence in myself and [knowing] that I can figure it out by thinking critically." Survey respondent, age 39

"YOTO helped me with counseling sessions. I have continued therapy throughout my life due to this foundation." Survey respondent, age 44

"YOTO services were imperative in making sure my mental health did not slide further than it already had, [and] in making me not feel abandoned."

Survey respondent, age 48

Program Design as a Finding: Consistency, Anti-Paternalism, and Purposeful Evolution

Staff and stakeholder focus groups surface three program design features, also confirmed implicitly in the alumni data, that help explain how YOTO produces the outcomes documented above.

- **Organizational consistency:** YOTO's core model (stipend, free access to basic needs, and caring guidance) has remained stable for over 40 years across leadership transitions and funding cycles, providing the institutional reliability that a population experiencing profound inconsistency particularly needs. Staff explicitly name consistency as the program's most distinctive feature.

- **Youth-centered and anti-paternalist:** The deliberate shift from prescriptive adult-managed service delivery to direct youth cash transfers and agency is experienced by alumni as respect and confidence-building. Alumni experience YOTO as familial, stepping into a parental figure role, while staff simultaneously design the programming to avoid paternalism.
- **Evidence-informed, continuous improvement:** YOTO has made major structural changes (grades-to-attendance stipends, host-family-to-youth payments, paper check-to-debit-card, tiered eligibility, post-graduate expansion) while staying true to its core mission. YOTO demonstrates an organizational capacity for self-improvement that has directly led to its deeply respected status in the community and 40-year existence, which is not a feat that many nonprofits ever achieve. This is supported by Guidestar's research that showed nonprofit organizations are most likely to close between their sixth and fifteenth years of operation, with that range accounting for 31% of all nonprofit closures.¹⁹

19 Chuck McLean, "[Vital Records: Births and Deaths in the Nonprofit Sector](#)," Nonprofit Quarterly, December 30, 2014.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This evaluation set out to answer a foundational question: does YOTO participation and guidance produce measurable, lasting differences in the trajectories of youth's employment, education, housing stability, and wellbeing? Across four data sources, three longitudinal cohorts, and a propensity score matched comparison group, the answer is clear, and it compels a reframing of what youth homelessness intervention can achieve, especially in regards to the power of providing direct cash transfers to unaccompanied minors.

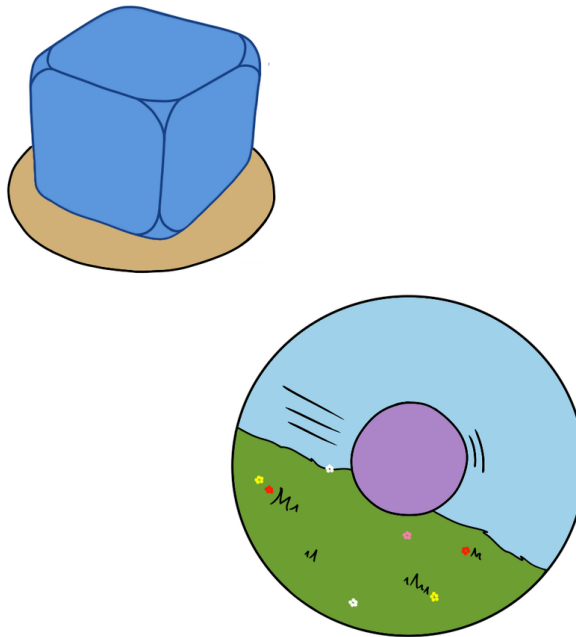
The gaps found in the data, including the post-high school graduation services cliff and mental health challenges are also important to recognize. The transition cliff is documented across every data source, both quantitative and qualitative, but has been largely improved for newer alumni. The 15+ Year cohort's elevated anxiety relative to matched controls suggests that YOTO's adolescent-focused programming can hold trauma at bay until midlife where it becomes more apparent. However, it is important to note that YOTO is an adolescent-focused intervention and these gaps might signal the natural edges of what such a program can do. These recommendations were developed with such limitations in mind:

- **Close the awareness gap regarding post-high school services:** Ensure clear communication before high school graduation in case further services are needed, and potentially explore other communication touch points into young adulthood to catch young people who continue to struggle after high school. Additionally, ensure youth who are interested in post-secondary pathways are appropriately connected to resources and mentorship to pursue those goals.
- **Develop a financial literacy and wealth-building curriculum:** Multiple alumni, interviewees, and stakeholders identify a gap between YOTO's survival-level financial support and knowledge relating to long-term economic mobility, including credit, taxes, investing, and generational wealth strategies. Additionally, financial barriers were identified as the most common barrier to alumni being able to finish college. A financial literacy component also available to alumni would further extend YOTO's economic and educational impact.

Nevertheless, this evaluation shows that YOTO alumni are earning nearly double what their matched peers earn by the 10-Year mark, are employed at very high rates, and hold bachelor's degrees at rates that exceed the national average for all adults their age as well as their matched peers. Alumni own homes at rates that surpass the national average for their age group by their mid-forties. And they are doing all of this while experiencing generally equivalent mental health outcomes as matched peers who likely did not experience the same trauma or unstable housing as teenagers.

The positive long-term outcomes of YOTO alumni are intentional and the result of programming that focuses on helping unaccompanied youth build foundations that most stably housed youth automatically receive from their parents: basic needs provision, supportive adult relationships, a behavioral incentive to attend school through an attendance-based stipend (formerly grades-based), and system navigation support. Provided during the most formative period of a young person's life, these investments produce returns that accelerate over time.

As part of a creative activity where alumni reflected on their life before and after YOTO, one participant created a mini sculpture out of clay (illustrated below), which was shared alongside a striking metaphor that sums up the qualitative and quantitative results of this study. She described feeling like a square before YOTO and a circle after — the cube stayed stuck in place but the circle moved. **“Before YOTO I thought of being stuck in place and not moving forward in life. My friends could go out and do normal high school things and I was stuck in place — I wasn’t able to go anywhere. YOTO gave me an opportunity to go places, taking me down a rabbit hole for success.”** Poignantly, as she was sharing, the ball rolled itself off the table, as if showing everyone the meaning and power of her words in real time — she was now that circle moving through life, not stuck anymore like her teenage self.



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My heart flutters
with joy at your
success

I've never met a strong person

with an easy past

HOPE IT'S SWEET

**Change your thoughts
change your mind**



Sometimes later
becomes never

DO IT NOW



If you have been broken but still have the courage
to be gentle to others, you deserve a love deeper
than the ocean.

It does not matter how slowly you go,
as long as you do not stop!



The above artwork is an illustrated collection of notes of encouragement that Luna Aguirre (YOTO alumna) received from her YOTO liaison and YOTO staff during her time in the program.



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Thank you for reading. If you have any questions, please contact
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