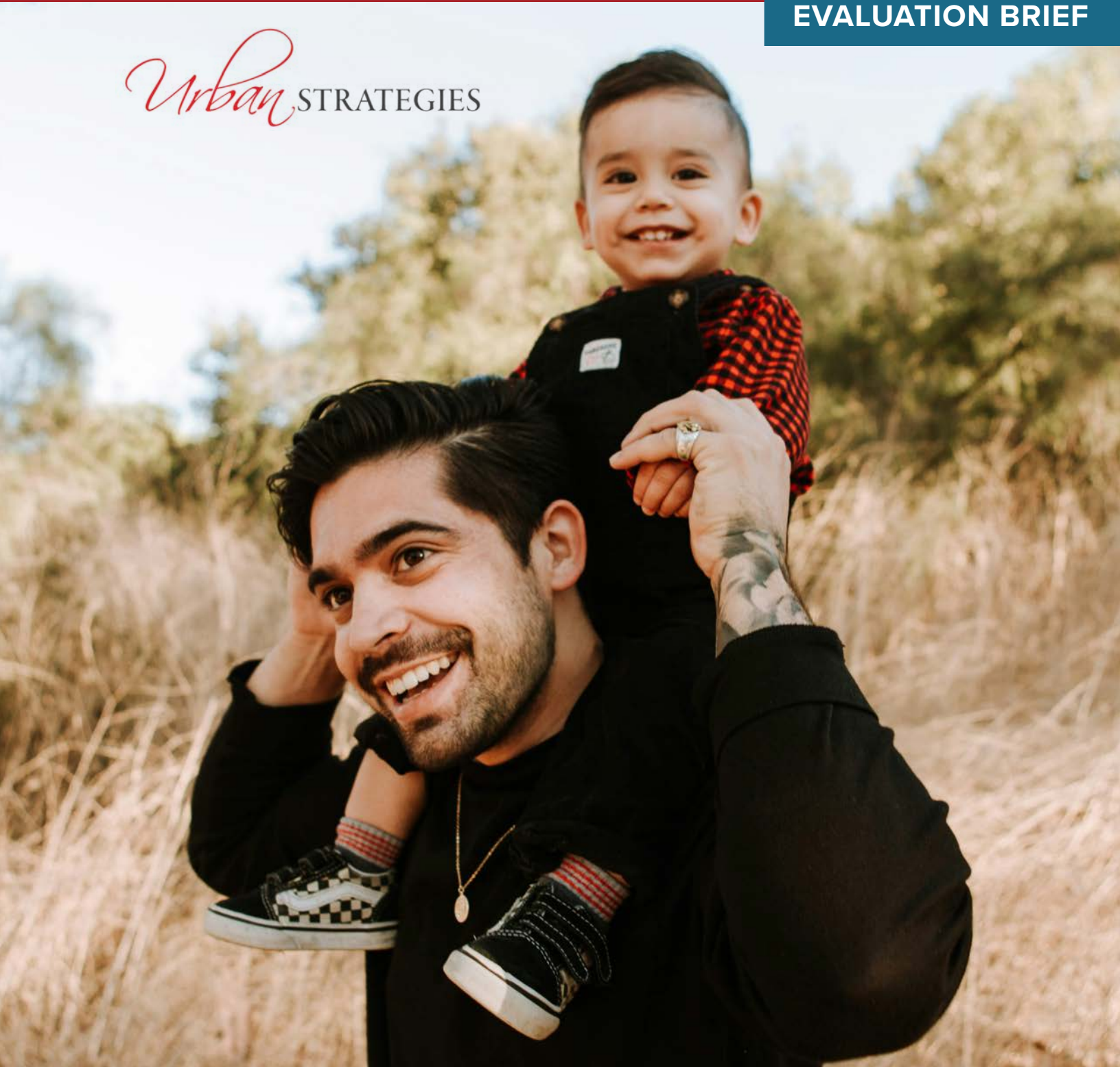


A Model that Works: Activating Latino Churches and Faith-Based Organizations for Community Flourishing

