



DIALOGUES WITH OUR FUTURE ANCESTORS
An Inquiry into the Well-Being of MA'O and Kauhale
Youth Leadership Training Program Participants 2003–2020

SOCIOECONOMIC Outcomes Brief

This brief covers the socioeconomic outcome learnings from MA'O's *Dialogues with Our Future Ancestors* alumni survey project. Briefs are also available for education, workforce, holistic health, and community connectedness outcomes, as well as the YLT experience, and evaluation process learnings. The YLT is a holistic program; for a thorough understanding of the program and its interrelated outcomes, we encourage you to refer to the other briefs, and to the report in its entirety, all posted on our website.

DIALOGUES SUMMARY

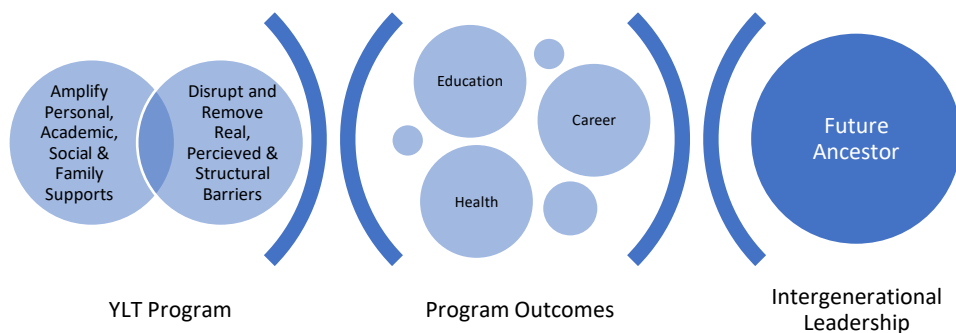
Since its founding in 2001, MA'O Organic Farms (MA'O) has witnessed that investments in the connection of youth to land and in the empowerment of youth leadership generate health, sustainability, and resilience with and for the community. In 2020 MA'O partnered with a team of evaluation experts and academic partners to develop and deploy a multi-faceted 'alumni survey' with the intention of thoroughly and systematically analyzing the effects of its core Youth Leadership Training (YLT) college internship program on participants, and by extension on the community. Our goal was to investigate the hypotheses embedded in MA'O's theory of change regarding the immediate and cascading individual and communal changes that stem from educating and empowering youth.

The Dialogues With Our Future Ancestors project was grounded in MA'O's long-held practice of inquiry, reflection, and refinement: **the feedback loop for our kuleana to our future ancestors.** It was undertaken as a community-based participatory research (CBPR) project, through which MA'O staff, evaluation experts, and academic researchers contributed their unique expertise and experience. This application of the practices of makawalu (seeing through many perspectives; literally 'eight eyes') and kilo (direct observation, generally as a practitioner) affirmed much of MA'O's experiential knowledge, while productively complicating some standing assumptions, and inviting new questions and perspectives.

YLT INTERNSHIP PROGRAM & THEORY OF CHANGE

MA'O's theory of change posits that a social enterprise can mimic the strengths of an 'ohana (family) by providing material, intellectual, and emotional support, educational resources, and workforce training. The YLT program helps youth find their purpose, connect with their culture and history, develop knowledge and skills, grow and mobilize personal and professional networks and partners, and pursue educational and workforce opportunities that lead them, their families, and the community toward cultural, social, economic, and spiritual resilience. This grows **future ancestors** dedicated to leadership, rooted to place, and committed to their community.

Figure A YLT Theory of Change



The YLT program encompasses two program tracks housed in separate educational and enterprise settings: MA’O Organic Farms (an organic farm and home to the majority of YLT interns, referred to as “MA’O”) and Searider Productions (a digital media initiative at Wai’anae School, referred to as “DMED”). Together, these two programs are called the Kauhale. The Kauhale YLT interns from both MA’O and DMED receive comprehensive educational and social wrap-around services, which include counseling, academic advising, and referrals to other social services. They also receive financial support in the form of a monthly stipend and tuition waivers for University of Hawai’i, Leeward Community College (LCC). All Kauhale YLT interns in both the MA’O and DMED program tracks participate in a ramp-up program at MA’O Organic Farms and receive ongoing programmatic support from MA’O education staff. The overlapping two-year cohort structure is core to the program structure: an intern starts as a novice, looking up to the ‘elder’ interns for guidance, expertise, and proof of what is possible, after which they in turn progress into the elder role and take on kuleana (responsibility) for the success of those who follow.

