

Employment Pathways for Boys and Young Men of Color:

Solutions and Strategies That Can Make a Difference



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Introduction

Employment is an important part of youth development and the successful progression into young adulthood. Young people learn important communication and social skills, and are also exposed to careers, workplace culture, and opportunities to hone problem-solving and interpersonal skills.

Research reinforces the importance of early work experience, especially for poor and low-income youth. Youth employment strategies, including summer jobs, paid internships, and year-round subsidized work experiences, can be linked to a broader approach to address poverty (Schwartz & Leos-Urbel, 2014). Children who are born poor—and are persistently poor—are significantly more likely than those not poor at birth to experience poverty in adulthood, unemployment, and underemployment (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2012). Persistent childhood poverty (living below the federal poverty level for at least half of one’s childhood) is prevalent among Black children (Ratcliffe, 2015). To lift children—particularly children and youth of color—out of poverty, they must have access to work and a career path leading into adulthood.

Beyond eventual economic security and social mobility, there are many short and long-term benefits to youth employment. Employed teens are more likely to graduate high school, and recent research studies suggest that employment during the summer months can prevent involvement in the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Ingmire, 2014). Moreover, employment in the teen years is a significant predictor of successful attachment to the labor market into adulthood. It is also linked to increased earnings in the short-term and later in life (Sum, McLaughlin & Khatiwada, 2006). In fact, older youth have almost a 100% chance of being employed in a given year if they have worked more than 40 weeks in the previous year (Sum, Khatiwada, Trubsky, Ross, McHugh & Palma, 2014).



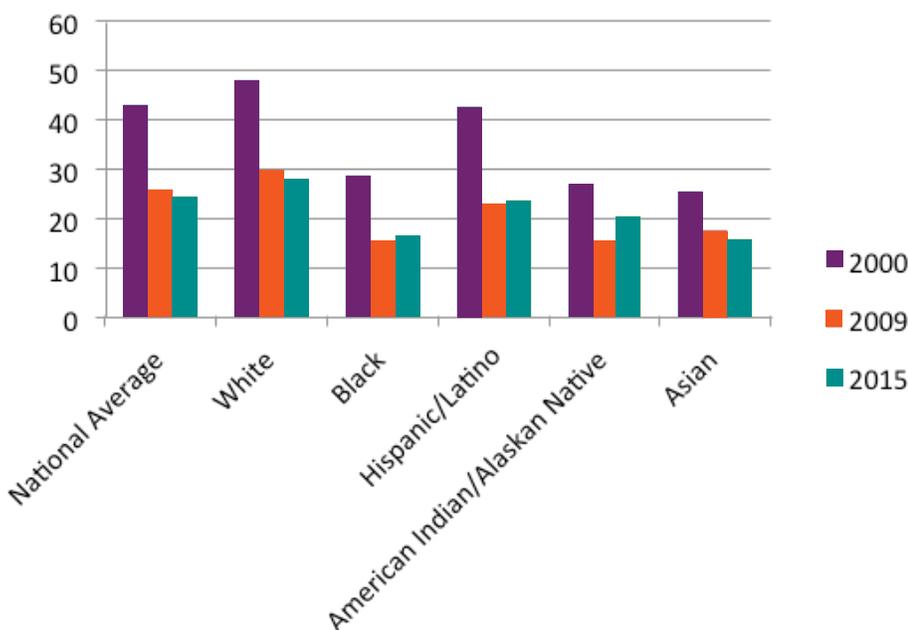
Employment Crisis for Young Men of Color

While all young people are experiencing dramatic declines in employment, young men of color (particularly young Black and American Indian/Alaskan Native men) have been disproportionately affected. Too often, low-income young men of color have very little opportunity to be exposed to various career paths, gain valuable work experience, and build employment history. There are many factors that keep young men of color out of the workforce, including discriminatory hiring practices, poor education, disproportionate incarceration rates, and lack of social contacts to vouch for their employability and connect them to future work opportunities (Spaulding, Lerman, Holzer & Eyster, 2015).

