



abriendo caminos a la comunidad:  
successful intervention for expelled youth

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## Introduction

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Research indicates that youth who have been expelled are more likely to eventually become detained in juvenile hall (Irvine 2005a). This link most profoundly affects male Latino youth, who are experiencing disproportionately high rates of expulsion and detention (Irvine 2005b).

Abriendo Caminos a la Comunidad, or “Caminos,” provides one program option in Santa Cruz, Monterey, and Santa Clara counties that may prevent the future detention of expelled youth. Caminos aims to extend the “continuum of care” for at-risk youth by providing positive work internships; offering debriefing sessions that allow students to reflect on their community service experience; offering character development sessions that focus on building trustworthiness, caring, respect, responsibility, self-esteem, and pride in the community; and providing support services to help suspended and expelled transition back into their top-choice schools, avoid future suspensions and expulsions, and graduate from high school.

This research summary explores outcomes for expelled youth participating in six-week community service “cycles” during the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years. We find that youth participating in these “cycles” experienced significant improvements in trustworthiness, respect, caring, and taking responsibility at work and at home. Many participants also developed relationships with mentors who helped guide them back into school. As such, Caminos provides a promising program for youth at-risk of repeated suspensions and expulsions, and dropping out of school.

In serving this population, Caminos might also serve as an intervention for detention within the juvenile justice system. The most common reasons for expulsion within Santa Cruz, Monterey, and Santa Clara counties are possession of a weapon, possession of an illegal substance, and threatened physical injury: all of these activities are also associated with gang activity as well as detention (Irvine 2005b). As Caminos helps students reintegrate into school and avoid future suspensions and expulsions, students may be simultaneously diverted from the juvenile justice system. This is particularly true of Latinos, who represent the majority of youth served by Caminos.

## Sociological Literature

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Our findings contribute to the sociological literature on delinquency. Little is generally known about the effectiveness of intervention programs aimed at juvenile delinquency (Howell, 1998b; Kim, 2002). This study documents how

one particular intervention successfully addresses the factors that lead to violence and delinquency.

Researchers have found that there are many factors that lead to delinquent behavior. The three primary influences on youth behavior are parent-youth relationships, school-youth relationships, and youth-youth relationships (Browning et. al. 1999). In particular, youth engaged in violent behaviors usually come from families in which the parents do not support their children (Baldry & Farrington 2000; Browning et. al. 1999; Rigby, 1993; Rigby et. al. 1999; Roche, 1999; Schwartz et. al. 1997). In addition, weak school commitment and low achievement are associated with delinquent behavior (Browning et. al. 1999). Finally, youth engaged in violent or delinquent behavior are often friends with other youth engaged in violent or delinquent behavior (Browning et. al. 1999). In some geographic locations, peers are organized into formal gangs. In these areas, gang members represent a small percentage of the youth population, but are responsible for the majority of violent acts (Howell, 1998; Kim, 2002; Thornberry, 1998).

Based on the results of previous research, any intervention that addresses parent-youth relationships, commitment to school, and alternatives to peer-based gang involvement will reduce youth violence and delinquency. The first year results from this study show that Caminos addresses all three factors.

## Research Design

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To document outcomes for youth participating in Caminos, Ceres Policy Research combined the collection of surveys, administrative records, youth interviews, and program observation. We describe each of these methods in more detail below:

- We collected 138 pre- and 66 post- surveys from youth participants. These surveys measured changes in character development as well as satisfaction with the Caminos program. 272 pre- and 84 post-surveys were also collected from non-participating students attending alternative education sites over the same period of time.
- We collected administrative data from the Santa Cruz, Monterey, and Santa Clara County Offices of Education in order to document variables such as the demographics of participants, youth suspension and expulsion histories, community service placements, and hours of community service completed.
- We conducted 25 interviews with youth participants across all three counties. These interviews explored what youth learned about work,

their peers, and the community, as well as satisfaction with the Caminos program.

- Finally, we observed reflection and debriefing activities as well as community service sites in each of the three participating counties.

## Data Analysis

Ceres Policy Research relied on two different statistical tests in order to evaluate youth outcomes for the Caminos program.

When we were interested in determining whether a group changed over time, we used a t-test.

When we were interested in determining whether two groups were different from one another, we used an analysis of variance test.

Findings from these tests were considered “statistically significant” if we could be more than 95% sure that change had occurred over time or that the groups were different. We report only statistically significant results below.

## Findings

### Character Development

Youth participants gave themselves significantly higher character development scores at the end of the Caminos program. Youth began by rating themselves between “ok” and “good” on measures of trustworthiness, respect, caring, and responsibility. At the end of the Caminos cycle, youth rated themselves solidly “good.”<sup>1</sup>

Non-participants also rated themselves higher on character development measures over the same length of time. However, this increase was not statistically significant. The comparison between participants and non-participants indicates that the Caminos program is responsible for the increase in character development.

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<sup>1</sup> This finding is based on a paired-sample t-test run on youth survey results ( $p < .00$ : this means that we were 100% sure that change occurred over time). Youth gave themselves scores on a scale of 1-4 for each of the character traits listed, with a 1 meaning “bad,” a 2 meaning “OK,” a 3 meaning “good,” and a 4 meaning “really good.”

