



BOYS AND YOUNG MEN OF COLOR
— THE PROMISE AND OPPORTUNITY —

Investing in Young Men of Color as Community Assets

Introduction

Living in resource-poor communities, many young men of color have less access to high-performing and adequately funded schools, opportunities to work, positive youth development experiences, and social capital. However, many young men of color in poor and low-income communities are thriving; their resilience and tenacity, as well as local leadership, positive adult connections, and effective programs, have helped them overcome the odds.

Unfortunately, investments in programs and supports in poor communities are far too low to ensure opportunity and success for large numbers of low-income young men of color. Everyday essentials that some people take for granted—including effective schools, safe environments, basic health care, and jobs that provide economic stability and career advancement—are out of reach for many. Too often, young people miss out on life-changing opportunities because of scarce funding and inadequate infrastructure to deliver services at scale. At all levels of government, we need fully funded public policies that address service gaps for young men of color at our institutions. Our investments and policy choices must value young men of color as assets vital to economic and social growth. There is no silver bullet, but there *are* many solutions. Federal, state, and local policy should reflect a comprehensive approach.

This brief is not about what’s “wrong” with young men of color; it’s about leveraging policy and practice opportunities to support positive outcomes. We offer a set of solution-centered policies and strategies to address four barriers to success for young men of color:

1. **Education Equity:** Improving College and Career Readiness and Supporting Dropout Prevention and Recovery
2. **Workforce Development and Training:** Investing in Summer and Year-Round Employment
3. **Youth Development and Wellbeing:** Meeting Basic Needs and Expanding Behavioral and Mental Health Supports
4. **Public Investment in Young People:** Raising the Bar at All Levels of Government

Why the focus on young men of color?

America's demographics are rapidly changing. According to the most recent Census data, persons of color make up 48 percent of the population under age 20. Demographers predict that this share will rise to 52 percent in 2025 and 55 percent in 2035.ⁱ By 2044, a majority of Americans will be people of color.ⁱⁱ The fastest-growing segments of our labor force have some of the lowest levels of educational attainment.ⁱⁱⁱ As the predominantly White baby-boomer generation retires, the share of the labor force held by people of color will increase significantly. Recognizing this demographic shift is critical to developing effective policies that concentrate resources where they are most needed to help poor and low-income youth of color rise out of poverty.

Young men of color, especially those in poor and low-income communities, have some of the worst employment and education outcomes. They are disproportionately negatively impacted by the criminal justice system and suffer from poor health outcomes. However, these young people are also fathers, brothers, sons, and indispensable members of our nation and communities. They are parents (custodial and noncustodial) of young children, whose success is placed at risk by economic instability. Their children's futures are inextricably linked to their success and their ability to access opportunities and pathways out of poverty.

Education Equity: Improving College and Career Readiness and Supporting Dropout Prevention and Recovery

Educational success is the cornerstone of successful pathways for youth. It is widely accepted that the U.S. must better prepare students for careers that provide financial stability, promote national economic growth, and improve our standing globally. By 2018, 60 percent of all U.S. jobs will require some level of postsecondary education. At the current rate, employers in 2025 will need about 23 million more degree and credential holders than our higher education system will have produced.^{iv} Despite this critical need, many low-income students of color are unprepared for future opportunities. This is often attributed to the deficiencies of students, families, and communities. In particular, environmental and cultural differences are cited as primary culprits for low academic achievement. In reality, schools are struggling to meet these students' needs, allocating too few resources to address guidance and counseling, attendance, and additional course help. It is essential that we address structural deficiencies in education policy and disparities in school systems and education, particularly those with high-minority populations.^v

Solution-Centered Policies and Strategies

Seize the opportunity to strengthen federal policy through reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Currently before Congress, ESEA presents an immediate opportunity to address equity gaps and achievement among boys and young men of color. ESEA must place greater emphasis on reforming the nation's secondary school system, especially in high-poverty and underperforming districts, with a focus on improving college and career readiness, dropout prevention and recovery, and school discipline policies for students of color.^{vi} This federal legislation can direct and incentivize states and local education agencies to implement effective strategies to address these challenges. ESEA could require state and local education agencies to analyze high school coursework data, identify equity gaps, and develop strategies for closing those gaps in annual plans; fund and

Investing in Young Men of Color as Community Assets

establish early warning indicator systems and interventions to prevent high school dropout; and invest in dropout recovery strategies in districts and schools that are failing to graduate significant numbers of students.