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Employment trends over the last 15 years reveal a steady decline of youth in the workforce and boys and young men of color have been greatly impacted. Last year, just one in five American Indian/Alaskan Native male teens were employed, and numbers are even lower for Black male teens at 16% (which represents a 42% decrease in employment between 2000 and 2015). While employment population rates dropped from 48% to 28% for young white men during this same time period, they are still more likely than American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Black, and Hispanic/Latino male teens to be attached to the labor market (U.S. Census, 2015).

Figure 1. Percent of Males Employed By Race, Ages 16-19



Source: CLASP Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2015

Figure 2.

**Employment Population Rates
for Black Males Ages 16-19**

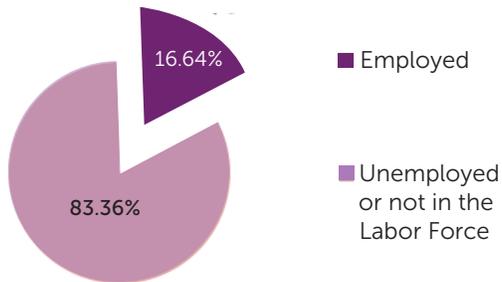
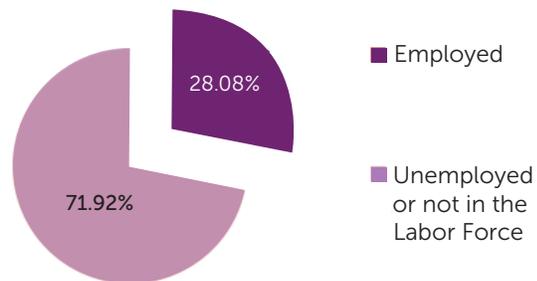


Figure 3.

**Employment Population Rates
for White Males Ages 16-19**

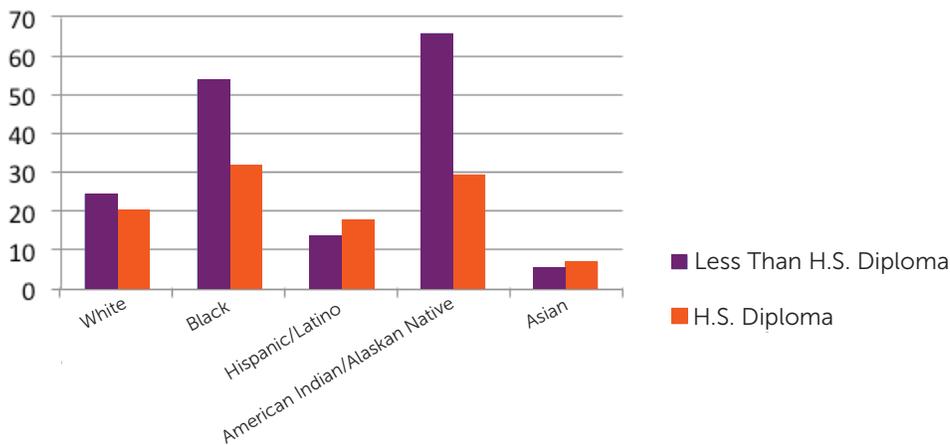


Source: CLASP Analysis of U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2015

For out-of-school youth—especially those without a high school diploma—securing gainful employment is even more difficult. In 2013, there were 5.5 million “opportunity youth,” young people ages 16–24, who are disconnected from school or work (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2015); and the majority of those individuals were young people of color. According to recent research, youth disconnection rates for Blacks (21.6%), Native Americans (20.3%), and Hispanics/Latinos (16.3%) are markedly higher than rates for Asian Americans (7.9%) or whites (11.3%). In nine metro areas, at least one in four Black youth is disconnected from educational systems or the labor market. In ten metro areas, at least one in five Hispanic/Latino youth is disconnected (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2015).