EVALUATION BRIEF

Urban STRATEGIES



1 Introduction & Background

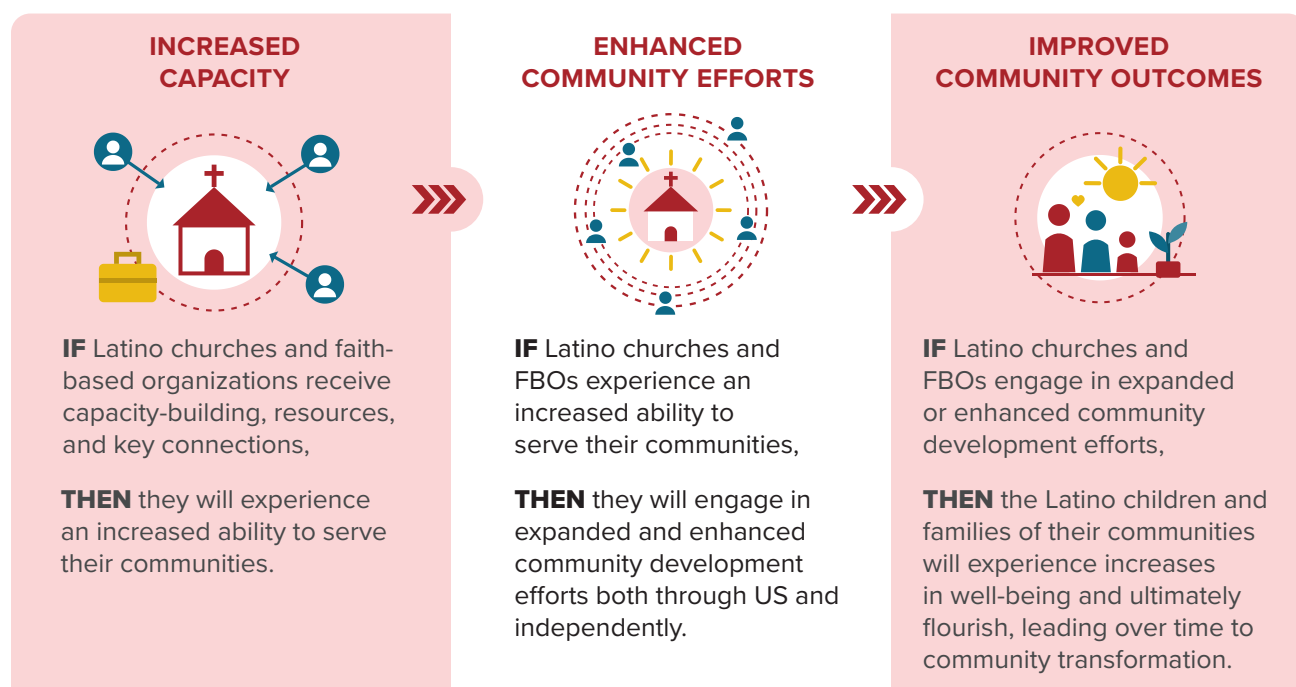
Urban Strategies is a social impact organization that exists to equip, resource, and connect faith- and community-based organizations so that all children and families can reach their full potential. Since 2003, we have partnered with Latino churches and faith-based organizations to strengthen communities across the U.S. and Central America.

In the neighborhoods where our partners are located, families have limited access to effective services, resources, and support that reflect their language and culture. Together with Urban Strategies, faith partners have implemented multigenerational programs and services to address these gaps, with programs that span early childhood development, community health, housing and case management services for vulnerable children, youth development, abuse prevention, family strengthening, and pastoral well-being. In doing so, Urban Strategies has provided tailored resourcing and capacity-building to such organizations to support their work in the community.

As reflected in the theory of change below, Urban Strategies' social impact model begins with the premise that Latino churches and faith-based organizations are uniquely positioned to serve their local neighborhoods. These organizations are already present in the lives of the families who live there, and many have earned a level of trust that takes years to build. With these strengths as the foundation, Urban Strategies activates Latino churches and faith-based organizations through our social impact model, which equips them with organizational development services, key connections, and other resources, including but not limited to funding. Since 2003, Urban Strategies has implemented this model to increase faith partners' capacity to carry out high-impact programming, with the aim of increasing flourishing among children and families.

