Evaluation Proposal for Liberia's At-risk Youth Livelihood Program

1. Overview of Liberia's At-risk Youth Livelihood Program

The Problem: Monrovia, the capital and largest city of Liberia, faces a youth unemployment crisis fueled by poverty, insufficient vocational training, and mental health issues. Many marginalized youths, referred to as "zogos," grapple with homelessness, substance abuse, and criminal behavior, which contribute to rising crime rates and social unrest. Previous interventions have been inconsistent, underfunded, and lacking a structured rehabilitation strategy, leaving zogos ensnared in cycles of poverty, addiction, and exclusion from economic opportunities.[1]

The Program: The Youth Mental Health, Employment, and Skills Program (YMESP) is a structured rehabilitation, skills training, and employment initiative designed to support 300 at-risk youth in Monrovia and the surrounding urban areas. The program follows a three-phase model, starting with mental health counseling and substance abuse treatment, followed by vocational training in high-demand fields, and concluding with on-the-job training and employment integration.

Program Theory: Studies suggest that combining mental health interventions with vocational training significantly improves employment outcomes and reduces crime among at-risk youth[2]. YMESP assumes that addressing psychological trauma, equipping youth with employable skills,

---

[1] Ministry of Youth and Sports, Republic of Liberia. *National Youth Policy Action Plan 2019–2023*.
[2] World Bank (2015). *Youth Employment Programs: An Evaluation of World Bank and IFC Support*.
Also see: Blattman, C., & Annan, J. (2016).
"Can Employment Reduce Lawlessness and Rebellion?" *Quarterly Journal of Economics*.

and integrating them into the workforce will lead to long-term stability, reduced recidivism, and improved socio-economic inclusion, thus improving their overall quality of life.

The Dependent Variable in the Study: The evaluation will examine participants' employment outcomes, mental health improvement, and crime reduction among participants. Specifically, the study will track job placement rates and wages, substance abuse relapse rates, and involvement in criminal activities before and after program participation to assess its overall impact.

Primary Outcome of Interest: The primary outcome of interest is the *improved quality of life* of participants

The motivation of the study: In June 2022, the President of Liberia declared the deplorable situation of At-Risk Youth a national emergency[3]. Simultaneously, in collaboration with the United Nations and other partners, the government launched a national fundraising campaign to support the rehabilitation and empowerment of At-Risk Youth across the country.

Program Inclusion Criteria: The study will include at-risk youth aged 15-24 who are homeless, unemployed, involved in substance abuse, or have a history of crime and violence. Youth already enrolled in stable employment, formal education, or intensive medical care facilities will be excluded from the study.

[3] Government of Liberia (June 2022). *Presidential Declaration on National Emergency for At-Risk Youth*.

2. Outcome Measure

The outcome selected is *Improved Quality of Life*, a comprehensive indicator that reflects changes in multiple dimensions of a participant's well-being. Because YMESP targets psychological recovery, vocational development, and employment reintegration, the outcome must reflect economic gains and emotional, social, and environmental improvements. The following sections identify Improved Quality of Life as a latent construct and justify the selection of the WHOQOL-BREF as a validated instrument for its measurement.

2.1. Identification of the Latent Construct: Improved Quality of Life

Improved Quality of Life is a latent construct that cannot be directly observed or measured by a single variable. Instead, it is inferred through a combination of indicators that capture individuals' perceptions of their physical health, emotional state, social relationships, and environmental conditions (DeVellis, 2016). The program is not just about providing short-term relief or isolated services; it is designed as a multi-phase intervention that addresses mental health recovery, skill development, and economic reintegration, contributing to a young person's overall well-being and life satisfaction. Because the three (3) components influence different aspects of a participant's life experience, a multidimensional construct is necessary to capture overall change meaningfully.

Moreover, this outcome aligns with the program's long-term goals and Liberia's broader national development priorities, emphasizing sustainable rehabilitation, social reintegration, and economic independence for youth. It allows for a multi-dimensional evaluation of progress and ensures that the program's true impact can be meaningfully assessed beyond temporary fixes.

