

# Impact Evaluation of the Adolescent Behavioral Learning Experience (ABLE) Program

September 2016  
Fact Sheet

In 2012, the City of New York launched the Adolescent Behavioral Learning Experience (ABLE) program, a large-scale initiative serving 16- to 18-year-old youth detained at the New York City Department of Correction's Rikers Island jail (Rikers). The ABLE program aimed to break the cycle of reincarceration for adolescents in the jail using Moral Reconciliation Therapy (MRT), an evidence-based intervention that focuses on improving decision making. The project employed an innovative social impact bond (SIB) funding mechanism to support the provision of services. SIBs invite private investors to fund a public service intervention through an intermediary organization—and the government repays the funder only if the program achieves certain goals, which are specified at the outset of the initiative and assessed by an independent evaluator.

## Vera's Role

The Vera Institute of Justice served as the program's independent evaluator. Vera employed rigorous research methods to determine whether the program led to reductions in recidivism for youth passing through the jail. Specifically, the evaluation was designed to assess whether the program reduced recidivism by 10 percent or more, the pre-defined threshold of success at which the city would have to pay Goldman Sachs (the SIB's private investor) back for its investment in the program.

## Research Design

To determine if the ABLE program met the threshold for success, Vera assessed "recidivism bed days" (RBDs), a measure that captures the number of days that members of the study cohort were held in the jail during the 12 months following their release from Rikers. Vera used a quasi-experimental design to do this evaluation.

The quasi-experimental approach compared RBDs for 16- to 18-year-olds who were eligible to participate in the ABLE program during 2013 with a matched historical cohort who passed through the jail before the program was established

(from 2006 to 2010). To ensure an "apples to apples" comparison, these cohorts were matched on a variety of factors including charge, criminal history, gender, and age using a statistical technique called propensity score matching. To control for the impact of factors that affect recidivism, but are unrelated to the program, such as citywide changes in crime rates or changes in policing practices, researchers also tracked RBDs for 19-year-olds over the same period and then adjusted the results of the analysis accordingly. Nineteen-year-olds were chosen for this purpose because they were not eligible to receive ABLE services and historical data demonstrate that trends in recidivism for 16- to 18-year-olds and 19-year-olds were closely aligned.

## Findings

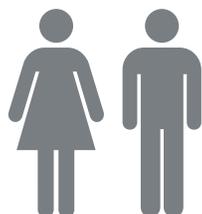
The ABLE program reached most of the 16- to 18-year-olds entering the Rikers Island jail during 2013. Of the 1,691 adolescents who entered the jail during this time and were held for seven or more days, the overwhelming majority (87 percent) attended at least one ABLE session. (Jail intake and housing policies meant that adolescents who were housed in the jail for fewer than seven days rarely had the opportunity to receive ABLE services.) Of the adolescents who participated in the ABLE program during the study period, 44 percent reached one of the program's key milestones.

Vera determined that the program did not lead to reductions in recidivism for participants. When external factors were taken into account, the rate of recidivism for eligible 16- to 18-year-olds was statistically equivalent to the matched historical comparison cohort. The 19-year-olds and the study cohort (16- to 18-year-olds) displayed similar trends in rates of recidivism over time, indicating that any shifts were the result of factors other than the ABLE program. The program did not reduce recidivism and, therefore, did not meet the pre-defined threshold of success, a 10 percent reduction in RBDs for the study cohort.

# Measuring ABLÉ program effect

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## Factors that may influence recidivism



**Individual factors:**  
16- to 18-year-olds entering DOC custody in 2006 to 2010 may differ from those admitted in 2013, such as age, gender, charge, and criminal history.

## How these factors were accounted for

Young people from these two periods were matched based on 34 demographic and criminal justice characteristics to help ensure an “apples to apples” comparison.



**System-level factors:**  
Shifts in the city’s economy, crime rates, policing practices, or other environmental factors between these two periods may affect recidivism outcomes.

Changes in recidivism were tracked over the same period for the matched sample of 19-year-olds (who were not eligible to receive ABLÉ services) to assess the influence of external factors.



**ABLÉ effect:**  
The cumulative effects of the ABLÉ program.

After accounting for the above factors, any changes in recidivism among 16- to 18-year-olds between 2006 to 2010 and 2013 were attributed to the ABLÉ program.

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The Vera Institute of Justice is a justice reform change agent. Vera produces ideas, analysis, and research that inspire change in the systems people rely upon for safety and justice, and works in close partnership with government and civic leaders to implement it. Vera is currently pursuing core priorities of ending the misuse of jails, transforming conditions of confinement, and ensuring that justice systems more effectively serve America’s increasingly diverse communities.

To read this report, visit [www.vera.org/rikers-able-evaluation](http://www.vera.org/rikers-able-evaluation).

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