In 2025, Urban Strategies undertook an organization-wide evaluation to gather evidence as to whether this model contributes to the desired outcomes and to understand why. This document shares the results of this effort, and what it means for funders who want to invest in communities where the need is great and the local infrastructure to meet it is limited.

Theory of Change ◆◆◆



2 About the Evaluation

Evaluation Design

Designed to be as rigorous as possible, the evaluation's strength lies in the use of multiple data sources, mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative), and a theory-based design. The evaluation collected and analyzed two kinds of evidence:

1) Quantitative survey data to measure partner and program participant outcomes before and after engagement with Urban Strategies; and 2) Qualitative data gathered through interviews and site visits that added depth and context to the numbers. Using both types of evidence gives a fuller picture than either could provide alone.

The evaluation examined Urban Strategies' contribution to observed changes rather than proving direct cause and effect. Survey responses relied on self-report and retrospective questions. These limitations are common in community-based evaluations and do not diminish the overall value of the findings.



Who We Collected Data From

The evaluation team gathered survey data from 109 of Urban Strategies' **partners**, located in communities across the U.S. (including Puerto Rico) and Central America; and 892 program participants. The team also conducted 24 interviews with partnering pastors, 54 interviews with program participants, 14 partner site visits, and 13 interviews with Urban Strategies staff. While the evaluation findings do not vary significantly by region, the discussion in this Evaluation Brief will focus on the continental United States, representing input from 49 of the 109 partners that participated in the evaluation.

***"Partners"** is defined as Latino churches and faith-based organizations that participated in this evaluation and were collaborating with Urban Strategies at the time of the evaluation or in the previous programmatic year.*

Data Collection by the Numbers ♦♦♦

SURVEYS

109

partner organizations
from 13 programs



892

program
participants



2

regions: U.S. and
Central America



INTERVIEWS AND SITE VISITS

24

pastor interviews

54

program participant
interviews

14

partner site visits

13

staff interviews

3 About Urban Strategies' Partners

The evaluation found that partners possess key characteristics that are beneficial for community development. Nearly 90% are located in low- or very low-opportunity areas, meaning they are already present in communities where the need is greatest. On average, partnering churches reported that more than half of their congregants live in the immediate community. The majority also own their facilities or are paying a mortgage, giving them a stable, long-term physical presence from which to operate.

Partners have foundational qualities to serve their communities; however, many lack the resources and capacity to do so at scale. Half reported annual budgets under \$150,000. Half of partners are primarily low-income congregations, and 61% of partners have 150 members or fewer. Over half have a congregation that is majority bicultural and bilingual, reflecting the language and cultures of their immediate community. Forty-one percent of partnering churches' principal leaders are bivocational, meaning they hold outside employment alongside their church leadership role and therefore, face significant competing demands for their time and attention. While this reality can limit pastors' available time, it can also be a strength, serving as a motivational factor for community efforts.

Characteristics of Partners ◆◆◆

STRENGTHS PARTNERS BRING

90% 
located in low- or very low-opportunity areas

78% 
own their facilities or are paying a mortgage

55% 
are majority bicultural and bilingual

54% 
of congregants reside in the immediate community

WHERE RESOURCES ARE THIN

51% 
report annual budgets under \$150,000

51% 
have 150 members or fewer

50% 
are primarily low-income congregations

41% 
of pastors or principal leaders are bivocational



“

We're young. We just got started a couple of years back. The type of support that we received, the feedback that we've been able to receive, and implementation of the curriculum has just been a wonderful experience.