STUDY METHODOLOGY¹

The MA’O Alumni Study comprised four components: two focus groups, an online questionnaire, one-on-one interviews, and the collection of biometric data and biospecimen samples.

The **total YLT alumni population (n=315)** is made up of YLT participants in Cohorts 1-12.5, regardless of how long they stayed in the program and whether they received their associate degree.²

The **alumni questionnaire respondents (n=62)** includes all those who provided a complete response to the online survey questionnaire. This represents **20%** of the total alumni population. The demographic differences between the sample and parent alumni groups suggest that the questionnaire results may not generalize to all YLT participants, particularly those who stayed in the program for a shorter duration, did not attain a post-secondary degree, did not elect to stay on at MA’O for further internship or staff opportunities, or participated in DMED.

The **interviewees (n=21)** did one-on-one interviews in addition to completing the online survey. They represent **7%** of total alumni population. The interviewee population was more likely to have graduated with a degree and to have stayed at MA’O longer, which may have skewed the interviews to reflect a generally more positive interpretation of the YLT program experience.

Comparisons are made throughout the analysis between the alumni questionnaire respondents (n=62) and a **Wai’anae peer group (n=157)**. The Wai’anae peer group aligns closely with the alumni population across the key characteristics of age, gender, household income, and household size.

¹ The complete description of the study methodology can be found in the Process Brief, and in the full report.

² Some participants in Cohorts 13 and up were still active in the program at the time of the project, and as a group they could not yet be considered to have completed the YLT. Members of C13 and up who had already left the program were invited to participate.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS IN THE YLT CONTEXT

Given MA'O's commitment to fostering community-based economic development, and to empowering and educating youth, we expect that the YLT alumni will experience improved socioeconomic outcomes that will extend to their current and future families, and the community. Through the YLT program participants develop agency, self-determination, and confidence, build skills and knowledge, and grow personal and professional networks. They also attain post-secondary degrees and develop workplace competencies that are expected to lead to greater professional opportunities and mobility. As a result, we anticipate that YLT alumni will access meaningful and remunerative work in which they can exercise leadership (discussed in the Workforce Brief). We also selected several additional socioeconomic indicators as part of our first attempt to more concretely understand the cascading impacts of investing in youth education and empowerment. These indicators are potentially relevant to public policy discussions about avoiding societal costs through investments in youth. It is anticipated that YLT graduates will:

- 1) Have increased financial literacy
- 2) Rely less on public benefits
- 3) Have reduced incarceration rates
- 4) Have improved 'ohana well-being

SOCIO-ECONOMIC OUTCOMES – STUDY RESULTS

Socioeconomic outcomes for YLT participants must be viewed in the broader context of Wai'anae moku. Wai'anae was traditionally home to a strong and cohesive community that produced adequate food for its people while managing its land and water resources sustainably. Today Wai'anae is home to the world's largest and most densely populated community of native Hawaiians, who make up 60% of the community, compared to 20% statewide. The community also reflects the rich cultural legacy of plantation-era migration and more recent arrivals from Micronesia and beyond.

While it should be a vibrant rural community, Wai'anae has been undermined by decades of underinvestment following the cultural and economic violence of colonialism. Much of the population is mired in intergenerational poverty that is fueled by a historic severing of land and people and perpetuated by a lack of educational attainment and economic opportunities. The region's poverty is entrenched in the relationship between low educational attainment and low income, with 16% of the region's adult population lacking a high school diploma (11% statewide), and 88% lacking a Bachelor's degree (69% statewide).³ This leaves well-paying jobs out of reach for the majority, relegating 25% of the community to living under the 100% federal poverty level, compared to the statewide poverty rate of 11%.⁴