## Behavior at Home

Survey data indicate that a large number of parents perceive differences in their children's behavior and, moreover, that these changes have helped the family at home. All of the parents who completed open ended questions on the survey described a range of positive changes. Examples of what parents said are listed below:

**(My son) has been open about how he is feeling. He wants to try more in everything all around him. -parent survey**

**(My daughter) cares about taking responsibility. -parent survey**

**(My son) is beginning to help his little brothers and sisters. He helps his brother with his homework. -parent survey**

**(My daughter) tells me she loves me when she goes anywhere. -parent survey**

## New Lessons About Work and New Mentors

According to the survey data, 71% of participants and 36% of non-participants report learning something new about work. This difference is statistically significant, allowing us to attribute increased knowledge about work to participation in the Caminos program.<sup>2</sup>

Qualitative answers on the survey and youth interviews help us understand what youth learned. Most youth learned how to take on additional responsibility.

**I learned that it is important to be on time and be responsible for myself. -youth survey**

Additionally, interviews with youth indicate that 33% of youth who were placed in internships described developing new relationships with supervisors who became mentors. One young man describes how advice from his mentor effectively helped his relationship with his parents.

**(My supervisor) told me, when I'm speaking to my parents, um, try not to lose my temper, because I have that a lot. She told me to calm down. I went up to them and I asked them if I could speak with them, they really didn't seem like they wanted to but after we started talking, um, I guess they got the idea I was sorry for what I did and I wasn't thinking of doing it again...So it worked. -youth interview**

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<sup>2</sup> This finding is based on an analysis of variance test (sig=.000: this means that we were 100% sure that the two groups were different).

### **New Lessons About Other Youth**

According to the survey data, 71% of participants and 21% of non-participants said they learned something new about other youth. This difference is significant, allowing us to attribute increased knowledge about peers to participation in the Caminos program.<sup>3</sup>

Youth interviews give us some insight into what participants learned about their peers. Most commonly, participants learned that they are not the only one who has made mistakes.

**When you get to know (the youth in Caminos), they're just like me, like, they didn't even know this could happen...They made mistakes, but they're not really like that, they're really cool. They just made mistakes. Everybody does. And you can become a better person. –youth interview**

### **New Lessons and Commitment To The Community**

According to the survey data, 69% of participants and 30% of non-participants said that they learned something new about their community. This difference is significant, allowing us to attribute increased knowledge about the community to participation in the Caminos program.<sup>4</sup>

Most commonly, Caminos participants learned about organizations that help youth that are located in their community.

**I learned there are a lot of different things out there...It kind of made it seemlike the community was bigger. It's bigger than I thought. I walk around and know about all kinds of places that have to do with youth and...can help out teenagers. –youth interview**

In the end, 32% of Caminos participants completed more than the number of community service hours required by their expulsion contract, thus helping their community even when they didn't have to. In comparison, 0% of the non-participating expelled students completed more than their required number of community service hours.<sup>5</sup> This difference is statistically significant, allowing us to attribute additional volunteer hours to participation in the Caminos program.

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<sup>3</sup> This finding is based on an analysis of variance test (sig=.000: this means that we were 100% sure that the groups were different).

<sup>4</sup> This finding is based on an analysis of variance test (sig=.000: this means that we were 100% sure that the groups were different).

<sup>5</sup> This difference is statistically significant and is based on an analysis of variance test (sig=.000: this means that we were 100% sure that the groups were different).

## Transitions Back to School

Though 61% of expelled youth would like to return to their previous school, very few non-participating youth achieve this goal. Without the support of the Caminos program, 4% of non-participating youth complete a portion of their required community service hours, 2% complete their community service requirements, and 2% return to their previous school.

In sharp contrast, 97% of Caminos participants complete some portion of their required hours. 50% of participants complete their community service requirements and 37% of participants returned to their previous school.

These differences are all statistically significant, allowing us to attribute successful transitions back to school to participation in the Caminos program.

## Differences in Findings by Ethnicity

Ceres Policy Research explored whether these findings differed by ethnicity or race. In particular, we were interested to see if the findings for Latinos were different than for non-Latinos.

We found that there were no differences in the youth outcomes by ethnicity. Latinos benefitted from the Caminos program as much as non-Latino participants.<sup>6</sup> This indicates that the Caminos program is equally successful with all participating students.

## Conclusion

Overall, Ceres Policy Research finds a number of positive outcomes for youth participating in the Caminos program. Caminos helped improve parent-child relationships at home, one factor highlighted by researchers as associated with violence and delinquency.

Caminos also led to significant improvements in character development, particularly increased responsibility, initiative, and commitment to community service and work. This commitment to community service and work could lead to renewed commitment to school or take the place of commitment to school to reduce violence and delinquency.

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<sup>6</sup> This finding is based on ANOVA analyses of the character development measures from the youth survey. For the ANOVA analyses, we compared Latino participants to non-Latino participants ( $p < .05$ : this means that we were over 95% sure that the groups were different).

Caminos provides a location for youth to discuss their past behavior with their peers. Caminos participants have learned that they are not the only ones to make a mistake. They have also participated in positive activities with their peers. In this way, Caminos provides positive peer interactions that work to counter negative peer influences that lead to violence and delinquency.

Finally, we can attribute an increased number of expelled youth returning to general education high schools to the Caminos program.

As such, Caminos provides a promising program for youth at-risk of repeated suspensions and expulsions as well as gang involvement. This is as true for Latinos as other youth. In this way, Caminos could easily serve as a diversion program for both expelled and detained youth. Caminos might ultimately break the link between expulsion and detention and help alleviate disproportionate minority confinement within the juvenile justice system.

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