2.2. Justification for the Construct and Instrument

The outcome of "Improved Quality of Life" is best understood as a latent construct because such a concept cannot be directly observed or measured through a single indicator but instead must be inferred through a combination of related variables. As such, QoL offers a meaningful and widely accepted metric for capturing the long-term impact of social development programs (World Health Organization [WHO], 1997). In the context of the YMESP, improved quality of life reflects a broad and multidimensional experience of well-being that spans emotional, social, physical, and economic domains. For instance, an individual's sense of life satisfaction, personal safety, emotional stability, access to resources, and meaningful engagement in work are all integral to their overall quality of life. Yet, none of these alone fully encapsulate the construct.

Given the program's structure, which includes trauma counseling, vocational training, and employment integration, quality of life cannot be meaningfully captured by a single variable like income level or psychological status alone. Instead, it emerges as an underlying factor inferred from improvements across multiple life domains.

2.3. The WHOQOL-BREF for Measuring the Improved Quality of Life

To effectively measure the primary outcome of Improved Quality of Life in the YMESP, the WHOQOL-BREF was selected as the most appropriate instrument. The WHOQOL-BREF instrument is employed to measure this construct. Developed by the World Health Organization, WHOQOL-BREF is a 26-item tool that assesses quality of life across four domains: physical health, psychological well-being, social relationships, and environment. These dimensions align directly with the multi-phase structure of the YMESP, which aims to address

not only mental health and trauma (Phase 1) but also employable skill development (Phase 2) and economic reintegration (Phase 3).

The WHOQOL-BREF has undergone extensive psychometric testing and is widely validated across diverse cultural and socio-economic settings, including low- and middle-income countries. It has demonstrated strong construct validity, meaning it effectively measures the concept of quality of life as it is theoretically understood. The instrument also exhibits high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients typically exceeding 0.70, ranging from 0.68 to 0.82 across domains, indicating reliable measurement across items within each domain (Skevington, Lotfy, & O'Connell, 2004). Furthermore, it has been tested for cross-cultural reliability, making it particularly suitable for use in Liberia's context, where the quality of life is influenced by social, economic, and environmental challenges unique to post-conflict, resource-constrained settings.

3. Theory of Change

The YMESP theory of change offers a logically sequenced, assumption-sensitive model for transforming the lives of Monrovia's most marginalized youth. It integrates mental health, economic opportunity, and social inclusion to achieve sustained improvements in quality of life. By explicitly identifying key assumptions at every level, from outreach to impact, the program ensures that success is not merely about what is delivered, but also about the enabling conditions required for lasting change.

3.1. Coherent Theory of Change

YMESP provides a structured framework to transform the lives of at-risk youth through a multi-phase process. The Theory of Change begins by engaging marginalized youth in Monrovia through outreach and public awareness, followed by screening, selection, and enrollment into the program. These initial steps prepare participants to embark on a phased journey of recovery, skill acquisition, and economic empowerment.

The first phase focuses on trauma recovery and mental health stabilization. Participants attend therapy sessions that address substance abuse, psychosocial distress, and behavioral challenges. These sessions are coupled with life skills and conflict resolution training aimed at fostering personal discipline and emotional resilience.

Building upon this foundation, the second phase introduces vocational training tailored to market needs. Youths are equipped with practical skills in trades such as tailoring, construction, and agriculture. This training is designed to improve employability and support participants in transitioning from dependency to economic self-sufficiency.