Even without federal requirements, state and local education agencies should take the initiative to implement these proposed provisions. A number of school districts, such as Baltimore and Denver, have dismantled zero-tolerance policies and greatly reduced racial disparities in school discipline. Texas recently passed legislation to decriminalize school truancy. And California has passed legislation to support dropout recovery programs and increase graduation rates.

Improve College and Career Readiness. The United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights has quantified the deep disparities in high schools in three key areas that are critical for college and career readiness: the level of coursework available, the experience level of teachers, and access to guidance counselors. These are specific areas where high-poverty high schools are failing students. For example, college preparatory courses are less likely to be offered in high-poverty schools. Among the 100 largest school districts, Calculus is offered in 41 percent of high-poverty schools, compared to 86 percent of low-poverty schools. Physics is offered in 69 percent of high-poverty schools, compared to 90 percent of low-poverty schools. This is particularly problematic for young people of color, who make up an overwhelming majority of the student population in high-poverty high schools.^{vii} A fuller understanding of these systemic barriers is critical to developing effective policies and practices that improve college and career readiness for students of color, especially young men.

Recommendations:

- ESEA should give the U.S. Department of Education authority to require state and local education agencies to analyze high school coursework data to identify equity gaps in the availability of a robust menu of college-preparatory classes, as well as develop strategies for closing the gap in annual plans.
- ESEA should give the U.S. Department of Education authority to require states and local education agencies to track rates of participation among students of color in higher-level and advanced placement courses, as well as develop strategies for closing equity gaps in annual plans.
- State legislators and executive branch policymakers should provide incentives for experienced teachers to serve in more challenging schools, such as differential salary, tax credits, or housing subsidies. To avoid unintended consequences and support intentional strategies, they should also conduct a racial equity analysis of proposed teacher and school accountability statutes to determine its impact on teacher placement in low-income, high-minority schools.
- Federal policymakers, state legislators, and education agencies should incentivize reduced student-to-counselor ratios, particularly in high-poverty and high-minority schools, where greater supports are needed to navigate college enrollment and matriculation.
- The U.S. Department of Education should track the number of high school graduates who need remedial coursework in the first year of college and use this data to improve high school curricula.

Support dropout prevention and recovery. The national on-time high school graduation rate has risen to eighty-one percent^{viii}—a 6.3 percent increase since 2010. However, unpacking this data by race reveals severe disparities in who’s graduating. Students of color are less likely to finish school within four years. Seventy-five percent of Latino students, 75 percent of African American students, and 70 percent of American Indian students graduate from high school, compared to 87 percent of White students.^{ix} While Asian American students boast a high school graduation rate of 89 percent, the educational needs of many Southeast Asian American students are often overlooked because of the “model minority myth”—a misconception that all Asian Americans excel academically and face no obstacles. In fact, in Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietnamese communities, fewer than half of all individuals over age 25 have a high school diploma.^x Students drop out of school for many reasons, including challenges in the school environment, schools’ inability to meet their educational needs, and working long hours to help support their families. This is especially true for Latino males and poor and low-income young people.^{xi} Even worse, many students are “pushed out” as a result of punitive, inconsistent school discipline policies that disproportionately impact African American and Latino male students.^{xii}

Recommendations:

- Federal policy should encourage and fund state and local education agencies to establish early warning indicator systems and interventions. Since ninth grade is when students are most likely to drop out of school, educators should be attentive to warning signals during this time and use readily available school data, including indicators of attendance and course failures in middle school and the first year of high school, to identify students at risk of dropping out.
- State and local policymakers should support the provision of academic supports to remediate and accelerate learning for students who are struggling, those who are over age and under-credited, and those who may have dropped out of school. Quality recuperative strategies include online credit recovery, intensive tutoring services, and competency-based learning options. Federal policy should provide funding and technical assistance to aid states and districts.
- State and local governments should develop a multiple-pathways approach that blends education, training, and postsecondary education support to students of all levels, including those who are advanced and those who have dropped out and are seeking to reenroll in school. Federal policy should encourage state and local education agencies to work collaboratively with community-based organizations and workforce boards to create a menu of well-supported educational pathways and options, such as credit recovery and accelerated learning models, twilight academies, and reengagement centers.
- Local governments and education agencies should invest in and implement student supports that build character, leadership skills, and cultural identity. These opportunities should include in-school and out-of-school programming that foster a positive cultural identity, as well as help young people engage in their communities by learning about issues that affect their lives, organizing themselves to have a voice, and participating in leadership structures such as youth councils.
- State and local governments should ensure wraparound supports are available to youth living in high-poverty communities. Investing in and implementing these supports through partnerships among community organizations, schools, and social service agencies can provide students with health and social service supports and build relationships that bridge home and school life.

Workforce Development and Training: Investing in Summer and Year-Round Employment

Employment is an important part of youth development and successful progression into young adulthood. Ages 16 through 24 are critical development years, as young people prepare to take on adult responsibilities. A key predictor of consistent employment in adulthood is early exposure to the world of work through summer and year-round employment, internships, and service opportunities during the teen years. Youth who have been employed tend to have higher earnings in young adulthood. Additionally, teens who are employed are more likely to stay in school and graduate high school.^{xiii} Work experience in high school adds to increased annual earnings through age 26, especially for those who do not attend a four-year college. Beyond the many developmental benefits, youth employment also improves the quality of community life. Typically, youth spend their earnings in their communities, strengthening neighborhoods as well as local economies.^{xiv} Unfortunately, many low-income young men of color don't have opportunities to gain early career exposure, build work experience and history, and establish a network of employers who can vouch for their skills and employability. While all young people are experiencing dramatic declines in employment, young men of color (particularly teens) have been disproportionately affected. In 2014, the employment rate for teens ages 16 to 19 was 16.5 percent for Black males, 24 percent for Hispanic males, and 29 percent for white males.^{xv} This has a long-term negative impact on their ability to secure a job with decent wages and chart a career with upward mobility.

Solution-Centered Policies and Strategies

Address deeply entrenched employment challenges for low-income young adults and out-of-school youth through implementation of the recently passed Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). WIOA presents an opportunity for states and local communities to improve access to workforce education and training for low-income young adults and out-of-school youth, who are disproportionately young people of color.^{xvi} WIOA requires 75 percent of Title I Youth formula funds to be spent on employment and training interventions for out-of-school youth. In addition, it increases the focus on serving the most vulnerable workers, expands education and training options, and allows unemployed adults and youth to “earn while they learn.”^{xvii} Effective state and local leadership can use WIOA to take meaningful steps toward a new workforce system that addresses these young people's needs and leverages other economic development and state and local education opportunities (such as community college). States and local workforce development boards could better serve out-of-school youth, including young men of color, by prioritizing this population for workforce services beyond Title I Youth funding (for example, through governors' statewide set aside allocation); ensuring state and local plans detail how they will support a continuum of services across programs along a career pathway; and implement interventions that target this population, such as transitional jobs, pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships, and integrated education and training in partnership with postsecondary institutions. At the federal level, agencies can provide final regulations that maximize services and outcomes for low-income youth, young adults, and out-of-school youth.