In the following section we explore alumni insights regarding their financial literacy, use of public benefits, experience with incarceration, 'ohana well-being, and food security. We selected these particular variables as our first attempt to more concretely understand the cascading impacts of investing in youth education and empowerment. Some of the variables – notably use of public benefits and incarceration – reflect an interest articulated in the social impact investing arena about the potential for avoiding future public costs through effective engagement with “at risk” youth, for example through the use of social impact bonds. While we see the potential in this line of inquiry, we also note that recent academic literature cites risks inherent in “the financialization and privatization of social and public policy; they reduce the rights of citizens both as service users and as a polity.”⁵

³ *US Census 2016 American Community Survey*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Roy, Michael J., McHugh, Neil, & Sinclair, Stephen. “A Critical Reflection on Social Impact Bonds” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. May 2018 https://ssir.org/articles/entry/a_critical_reflection_on_social_impact_bonds# accessed on April 20, 2021

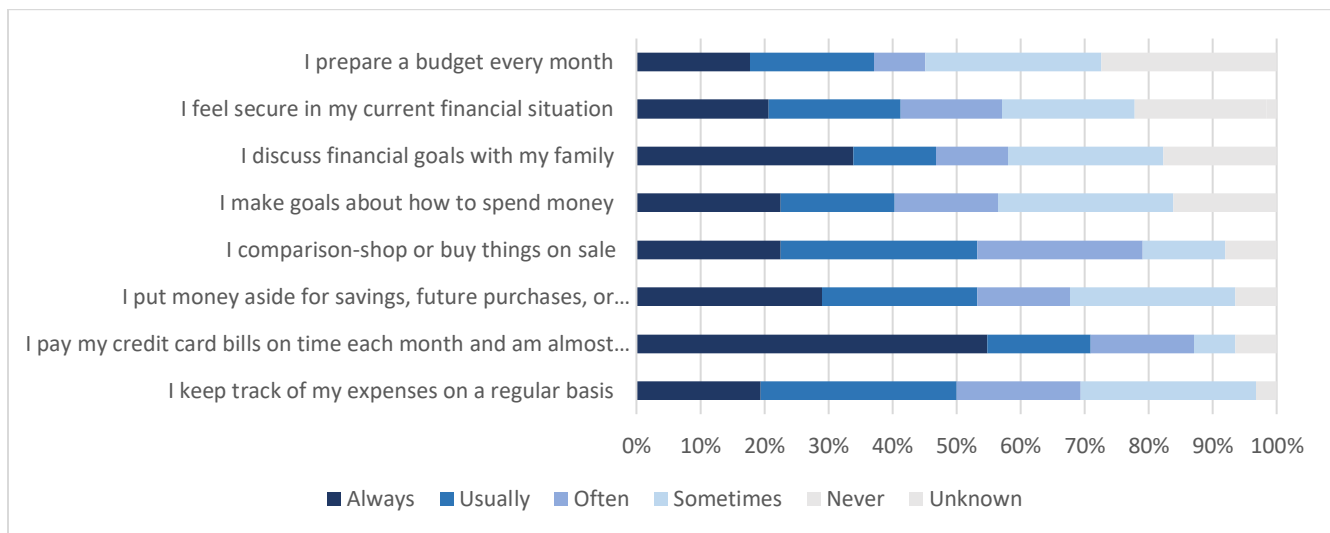
Financial Literacy

Over the years YLT program participants have received a range of financial literacy training and experiences, making it difficult to generalize results for the total alumni community. One thing that all interns have in common, however, is that they all received stipends in return for their sweat equity in the enterprise. For many, this was the reason to open their first bank account, which is an important step toward financial independence, as well as financial literacy. Several cohorts also received matches to their personal savings that could be used towards certain school related purchases, but this Individual Development Account (IDA) program has not been available for all cohorts (depends on external funding). Financial literacy has emerged as an area for future curriculum development; this inquiry represents our initial attempt to engage with the topic systematically.

Questionnaire Findings

Financial literacy is not a standardized metric; for the purposes of this analysis the alumni’s financial literacy was measured using eight indicators (see Figure B). As our work in this area evolves, we will look forward to developing more sophisticated assessments of financial literacy. In this initial inquiry, 60-80% of respondents selected often or better for four categories, including: keeping track of expenses on a regular basis, paying credit card bills on time, putting money aside for savings, future purchases or emergencies, and comparison shopping. Meanwhile, 45-60% selected often or better for the remaining activities: making financial goals, discussing those goals with family, feeling secure in their current financial situation, and preparing monthly budgets.