—*Pastor of US Partner*

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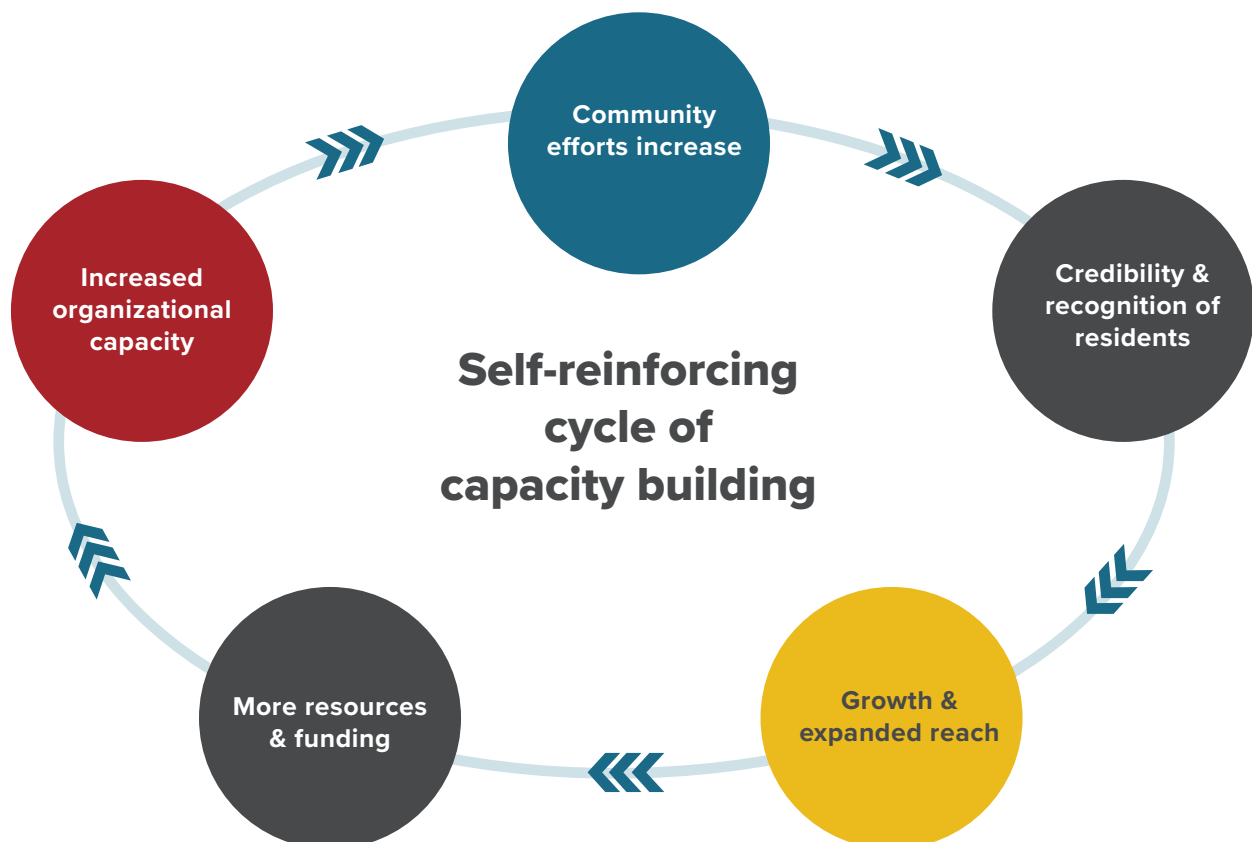
What Changed for Partners: Capacity and Community Impact

Partners reported substantial gains on average across every measure of organizational capacity after collaborating with Urban Strategies. Increases ranged from 24 to 33 percentage points across internal organizational capacity, leader well-being, and healthy leadership processes. Alignment to community development principles (measured by considering community's needs in decision-making) increased by 13 percentage points, on average. In addition, most pastors interviewed shared that they benefited directly from Urban Strategies' technical assistance and the connections to other organizations that Urban Strategies helped facilitate.

The evaluation found that after working with Urban Strategies, partners reported having greater community impact. On average, partners increased the variety of community efforts they engage in, with nearly half experiencing an increase. These efforts evolved over time, moving beyond relief-oriented activities toward holistic community efforts. There were also significant gains in the number of people reached each week by partners. The average number of individuals impacted weekly more than doubled, increasing from 116 to 268 individuals after collaborating with Urban Strategies.