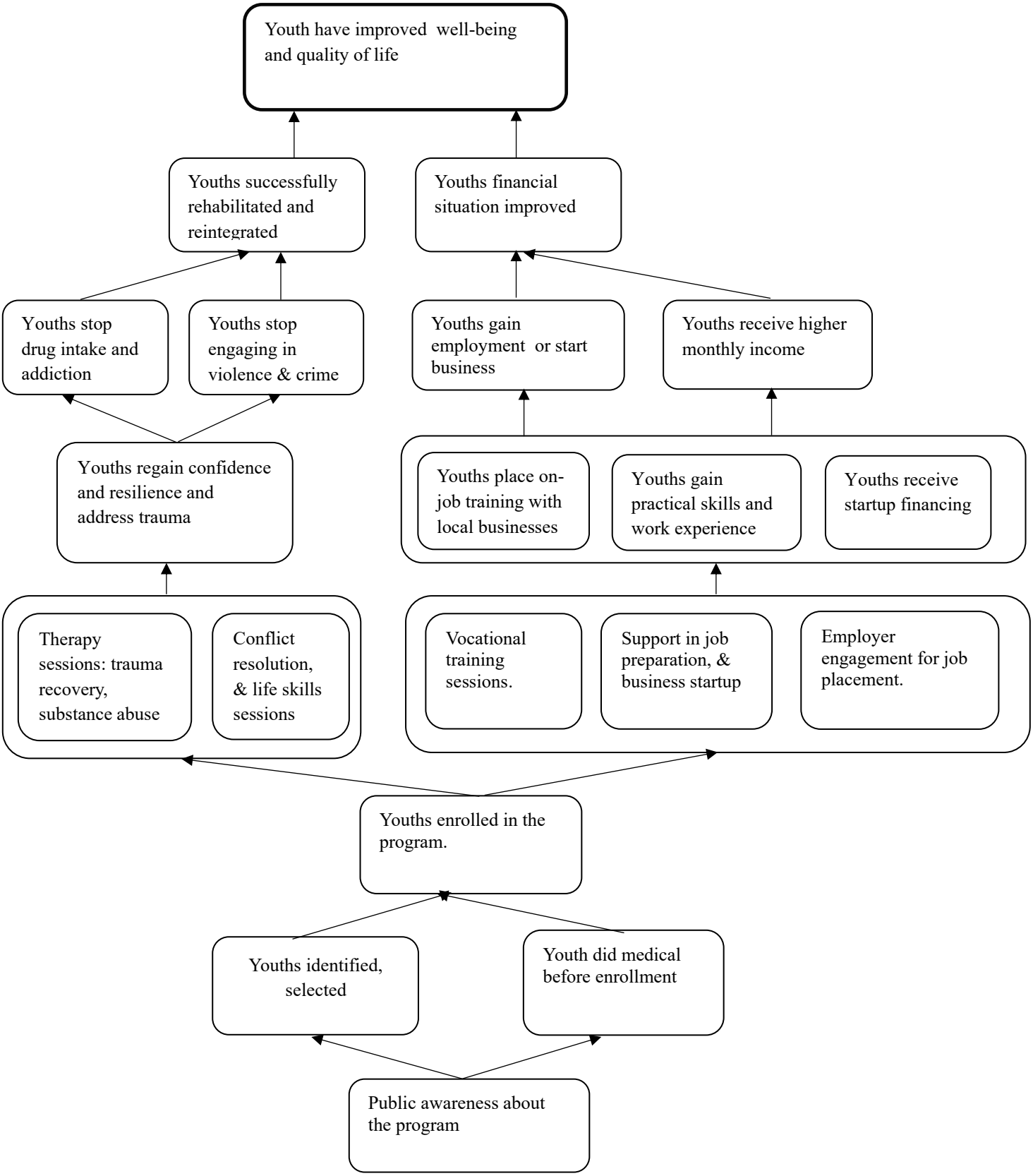
In the third phase, participants move into employment or entrepreneurship pathways. They are placed in internships, apprenticeships, or provided support to launch small businesses. This phase includes job readiness sessions, mentorship, and startup capital assistance. The transition from training to earning income represents a critical milestone in their reintegration process.

As a result of these program components, youth achieve short-term outcomes such as reduced drug use, disengagement from crime, and initiation of income-generating activities. These outcomes signify behavioral and economic shifts that mark the beginning of social reintegration.

In the medium term, participants consolidate these changes into stable employment, stronger community ties, and restored family relationships. They begin to take on responsibilities and participate actively in social and economic life.

The long-term impact of YMESP is improved quality of life, which includes enhanced well-being across physical, psychological, social, and environmental domains. By guiding participants through this sequenced and integrated model of intervention, the Theory of Change illustrates how systematic support can lead to sustained personal transformation and reintegration for some of Liberia's most vulnerable youth.