Figure B YLT Alumni Financial Literacy



Interview Findings

Several alumni relayed their experience with financial stress and financial decision making. This participant reflected on the evolution of their financial choices during the internship and since, and connected the concepts of financial literacy, personal health, and food sovereignty:

“ [During the YLT] I spent my money on other people all the time or [I bought] a lot of Taco Bell and McDonalds. I am not going to lie. Even working at MA’O, I have really loved their chicken bacon ranch snacks wrap from McDonald’s. That was my addiction and I was at that young age where I was like, “Well, this is what I can afford.” (...) When we go to LCC, we go [out] for lunch and that adds up, too. **My finances were still something that I was trying to learn and figure out.** I think over the years as I have gotten older then I am like, “Why am I buying other people alcohol? I do not even drink. They can buy their own if they want to have these bad habits.” So I cut that out and I replaced it with buying food. **But at least now when I am buying food, I am more conscious of, okay “Where is it going? Who am I supporting? Am I supporting these big companies or am I supporting a small local farmer?” And that is why I tried to look at the farmer’s market here to see if I can support local farmers.** (Interview Cohort 1-5)

Public Benefits

As we anticipated that YLT alumni would experience positive career and wage outcomes, we further hypothesized that they would have less need than their peers to access social safety net public benefits. To explore this expectation, alumni were asked about their use of three public services: unemployment benefits, Medicaid (QUEST), and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Alumni usage rates are compared to Wai’anae and Statewide usage in Table 1.

Questionnaire Findings

As noted previously, the survey was deployed when the COVID-19 pandemic was significantly impacting the Hawai’i economy and unemployment figures. While only 3% of alumni reported accessing unemployment benefits compared to 14% of the statewide population, this is at odds with the 11% who reported having lost a job due to the pandemic (p. 46). This suggests that while alumni were slightly less likely to be unemployed, those who had lost a job were substantially less likely than the general population to claim unemployment benefits than the statewide population.

Alumni reported usage of SNAP and Medicaid were also slightly lower than statewide enrollment figures and substantially lower than the Wai’anae community. However, these comparisons may be complicated by the age of participants. For example, alumni under 25 are still eligible to participate in their parents’ healthcare plans, and those still living with their families might be in households receiving SNAP benefits. We found no age-specific data points for public benefit usage that could be used to disambiguate these findings. Later in the report we discuss the alumni’s food (in)security compared to the LCC student population (pp. 60-63). These result appear to coincide with the alumni’s lower usage of SNAP, but further analysis is necessary to drawn any firm conclusions.

Table 1 YLT Alumni Use of State Benefits vs. Population

Public benefit	YLT Alumni	Wai’anae	State of Hawai’i
Medicaid (QUEST)	21%	32% (individuals)	27%
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	11%	34% (households)	12%
Unemployment benefits	3%	Data not available	14%*

*Unemployment rate in October 2020

Incarceration

According to the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, “the disparate impact of the criminal justice system on Native Hawaiians is apparent at every stage of the criminal justice system, starting from arrest and continuing through parole. The impact is cumulative, starting with a relatively small disproportionality at arrest, but revealing itself to

be more distinct at sentencing and incarceration.”⁶ These disparities are reflected in a disturbing intergenerational cycle of incarceration in the Wai‘anae community. YLT interns reflect this tragic reality; nearly half of alumni respondents reported having a family member who has been incarcerated (see Figure C). Future inquiries into family experiences with incarceration should differentiate between felonies and misdemeanors and explore the connection between felonies and household income.

MA‘O anticipates that participation in the YLT, with the associated post-secondary education, cultural grounding, empowerment, and mentorship, will help to disrupt the destructive cycle of incarceration. However, we note that any positive effect at the individual level may still be undermined by the systemic racism evident in sentencing disparities.