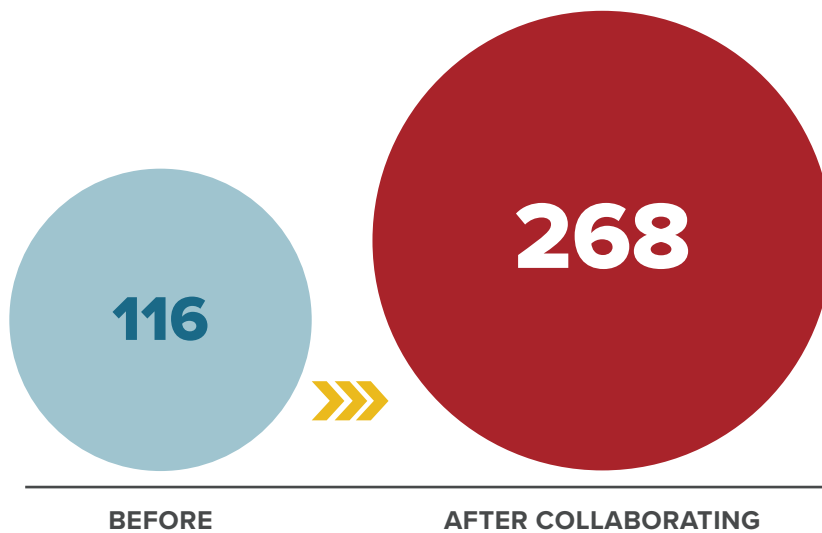
What makes these gains especially meaningful is that improvements were sustained over time. Weekly reach remained higher by an average of 66 individuals per week after collaborating with Urban Strategies. This finding suggests that the capacity Urban Strategies helps to build is sustained after active partnership. In addition, both past and currently collaborating partners described a self-reinforcing capacity-building cycle: as community engagement grows, so does visibility and credibility, which in turn supports growth, attracts additional resources, and sustains or expands capacity for community impact.

Gains that Build on Themselves ♦♦♦





What Changed for Partners ♦♦♦



Average number of individuals impacted weekly, before and after collaborating with Urban Strategies

+24-33%

gains in internal organizational capacity, leader well-being, and health leadership processes

+66

more people reached each week, on average, after formal collaboration with Urban Strategies concluded

~50%

of partners increased the variety of community efforts they engage in

5 What Predicts Increased Impact

Beyond measuring what changed after engagement with Urban Strategies, this evaluation explored factors that were associated with greater community impact among partners.

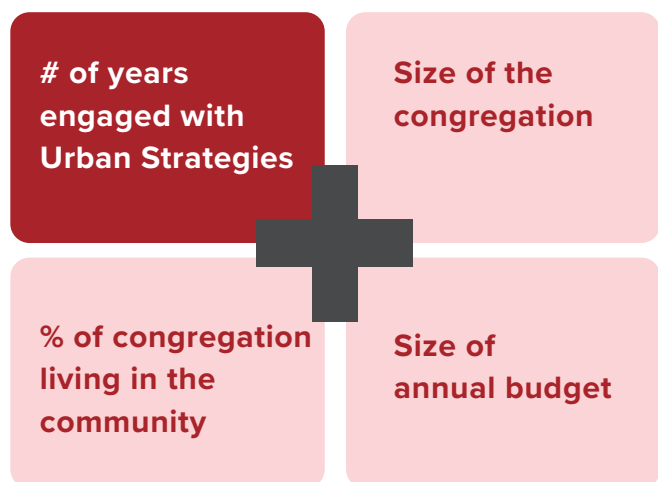
The evaluation found that a combination of four factors predicted greater community impact, meaning a greater variety of community efforts and more people reached each week:

1. The number of years a partner was engaged with Urban Strategies;
2. The share of congregants living in the immediate neighborhood;
3. The size of the partner's annual budget; and
4. The size of its congregation.

