

# The life situations and experiences of youths who were with Beyond in the '80s and '90s

**A Retrospective Study conducted between Aug 2011 and Jan 2012**

In 2011, a study was carried out to understand the current situations of youths who had been with Beyond in the 1980s and '90s, to gain an appreciation of their experiences, and also to find out how Beyond had impacted them.

This study serves as a pre-cursor to a study which will track the youth and children Beyond serves till they turn 25, and a starting point to assess Beyond's vision that

***“By 2025, every child and youth in Singapore, despite a disadvantaged background has the opportunity to refuse a lifestyle of delinquency and welfare dependency.”***

The research took the form of a structured questionnaire (n = 30) and an in-depth interview (n = 9) which measured the following indicators that could possibly signal when a family has sufficient opportunities to move out of poverty. Additionally factors which contribute to moving out of poverty through building resilience and community support were assessed. In combination, they are as follows:

- Income per capita
- Education
- Employment
- Conflict with the Law
- Challenges
- Well-being
- Social Capital

In addition, the researchers invited participants to comment on **how Beyond has contributed** in the abovementioned domains.

The design of the study was limited to self report and should only be used as a snapshot to understand where the youths we served are at, at the time of study.

Being aware of the many different factors that impact their lives, Beyond's contribution was assessed when participants explicitly talked about how Beyond has helped them.

## **INCOME PER CAPITA**

73% of our then youths reported an income per capita that is higher than the national benchmark of \$550 per capita.

Based on subjective reports of financial stability, 60% of the participants report being comfortable financially. In general, households earning less than \$600 per capita report that they are spending more than they can earn.

## **EDUCATION**

On average, the respondents had obtained a secondary school level education. The highest educational level obtained was not found to be significantly correlated with household income or income per capita. However, such a finding must be evaluated in light of the current trends and conditions in the education system and the labour market.

## **EMPLOYMENT**

74% of the respondents are currently employed, either full time or part time. Of the 26% that are not working, half reported that they were not looking for work and cited the need to look after their children or having enough money not to work.

## **CONFLICT WITH THE LAW**

26% of the youths studied reported having been in conflict with the law. Of these, half had gotten into trouble with the law only once in their lives, while the other reported being in

trouble with the law 2-5 times. All participants have not been in trouble with the law in the past year. Crimes were generally drug-related or gang-related.

## CHALLENGES AND WELL-BEING

Participants' reports on how they viewed their own lives over the last 12 months regardless of their financial situations were positive and encouraging.

- A third of the participants reported no problems in their lives using terms like "smooth sailing" or "contented with life"
- The most frequently cited challenges were health-related.
- Despite reported challenges, 90% of the participants reported being at least moderately satisfied with life in the past 12 months.

## SOCIAL CAPITAL AND WELL-BEING

In corroboration with the generally positive views people had for their lives. Respondents were asked to state the positive things that they had experienced in the last 12 months:

- 20% of the respondents mentioned being happy about finding stability (keeping a job, finishing their education, or staying out of trouble)
- 56% of the respondents cited being happy due to some form of social relationship
- These encompassed events and situations such as: celebrating getting married and having a new child, successes their children/nieces/ nephews had, having friends to support them along, glad that their parents were happier.

These findings reinforce the value of social capital in the lives of those we serve. In some inspiring cases, it was the hardships they had gone through that turned their lives around and allowed them to find meaning for themselves through serving others. Conversely, other participants mentioned that it was those around them that kept them going and out of trouble.

## BEYOND'S CONTRIBUTION

Participants ratings of Beyond were generally positive with regards to our contribution in their lives. These results were consistent despite the fact that the respondents had come to Beyond with differing needs, issues, and backgrounds.

- Beyond was quite helpful (3.78/5) in improving their financial situation.
- Beyond was helpful (4.11/5) at helping them pursue their education.
- Beyond was quite helpful (3.88/5) at helping them stay out of trouble.
- Beyond was quite helpful (3.42/5) at improving family relationships.

More information was gathered by asking respondents what they *remember most* about their experiences in Beyond

- Respondents remembered staff or volunteers that played a significant role in their lives
- Respondents remembered specific activities (camps, magic shows, swimming) that they enjoyed
- Respondents remembered the friends they made at Beyond

Analysis of the in-depth interviews reveal more details of some of the common themes that participants felt were significant ways Beyond helped them.

Coincidentally, most of the feedback can be neatly encapsulated in the domains of the resiliency model *Circle of Courage*, even though Beyond only explicitly adopted that model in 2008. It was interesting to note similar values existed in how the work had been done.

### 1. *Belonging*

- A culture of acceptance and support was felt from Beyond despite the mistakes they had made, or the situations they were in

### 2. *Mastery*

- Warm and encouraging attitudes that allowed youth to pursue their own strengths and interests

### 3. Independence

- A space to make friends, have fun, and learn life lessons from interacting with others be it staff, volunteers and friends.

### 4. Generosity

- A place where for many that stayed on as volunteers, they felt a sense of ownership and responsibility for the facilities and the younger youths that came.

In addition to this, some participants could identify clearly how Beyond strived to *mend relationships* within their family when they felt desperate or alienated.

Many participants valued most of all the personal touch provided by volunteers that played an *active* and *involved* role in the lives of the youths. For some, the caring or admonishing words of a particular volunteer were viewed in hindsight as a turning point in their lives.

## CONCLUSION

As a snapshot of how then youths who were in Beyond are faring now, how they look back on their lives and the way Beyond has contributed to them, our respondents have grown to be resilient individuals with a unique life story. While we are encouraged to see that most of Beyond's past youths are in many ways stable, it is perhaps this variation of life trajectories which is the most important finding of all.

The findings and interviews compel us to acknowledge that many other factors -- such as religion, marriage, hardship and intrapersonal factors -- play a large role in the development of these individuals and account for both who they are, as well as where they are now. Importantly, social capital and interpersonal relationships are integral and powerful agents in transforming at-risk youth into well-balanced adults who now contribute in different ways in the communities they are a part of now.

Beyond's impact is not limited to the indicators of financial stability, as shared by the

respondents. It is greatly appreciated and felt in different ways, mostly through the relationships with staff and volunteers.

## GOING FORWARD

**For our research :** The current study provides greater clarity for our ambition to track all youths in our purview until 25. In moving forward with the tracking, it is important that we objectively and continuously benchmark standards of living in Singapore. With the varied factors and trajectories of individual's lives, tracking is principally an exercise in accountability and deepening our understanding the lives of our youth. Beyond's programmes will not be the main reason for the growth or change. Correspondingly, the studies should ensure that our measurements of individuals take in a wider perspective of the aspects that impact their lives.

**For our work :** The retrospective study provokes us to reflect on what has worked for our youths and why. The feedback gathered and our understanding of the current population indicates that the same needs exist for youths today. Further, it is the dynamic interplay of intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships, either with the staff, volunteers or the natural environments they interact with are the largest factors that drive change.

The factors that nurture and support change, though varied, are best found in a conducive natural community. While we continue to support their material needs, Beyond's role is to bridge the marginalised to the larger community, empowering residents to share ownership of the community and the members within it.

Secondly, the potential for authentic change comes from validating youth's own self-worth, empowering them to transform their own lives in the direction they see fit, by identifying and amplifying their strengths. We must also ensure that the personal touch between staff, volunteers and the community is maintained in order to journey with our youths in a humane way.