Questionnaire Findings

In the questionnaire alumni were asked about their direct experience with incarceration since the YLT. While 72% of alumni reported that they have not been arrested and/or incarcerated since leaving the YLT, 21% indicated that they have been in jail since the YLT. Notably, none of the alumni reported having been convicted of a felony or misdemeanor. (See Figure D.) Incarceration outcomes is a topic of ongoing interest; the survey process has prompted us to learn more about future interns’ familial experience with incarceration, to further develop our understanding of this critical issue.

Figure C YLT Contact with Incarceration

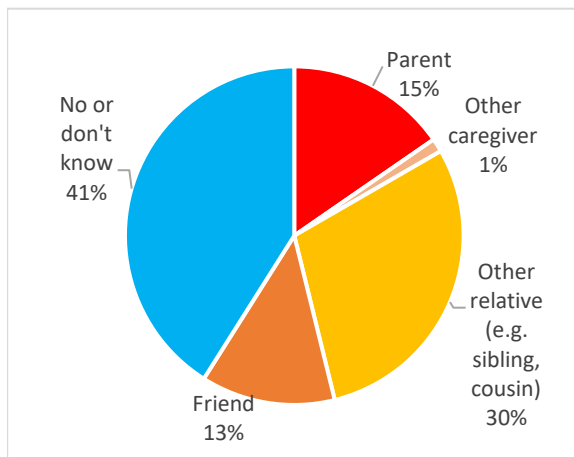
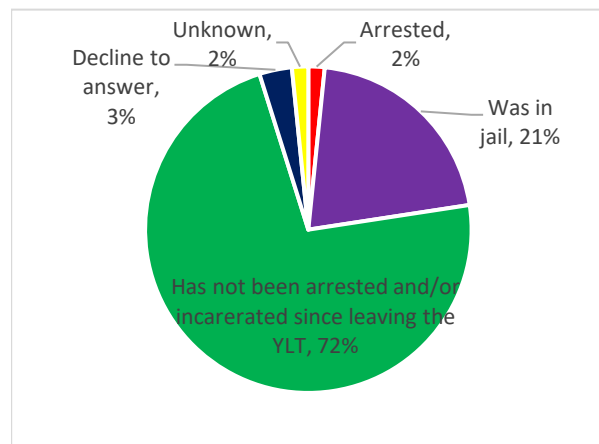


Figure D YLT Alumni Post-YLT Incarceration



As noted above (p. 38), our exploration of the use of public benefits and experience with incarceration ties in with the potential for using social impact bonds or other policy mechanisms that measure societal cost avoidance to justify investing in youth capacity building and education. We remain very cautious about such an approach, given the mixed picture that has emerged from early efforts with social impact bonds.⁷

⁶ https://www.oha.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/factsheets_final_web_0.pdf

⁷ “Narratives of promise, narratives of caution: A review of the literature on Social Impact Bonds.” *Social Policy & Administration*. June 2016. https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/golab.prod/documents/Narratives_of_Promise_Narratives_of_Caution_-_A_Review_of_the_Literature_on.pdf (accessed April 21, 2021)

'Ohana Well-being

As noted earlier, we expect that the YLT experience has substantive impact beyond the individual intern, at the level of interns' friends, families, and social networks. This effect was noted above in alumni's reports of their families' evolution during the YLT program itself, and in interns' influence on others' pursuit of college degrees (pp. 35-37). The whole area of alumni 'ohana outcomes is ripe for more nuanced exploration in future analyses. Here we note that in the interviews several alumni shared their perspectives about the connectivity across past, present, and future generations.

Interview Findings

“
[in the YLT], we talked a lot about our ancestors. (...) I never thought of that until I went to MA'O and understand the whole process of why our ancestors are important. Like, they were doing all this stuff that we learning about now is important, (...) I need to do the same (...) by helping others. That is something that I can do is doing the same by just planting and doing other things that I know it is good for the next generation (Interview Cohort 12+)

“
Yeah, I think like everything I do now is definitely for the next generation, generations to come. I think that is one of the foundations of like MA'O and stuff. With sustainability and just being able to feed like our children and feed our community. It is the same thing. It is so funny how everything [...] always comes back around. But definitely like now, I think at the age I am at. Because I do want children, but just all the decisions and choices that I do make are definitely something I definitely want to leave something good behind. You know, I [don't] just like money. You know, not materialistic type of things but things that actually have meanings and things that actually stick. That has definitely been a motivation of mine for sure I think. (Interview Cohort 1-5)