As these factors increased, so did the partners' community impact. This finding reflects something important about how Urban Strategies' partnership model works: support from Urban Strategies, together with an organization's capacity and contextual conditions, all shape community impact. No single factor alone was predictive, suggesting Urban Strategies' support works alongside other factors, to increase impact. At the same time, years partnering with Urban Strategies emerged as a key contributor to community impact. These findings position Urban Strategies' model as a strategic investment and demonstrate that Latino churches and faith-based organizations, when appropriately supported, can achieve measurable results and sustain—and in some cases expand—their community impact over time.

The Multi-Factor Model ♦♦♦

FOUR FACTORS, TOGETHER



GREATER COMMUNITY IMPACT



6 What Changed for Program Participants

On average, across every program and age group, the evaluation found that individuals served through these programs reported statistically significant improvements in flourishing. As measured in this evaluation, flourishing encompasses well-being across multiple domains, including social well-being, mental health, physical health, life meaning & purpose, education & life goals, access to basic needs, and safety.

Gains in Overall Flourishing

Participants reported a statistically significant improvement in overall flourishing across programs, with average increases ranging from 11% to 14%, depending on the age group. Over two-thirds of participants attributed their improvement directly to the program.

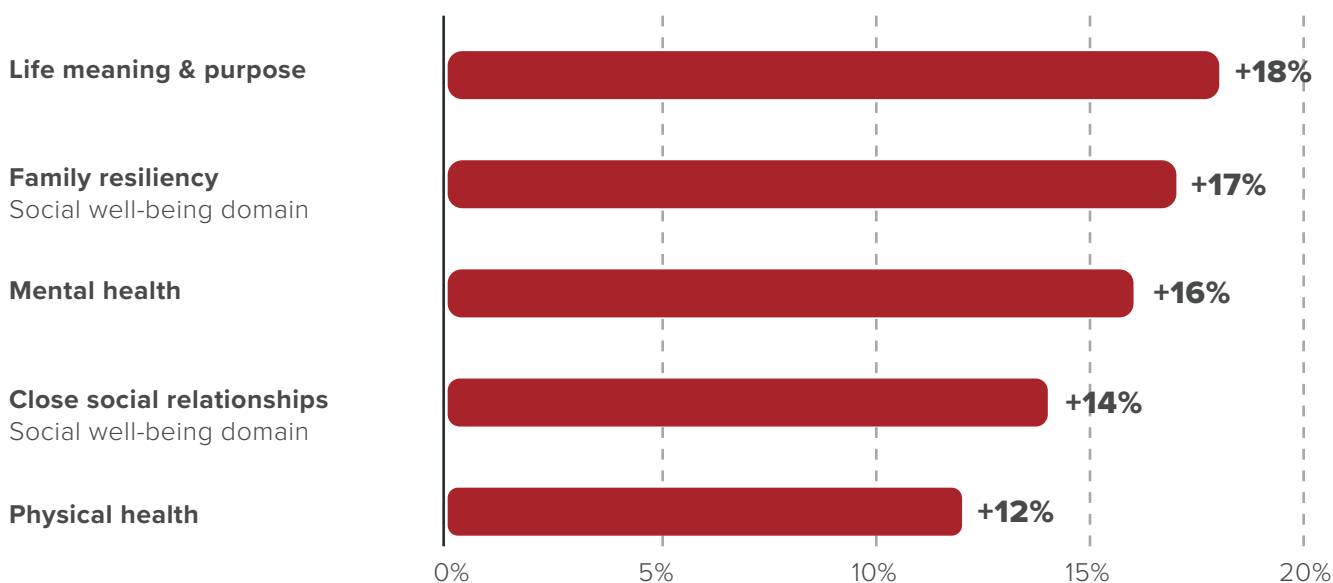
Increased Flourishing by Domain

The strongest and most consistent gains for program participants of all ages were in social well-being, mental health, and life meaning & purpose, domains closely aligned with the relational approach that Latino churches and faith-based organizations are well positioned to support. Through interviews, participants shared concrete examples of change such as strengthened relationships and improved emotional regulation. As one youth participant reflected, “My relationship with my parents [improved], because there was no form of communication [before]. Now we communicate. There haven’t been arguments.” Referring to his mental health post-program, a church leader shared, “I don’t think I could still be in ministry if I didn’t do it [the program] because I was fried.”