Create a Sustainable System of Workforce Services that Provide Opportunities for Career Exposure, Exploration, and Employment. States and communities should provide a menu of employment options (including work exposure and entry-level jobs) to respond to labor demand and emerging work opportunities for which young men are prepared. These options should be built into a career pathways approach, which connects progressive levels of basic skills and postsecondary education, training, and supportive services in specific sectors or cross-sector occupations in a way that optimizes the progress and success of individuals—including those with limited education, English, skills, and/or work experience—in securing marketable credentials, family-supporting employment, and further education and employment opportunities.^{xviii} Additionally, states and communities must be responsive to the impact of incarceration on young men’s employment prospects. In many instances, involvement with the justice system and felony convictions prohibit young men from accessing education, training, and federal student aid. Additionally, they are often banned from employment in certain professions and denied professional licenses despite having been trained.

Recommendations:

- Federal, state, and local governments, along with the private sector, must make budgetary investments in summer and year-round work experience and other try-out employment strategies, such as entry-level internships that provide stipends and wages and expose young men to careers, professional environments, and the world of work. WIOA now requires that at least 20 percent of youth formula funds be spent on paid and unpaid work experiences that incorporate academic and occupational education, including summer jobs, pre-apprenticeships, and apprenticeships.
- Implement subsidized employment options, such as transitional jobs, using federal, state, and local funding to support short- and long-term job placements for young men with limited work experience and those who face other barriers as a result of homelessness, involvement with the justice system, and/or behavioral and mental health challenges. WIOA also allows local areas to carve out up to 10 percent of their Title I Adult formula funds to support transitional jobs strategies.
- Public and private partners must work together to expand pre-apprenticeships and registered apprenticeships to allow young men to build their vocational, technical, and educational skills and explore a career path prior to entering a registered apprenticeship program in a specific industry.
- Finalize the proposed federal Child Support Enforcement regulations issued by the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) that emphasize Flexibility, Efficiency and Modernization. The proposed rule addresses the overuse of jail for child support enforcement and penalizing non-custodial parents that have no capacity to meet their payments. Instead, it offers provisions that could provide a new funding stream for states to implement jobs services for noncustodial parents through IV-D funds. Leveraging these funds with workforce and adult education systems could reduce incarceration for non-violent crimes, such as child support violations, for young men of color who are noncustodial parents.^{xix}

Use employer-focused strategies to increase young men’s exposure to work and tear down employer misconceptions. Building social networks is critical to helping low-income young men of color increase their social capital, access work, and advance economically. Research shows that social isolation and lack of broad social networks are larger challenges than worksite proximity for urban youth of color who are seeking jobs.^{xx} Lack of references is often cited by young men of color as a barrier to employment.^{xxi}

Recommendations:

Public and private investments in communities should support:

- Employment programs and interventions that help young men gain access to employers and work opportunities that would ordinarily be closed to them. This begins with opportunities for skill advancement and credential attainment.
- Partnerships with employers, including strategies that “buy” access to employment and work experience for young men and ensure they are adequately prepared and trained for the workplace. The local youth workforce system, in part through WIOA, and community-based partners play critical roles in advocating to employers about investing in youth, particularly young men of color.
- Employment vehicles that remove barriers to work based on criminal history and involvement with the criminal justice system, such as *Ban the Box* legislation and ordinances. Federal, state, and local governments should adopt these fair hiring policies. Nationwide, over 100 localities have instituted *Ban the Box* policies to reduce the stigma of incarceration and base employment decisions on applicants’ qualifications.

Youth Development and Well-Being: Meeting Basic Needs and Expanding Behavioral/Mental Health Supports

Among all adults, young adults ages 18 to 24 are least likely to have health care and most likely to be poor. Young adults of color are disproportionately poor. In 2013, the poverty rate was highest among Black and Hispanic young adults, with 32 percent and 21.3 percent respectively living in poverty. Even more alarmingly, the poverty rate for Black young adults rose by 1.7 percentage points from 2012 to 2013.^{xxii} Individuals living below poverty are at the highest risk of being uninsured, and people of color are at higher risk of being uninsured than non-Hispanic Whites.^{xxiii} Expansions to health insurance coverage are critical to communities of color, as uninsured individuals are less likely to have a regular doctor or to get timely and routine care and are more likely to be hospitalized for preventable conditions.^{xxiv} Meeting basic health needs is critical to young people’s adolescent development and growth into successful adults. Community factors and family circumstances (such as crime, violence, or instability in a family’s financial resources, housing, and food) also affect a young person’s emotional and social wellbeing and physical and psychological health. Boys and young men of color experience these issues more frequently than Whites. In particular, they are more likely to experience violence as victims, perpetrators, and bystanders.