YMESP Theory of Change Diagram



3.2. Underlining Assumptions Matrix

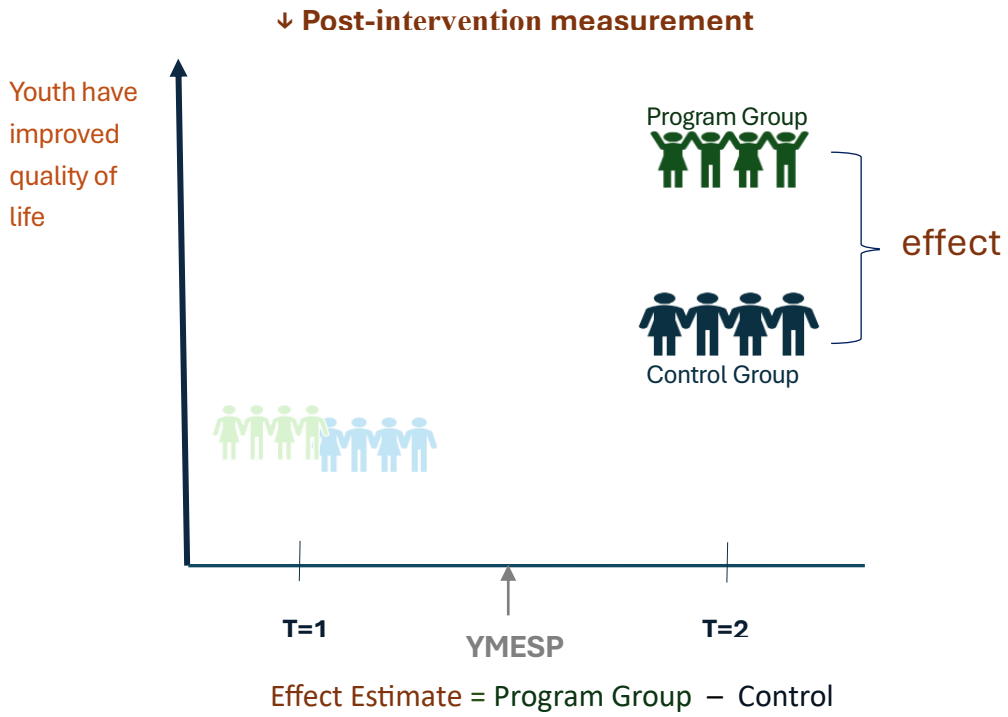
The assumptions underlying the YMESP Theory of Change reflect the enabling conditions required for each stage of the program to be effective.

Expected Results	Assumptions
Long-term Youths have improved well-being and quality of life	• Improvements across mental health, employment, and social inclusion will translate into sustained changes in quality of life. • No major external shocks (e.g., political unrest, funding cuts, economic collapse) will reverse progress post-intervention. • Participants remain in environments that reinforce their progress (safe housing, supportive networks, access to services).
Medium-term • Youths financial situation improved • Youths successfully rehabilitated and reintegrated	• Income and employment gains will be sufficient to support basic needs and reduce poverty. • Family and community acceptance will support long-term reintegration. • Youths will continue to apply coping, life, and business skills beyond the intervention period.
Short-term • Youths stop drug intake and addiction • Youths stop engaging in violence and crime • Youths gain employment or start a business • Youths receive higher monthly income	• Therapy and skills training will be enough to change addictive behaviors and reduce recidivism without long-term follow-up. • Participants will face minimal relapse or re-entry into criminal behavior due to economic pressure or social stigma. • Market conditions will allow for sustainable employment or profitable entrepreneurship. • Youths will be able to manage finances and responsibilities with limited supervision post-program.
Output • Youths gain practical skills and work experience • Youths place on-job training with employers • Youths rehabilitated and reintegrated into communities • Youths receive startup financing	• Training will lead to demonstrable skill acquisition and job-readiness among participants. • Sufficient job placement and startup opportunities will exist in the local economy. • Social reintegration is feasible despite past criminal involvement or addiction, assuming supportive community structures. • Disbursement of stipends and startup funds will be timely, well-managed, and free from fraud or misappropriation.

Activity • Therapy sessions: trauma recovery, substance abuse treatment • Conflict resolution and life skills sessions • Vocational training sessions • Support in job preparation & business startup • Employer engagement for job placement	• Youths will consistently attend sessions despite unstable housing, addiction, or fear of authorities. • Facilitators, counselors, and trainers will be adequately skilled and culturally competent. • Vocational training options will be aligned with labor market demand in Monrovia. • Employers will be open to engaging stigmatized youth, especially those with criminal or substance abuse backgrounds. • The program will have sufficient financial and logistical resources to run each activity as planned.

4. Internal Validity: Post-Only Counterfactual in a Quasi-Experimental Design

4.1. Explanation of the Counterfactual



In this quasi-experimental evaluation of the YMESP, the counterfactual reflects the anticipated outcomes of youth who have similar characteristics to program participants but do not receive the intervention. Rather than using randomized assignment or collecting baseline (pre-test) data, the evaluation employs a post-only matched control group design, which is a widely accepted alternative in real-world impact evaluations when randomization is not viable (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002).