Participants also reported gains in educational and life goals, physical health, access to basic needs, and safety, which were concentrated in specific programs addressing these areas. For example, participants in a program focused on pastoral well-being reported increases in physical health. Parents of children in an early childhood education program reported gains in “openness and curiosity in learning new things.” While these gains were generally more modest, they were still positive, suggesting programs are effective in achieving desired outcomes.

Adult Survey Results on Select Indicators of Well-being ◆◆◆

Average increase reported by adult program participants



7 The Unique Contribution of Latino Faith-Based Partners

The evaluation suggests several distinct ways that Latino churches and faith-based organizations contribute to flourishing and community impact.

Provide Trusted Gateway to Programs

In interviews, program participants spoke of how the church served as a trusted gateway to access programs. This was particularly true for programs offered to congregation members who may never have accessed such a program if it were not offered in this setting. Latino people of faith and community members reported a level of trust in these programs precisely because they were offered through a church, lowering the barrier to access for a population that might otherwise hesitate to engage with such programs. This was especially true for sensitive topics, such as the prevention of abuse or family violence, where participants described feeling more comfortable because of a shared faith connection or the simple presence of familiar faces.

Enhance Program Participants' Social and Mental Well-Being

The strongest gains documented in this evaluation among participants were in social well-being and mental health. This was true even for those in programs not designed to address these areas, as Latino churches and faith-based organizations are positioned to support exactly these outcomes. This role is suggested by previous studies on faith-based initiatives, and supported by Latino churches' embodiment of *personalismo*—a relational, warm, and personal style of engagement that Latino pastors consistently described as central to their approach and aligned to the culture of the families they serve.

Offer a Long-Term Community of Support

The relationships created with community participants can endure beyond the life of a program. The centrality of relationships in the Latino church, its lasting, physical presence and ongoing opportunities for connection, all provide opportunities for continued support across various areas of well-being. The ongoing community and support provided by the faith-based partner can help sustain participant gains over time.

Contribute to Program Participants' Life Meaning and Purpose

Faith-based settings create space for participants to find a deeper sense of purpose. Those interviewed spoke of an unfolding process of participants moving from receiving services to serving others, becoming agents of community transformation in their own communities. Individuals shared that their motivation to serve the surrounding community was strengthened. One pastor described watching youth in a community program go on to form their own group, *Dirección Juvenil*, turning what they had received into service for others. This evaluation suggests that Latino churches provide a pathway for individuals to move from receiving support to actively contributing to their communities.

“

Before, our only focus was food. . . Just food . . . That's it. After Urban Strategies, everything changed. We started focusing in other areas, like mental health, physical health, like a bunch of other areas.

—Pastor of US Partner

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8 Implications for Funders

This evaluation offers evidence of where financial investments produces impact, but it also suggests that receiving financial resources alone is not enough for Latino churches and faith-based organizations to maximize their community impact.

As this Brief documents, the evidence demonstrates that Urban Strategies' comprehensive model of delivering capacity-building services, resources, and key connections increases partners' ability to serve their communities, expand and enhance community development efforts, and contribute to greater flourishing among children and families. Notably, these gains persisted even after formal collaboration and funding ended. The evaluation produced clear evidence that investing in Urban Strategies' social impact model and mission of equipping, resourcing, and connecting its partners is what activates Latino churches to carry out their potential as agents for community transformation.

For philanthropic institutions committed to advancing well-being and flourishing among Latino families and communities, this evaluation offers a clear and compelling call to action: invest in Urban Strategies and its trusted Latino faith-based partners as a demonstrated and promising pathway for creating lasting, community-driven change.

Invest in the capacity of Latino faith-based organizations ◆◆◆



STRENGTHS IN PLACE

Partners already bring deep local presence and trust, and cultural and linguistic alignment.



GAINS THAT LAST

Partners have sustained and increased community impact even after formal collaboration with Urban Strategies concluded.



OUTCOMES THAT MATTER

The strongest gains came in social well-being, mental health, and life meaning and purpose.



We exist to equip, resource, and connect faith- and community based organizations
so that all children and families can reach their full potential.