CLASP and other researchers have consistently shown the severe impact of mental health issues, including the after-effects of trauma, on youth of color, disconnected youth, and low-income youth. For example, between 30 and 40 percent of youth exposed to community violence develop post-traumatic stress symptoms, such as re-experience (nightmares, intrusive thoughts, and flashbacks); avoidance of traumatic triggers and emotional numbing (constriction of affect); and physiological hyperarousal (hypervigilance, insomnia, and behavioral problems).^{xxv} Mental health issues make it difficult for young people to stay on an educational and career path leading to economic security.^{xxvi} Exposure to toxic stress can interrupt normal brain development; this has severe long-term consequences for learning, behavior,

and physical and mental health. With fewer family resources to rely on, young men of color need targeted supports that address their mental and behavioral health needs. Improved access to treatment has the potential to improve long-term outcomes for the most highly vulnerable youth and young adults. These youth are often the parents (including noncustodial parents) of young children, and for many of them, prevention of incarceration and/or involvement with juvenile/criminal justice is another potential outcome of effective treatment.

Solution-Centered Policies and Strategies

Take full advantage of Affordable Care Act (ACA) implementation at the federal and state levels to improve health equity and access and expand mental and behavioral services to young men of color. ACA is a game changer for low-income individuals and families, including young men of color because of the coverage expansions, particularly Medicaid expansion, and the mental health benefit package. Additionally, ACA extends coverage to former foster youth until age 26. This stability is critically important because extremely vulnerable youth are likely to be parents of very vulnerable children. In the 30 states and the District of Columbia that have taken the Medicaid expansion, it's important to engage advocates around systems building and implementation to ensure young men of color have access to high-quality, culturally competent treatment without bureaucratic obstacles.

Ensure access to health and behavioral health services through Medicaid. For young people living in or near poverty, the ACA's Medicaid expansion provides the framework for financial access to health, mental health, and substance abuse treatment. Together with strong delivery systems and qualified providers, this framework can significantly improve health outcomes for young men of color. In addition to basic health care, Medicaid can provide access to violence-reduction programs that promote healthy youth development, provide effective preventive services, and support evidence-based treatment, rehabilitation, and transition into the community.^{xxvii} The following recommendations are directed to states to improve services to youth.

Recommendations:

- Every state should enact the ACA Medicaid expansion. Youth advocates should make this a top priority.
- In expansion states, policymakers and advocates should address the most crucial needs for youth of color and their communities, including behavioral health services, and break down barriers to delivering high-quality services.
- Train youth development, workforce, education, child welfare, and Medicaid staff and relevant community partners on Medicaid enrollment, outreach strategies for young men of color, and helping youth and young adults *use* their new health care coverage—not just enroll.
- States should ensure current foster youth are enrolled through automated systems as they age out without having to take action or provide verification. They should implement proactive outreach strategies to identify youth under 26 who have aged out.
- States should take the option to enroll youth who aged out of foster care in another state.
- States should tailor the benefits package to the needs of vulnerable youth, including those aging out of foster care.
- States should adopt 12-month continuous eligibility for Medicaid for children, youth, and adults.

Embed trauma-informed practices into all youth-serving systems to improve health outcomes among young men of color. Research shows a critical need to change the philosophy and culture of how our systems provide services to youth experiencing violence and trauma. All adults who interact with them should be sensitized to signs of post-traumatic stress and trained to respond in beneficial, rather than counterproductive, ways. Ideally, our workforce, child welfare, justice, education, adult education, and other youth-serving systems should all be trauma-informed and work in concert to prioritize vulnerable youth for service, as well as coordinate support.^{xxviii}

Recommendations:

State and local policymakers, in partnership with providers, should:

- Utilize preventive health care approaches that recognize the impact of neighborhood environmental factors on the physical and mental health of males of color, including how those environments can prevent access to health services.
- Use behavioral health screening and assessment tools to identify where and how to intervene with children and youth as soon as trauma occurs.
- Engage training and employment programs infused with trauma-informed supportive services as part of preparing young men for meaningful employment.
- Use rehabilitative options within the juvenile justice system that focus on addressing trauma to divert youth from detention and incarceration.