The control group shall comprise youths who are eligible for the program but not enrolled, in addition to individuals from comparable high-risk neighborhoods in Monrovia. Matching will be based on observable pre-intervention characteristics such as age, gender, residential area, history of substance use, prior employment status, educational attainment, and previous exposure to criminal activity or homelessness. This design facilitates the estimation of the program's impact by contrasting post-intervention outcomes between treated and untreated individuals, under the assumption that matched individuals function as valid counterfactuals (Rosenbaum & Rubin, 1983).

4.2. Justification of the Design

A post-only quasi-experimental design with a matched control group is appropriate and warranted for this evaluation, particularly in delicate and humanitarian contexts such as Liberia. The YMESP seeks to assist 300 at-risk youth, often referred to as "zogos," many of whom face homelessness, addiction, social stigma, and criminal involvement. Implementing a randomized control trial (RCT) would raise ethical issues and pose logistical challenges, given that this

population is transient and often lacks identification, stability, or institutional trust (White & Sabarwal, 2014).

Instead, constructing a matched comparison group enables the evaluation to maintain a reasonable level of internal validity while being inclusive and ethically sound. By matching on variables such as age, gender, substance use history, employment status, education level, and prior criminal involvement, the design seeks to control for key confounders.

This approach enhances the credibility of impact attribution in the absence of baseline measures Moreover, the post-only design is further enhanced by using a validated multidimensional instrument, the WHOQOL-BREF, which has proven reliable and effective in evaluating interventions across the domains of mental, physical, and social well-being (Skevington, Lotfy, & O'Connell, 2004). This instrument ensures that outcome measurements capture not only economic improvements but also the broader psychosocial transformation the program aims to achieve.

4.3. Endline (Post-Intervention) Data Collection

Data will be collected at the end of the intervention, once participants complete all three program phases: mental health and psychosocial support, vocational training, and employment/entrepreneurship support. This endline data collection method follows a post-only design and will facilitate the assessment of the program's overall impact on participants' quality of life and behavioral outcomes (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002; White & Sabarwal, 2014). Additionally, control group data will be gathered simultaneously to ensure comparability and reduce the influence of external factors (Rosenbaum & Rubin, 1983).

5. Competing Hypotheses (Campbell Score Items)

To assess the internal validity of the YMESP impact evaluation, this section applies the Campbell Score framework, which identifies and scores common threats to causal inference in program evaluation. These threats are categorized into three domains: omitted variable bias, trends in the data, and study calibration and measurement. Each potential bias is evaluated based on whether the evaluation design adequately addresses or mitigates it, with scores ranging from 0 (not addressed) to 1 (addressed). The resulting Campbell Score offers a structured method to determine how confident we can be that the observed changes are attributed to the intervention and not to other factors.

Omitted Variable Bias

1. Selection: +1

Selection bias occurs when participants in the treatment and control groups differ systematically on factors that also influence outcomes. In this evaluation, although random assignment is not feasible, a matched control group is created using key observable characteristics such as age, gender, substance use history, and prior employment status. This strategy enhances internal validity by simulating the balance that would be achieved through randomization, helping to ensure that differences in outcomes are attributable to the program rather than pre-existing differences between groups (Rosenbaum & Rubin, 1983; Stuart, 2010).

2. Non-Random Attrition: +1

Non-random attrition refers to systematic differences in who remains in the study versus who drops out, which can bias results if related to treatment or outcomes. This study minimizes that

threat by employing a post-only design, where both treatment and control group data are collected at the same time after the intervention. This approach avoids attrition-related bias associated with longitudinal follow-up and allows for more complete data collection (White & Sabarwal, 2014).

Trends in the Data

3. Maturation: +1

Maturation effects arise from natural developmental or psychological changes over time that may influence outcomes independently of the intervention. By utilizing a contemporaneous control group, matched on characteristics and assessed simultaneously, the design addresses such maturation effects. Any natural changes that occur in participants would likely occur similarly in the control group, thereby mitigating this threat to internal validity (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002).