In the realm of 'ohana outcomes one point of interest is the age at which YLT interns (particularly women) have their first child. Children are a source of tremendous personal, familial, and communal joy and well-being, as well as a sense of purpose and meaning. Childbearing is also intimately bound up in complex and intergenerational relationships between education, economic opportunity, and wage penalties (again, particularly for women). Most critically in the context of the YLT: over the years we have observed the additional financial burden, time pressure, and conflicting kuleana (responsibilities) experienced by youth caring for children of their own while attending college. As noted in the discussion below (pp. 74-76) regarding attrition, the three respondents who identified needing more childcare support while in the program left prior to attaining an associate degree, and have not graduated since leaving the program. Though MA'O administrative data does not comprehensively account for whether interns had children while in the YLT, a cursory analysis of administrative records indicates that there is no significant difference in graduation rates between interns who had children while in the YLT and those who did not. We note here that though the YLT program does not provide direct services or support for students who are also parents, we do address these issues through partnerships and serve as a connector or bridge between students and relevant institutional services and resources.

Questionnaire Findings

Maternal age at first birth has significant impacts on the socioeconomic outcomes of both mother and child, and is heavily influenced by women's college education attainment.⁸ Given the YLT's emphasis on attaining a college degree, we anticipate that alumni, particularly those who completed their associate degree, would have children at a later age than their peers without a college education. The Hawai'i statewide average age at first child is 25; we were unable to obtain Wai'anae specific data for this analysis. At present, the age of alumni at the birth of

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/08/04/upshot/up-birth-age-gap.html>

their first child is trending slightly younger than the state average (see Table 2). Ultimately, however, it is not possible to assess this outcome at present, given that only 19 of the 62 questionnaire respondents have had children thus far, and many are still less than 25 years old. We note this topic for future analysis, as the alumni community ages.

‘Ohana well-being is also greatly impacted by individual social, emotional, and physical health, which is discussed in the following section on Ola Outcomes and Health Status.

Table 2 YLT Alumni Age at Birth of First Child

Age at Birth of First Child	Number of Alumni Who Have Children	% of Alumni with Children
18 or younger	0	0%
19-24	12	63%
25-29	6	32%
30-35	1	5%

SUMMARY & DISCUSSION

In summary, alumni reported mixed socio-economic outcomes. This area of analysis was significantly complicated by the range in survey respondents’ age, and the variety and complexity in their of living, housing, and economic arrangements. Given the intergenerational nature of socio-economic challenges faced by many families in Wai’anae, progress on socio-economic indicators is likely to unfold across a generational timeframe.

The overarching themes that emerges in the socio-economic outcomes are reflected elsewhere in the study. We highlight it here, and encourage readers to look for this theme in the other briefs and/or the full report:

- There is a complex interplay between youth’s experience in the YLT program and their structural, environmental, and familial context, which can impinge upon and/or bolster individual outcomes. This interplay surfaced repeatedly throughout our analysis, for example as manifested in the tension between personal aspirations, financial resources, and physical access in the areas of food security outcomes and career opportunities. We are keen to further explore what programming most effectively and constructively intervenes in these cycles. In particular, why, how, and when programmatic support is strong enough to balance or outweigh these countervailing challenges, and why and when is it insufficient.
- YLT alumni have tremendous hope and aspirations for the well-being of their current and future ‘ohana, often grounded in an articulation of cultural and community-centric values and a commitment to carrying forward a strong work ethic. Most resonant were the many affirmations of the MA’O philosophy of “love, respect, and the willingness to work.”

Our exploration of several socio-economic indicators, including the use of public benefits and experience with incarceration, ties in with the potential for using social impact bonds or other policy mechanisms that measure societal cost avoidance to justify investing in youth capacity building and education. We initiated the analysis with caution, given the mixed picture that has emerged from early efforts with social impact bonds. Our experience has underscored the difficulties of measuring avoided societal costs on a timeframe that is relevant to the investment made in youth capacity.