Promote economic security for youth and young adults. High poverty levels among young adults of color contribute to all the challenges above. Young men of color, who are less frequently custodial parents than young women of color, have less access to safety net programs than other young adults. Many young adults who are poor are working. Of the young adults ages 18 to 24 who were poor in 2013, 45 percent were employed. Young workers are more likely to have low-wage jobs and often struggle to get full-time hours.^{xxix}

Recommendations:

- At the federal level, expand the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) to childless workers under age 25. EITC is one of the United States' most important anti-poverty programs. In 2012, the EITC benefited over 27 million people, lifting 6.6 million (including 3.3 million children) out of poverty.^{xxx} Unfortunately, current EITC policy excludes millions of adult workers without dependents, including young adults. EITC is only accessible to eligible individuals without dependent children if the workers are between ages 25 and 65. This excludes a significant population of low-wage workers struggling to make ends meet. Recent bi-partisan congressional proposals and the president's 2016 budget would lower the eligibility age to 21 and raise the maximum credit. EITC would provide a supplement to low wages. These improvements to the EITC stand to benefit 13.5 million workers, including 2 million African Americans and 3.3 million Latinos.^{xxxi}
- At the state level, ensure job training and opportunities for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs) on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program). In 2016, roughly 1 million of the nation's poorest individuals

(ABAWDs) will be cut off from services, due to the return of a three-month time limit in many areas. Non-elderly, non-disabled adults will be restricted to a total of three months of SNAP benefits in any 36-month period if they are not working or participating in a qualifying work training activity for 20 hours or more per week. Individuals subject to this time limit will lose their nutrition benefits regardless of whether they are seeking employment or have a part-time job for less than 20 hours per week. Over 80 percent of individuals subject to the time limit live in households with incomes below half of the poverty line; 46 percent of those affected are between the ages of 18 and 29.^{xxxii}

Public Investment in Young People: Raising the Bar at all Levels of Government

Arbitrary sequester caps continue to produce anemic federal budgets, inflicting pain on families and preventing future economic growth. Despite increasing need, the core programs on which low-income people depend are flat or shrinking. Proposed congressional funding bills for FY 2016 would continue this trend, making painful cuts to workforce and education programs. Since 2008, Department of Labor Youth Activities funding has decreased by nearly 15 percent. Communities of color have been hit especially hard by disinvestment; youth of color, particularly vulnerable youth, simply don't have the resources they need to succeed.

Recommendations:

- The federal budget's spending levels are based on sequester caps; as a result, even the most modest increases require offsets in other areas. Congress and the president must lift funding caps, so that significant investments can be made in programs that help low-income families.
- Going forward, federal policymakers must explore strategies to increase national investment in vulnerable youth, including young men of color and those disconnected from school and work, and ensure targeting to areas with high needs. Comprehensive investments must be made in the short and long term if we are to keep young people connected and reconnect those who have been pushed out and lost.^{xxxiii}

Conclusion

Young men of color are full of promise; they are intelligent, creative, curious, eager to learn and work, and great communicators. Leaders at all levels must value young men of color, address the implicit biases that promulgate negative stereotypes, and recognize the importance of investment to our economic growth and social vitality. These investments cannot be a one-time infusion of public funds, a single program model, or a time-limited initiative. Resources must be sustained over time and paired with policy reforms as well as leadership and civic engagement. All young people, regardless of zip code, gender, or race/ethnicity, deserve mobility and opportunity. When we rely on short-term fixes to address long-term and historical challenges, we do a disservice to young men's aspirations and our shared dream of a better tomorrow.

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Investing in Young Men of Color as Community Assets

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