4. Secular Trends: +1

Secular trends are changes in societal, economic, or political contexts that could affect all individuals during the study period. Since both the treatment and control groups are drawn from similar environments and observed at the same point in time, broader contextual changes such as inflation or policy shifts are likely to influence both groups similarly, allowing for a more valid comparison of outcomes (White & Sabarwal, 2014).

5. **Seasonality: +0**

Seasonal variation, such as labor market cycles, school holidays, or weather patterns, may influence participant behavior or outcomes. If program activities or data collection periods align with specific seasons, it could introduce bias. The study design does not explicitly address or control for this, leaving open the possibility that seasonal factors could affect the interpretation of results (Glennerster & Takavarasha, 2013).

6. **Testing: +1**

Testing threats arise when exposure to a pre-test influences how participants respond to subsequent assessments. In this post-only design, there is no pre-test, eliminating the risk that participants change behavior based on their awareness of being tested. This design choice inherently avoids the testing effect that can distort true program impact (Campbell & Stanley, 1963).

7. **Regression to the Mean: +0**

Regression to the mean occurs when participants selected for extreme scores (e.g., high-risk youth) naturally move toward average outcomes over time. Because YMESP targets highly marginalized youth, there is a potential for natural improvement that may not be due to the intervention. Although matching reduces bias, the lack of baseline data makes it difficult to isolate program effects from natural variability (Shadish et al., 2002).

Study Calibration and Measurement

8. Time Frame of Study: +1

The timeframe of a study must align with the expected emergence of significant outcomes. In this evaluation, data collection takes place immediately after completing all three program phases: rehabilitation, training, and job placement, ensuring that outcomes are assessed when impacts are most likely to be evident. This improves the validity of findings and follows best practices for timing in impact evaluation (White & Sabarwal, 2014).

9. Measurement Error: +1

Measurement error occurs when instruments do not accurately capture the intended outcome. This study uses the WHOQOL-BREF instrument, which is a validated and widely used tool for assessing physical, psychological, social, and environmental well-being. Its strong psychometric properties and cross-cultural applicability enhance confidence in the reliability of the outcome measures (Skevington, Lotfy, & O'Connell, 2004).

10. Intervening Events: +0

Intervening events, such as political instability, donor policy shifts, or economic crises, can affect outcomes in ways unrelated to the intervention. While the theory of change acknowledges these risks and assumes they will not occur, the research design does not include mechanisms to monitor or adjust for such events. This remains a residual threat to internal validity due to its potential to confound results if such events do arise (Shadish et al., 2002).

The overall Campbell Score for the YMESP evaluation is **7 out of 10**, indicating a moderate to high level of internal validity. This score is generally regarded as acceptable for a quasi-experimental design, particularly in real-world, resource-constrained environments. While some threats, such as regression to the mean and intervening events, remain partially unaddressed, the design effectively mitigates major sources of bias.

References

Blattman, C., & Annan, J. (2016). Can employment reduce lawlessness and rebellion? A field experiment with high-risk men in a fragile state. Quarterly Journal of Economics, 131(2), 795–858.

Campbell, D. T., & Stanley, J. C. (1963). Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Research. Houghton Mifflin.

DeVellis, R. F. (2016). Scale Development: Theory and Applications (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

Glennerster, R., & Takavarasha, K. (2013). Running Randomized Evaluations: A Practical Guide. Princeton University Press.

Rosenbaum, P. R., & Rubin, D. B. (1983). The central role of the propensity score in observational studies for causal effects. Biometrika, 70(1), 41–55.

Shadish, W. R., Cook, T. D., & Campbell, D. T. (2002). Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Generalized Causal Inference. Houghton Mifflin.

Skevington, S. M., Lotfy, M., & O'Connell, K. A. (2004). The World Health Organization's WHOQOL-BREF quality of life assessment: Psychometric properties and results of the international field trial. Quality of Life Research, 13(2), 299–310. https://doi.org/10.1023/B:QURE.0000018486.91360.00

Stuart, E. A. 2010). Matching methods for causal inference: A review and a look forward. Statistical Science, 25(1), 1–21.

White, H., & Sabarwal, S. (2014). Quasi-Experimental Design and Methods. Methodological Briefs: Impact Evaluation No. 8. UNICEF Office of Research.

World Bank. (2015). Youth Employment Programs: An Evaluation of World Bank and IFC Support. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

World Health Organization (WHO). (1997). WHOQOL: Measuring Quality of Life. Geneva: World Health Organization. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/tools/whoqol