Those without high school diplomas by age 20 are 50% more likely to have inconsistent employment between the ages of 25–30, and 7 times more likely to experience persistent poverty between the ages of 25–30 than those who complete high school (Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2012). More than half of young Black men and nearly two-thirds of young American Indian and Alaskan Native men with less than a high school diploma are unemployed. Earning a high school diploma and improved educational attainment can inoculate against unemployment and increases lifetime earnings. Obtaining a high school diploma cuts the unemployment for young American Indian and Alaskan Native men by more than 50%. The unemployment rate for young Black men with a high school diploma is 40% less than those without.

Figure 4. Unemployment Rates for Out-of-School Males by Race and Education Attainment, Ages 16–24



Source: CLASP Analysis of US Census Bureau American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2010–2014

Young Hispanic/Latino men with low education attainment have lower unemployment rates than Black and American Indian/ Alaskan Native men; however, they are more likely to be underemployed than their white counterparts. “Underemployment” counts the unemployed individuals working part-time who would rather work full-time, as well as “marginalized attached” workers who have abandoned their job search but are still available for work (Catherine Singley Harvey, 2014). Studies reveal that young people who leave school early (prior to high school graduation), do so for financial reasons. This is particularly true for Hispanic/Latino youth. A national survey found that nearly 70% of Hispanic/Latino youth either left school before receiving their high school diploma or decided not to pursue postsecondary education so that they could work and support their families (Scott, Zhang & Koball, 2015).

Factors Contributing to Disconnection from Employment

Overattachment to the Criminal Justice System. Contact with the criminal justice systems plays a prominent role in the diminished employability of young men of color. Discriminatory hiring practices which are biased against people of color and individuals with criminal records make finding legitimate work an uphill battle. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, one in three Black men and one in four Hispanic/Latino men can expect to be incarcerated during their lifetime (Sentencing Project, 2003). American Indian youth are grossly over-represented in state and federal juvenile justice systems; 79% of youth in the Federal Bureau of Prison’s custody are American Indian and Alaska Native (Center for Native American Youth, 2014).

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Geographic and Social Isolation. Job access for urban youth of color is less defined by proximity to the worksite as it is by social isolation and the lack of broad social networks (Heinrich & Holzer, 2010). As a result of income inequality and housing discrimination, young men of color tend to live in low-income, racially segregated neighborhoods. This social isolation exacerbates their job prospects partly by limiting their “social capital” for labor markets (Spaulding, Lerman, Holzer & Eyster, 2015). American Indian young men, especially those living on reservations, experience both geographic and social isolation. Many poor and low-income young men of color do not have the networks and relationships that provide their well-off counterparts with access to job leads, internship opportunities, and the supports needed to navigate seeking and finding work. In interviews and focus groups with young men of color conducted by CLASP, lack of work experience, references, and discrimination were cited as chief barriers to obtaining employment (Bird, 2013).



Systemic Education Inequities and Low Education Attainment. Poor and low-income youth are more likely to attend high-poverty schools with low graduation rates. These schools are inadequately resourced to provide students with the necessary instruction and course work and to prepare them for college, well-paying jobs, and careers. For example, Algebra II is offered in 84% of high-poverty high schools compared with 94% of low-poverty schools. Calculus is offered in 41% of high-poverty schools compared to 86% of low-poverty schools. Physics is offered in 69% of high-poverty schools compared to 90% in low-poverty schools (Bryant, 2015). Further, poor and low-income youth are more likely to attend high schools with inexperienced, underqualified teachers and severe gaps in counselor-student ratios. Additionally, for a variety of factors, including inadequate school and district discipline policies, students of color are more likely be suspended and expelled from school which can “push” youth out of school before they earn their high school diploma.



Unique Challenges Facing Immigrant Youth. Immigrants and English Language Learners are among the fastest growing populations in U.S. public schools. Between 1970– 2000, the number of immigrant children enrolled in kindergarten through 12th grade increased from 6% to 20% (Morse, 2005). Attention to the barriers that immigrant youth face is imperative when considering education/training policies and strategies for boys and young men of color, including first and second generation citizen youth and undocumented youth. These barriers may include language and communication complications and cultural isolation, especially if services are not culturally-competent and sensitive to their needs. Family structure and status also becomes relevant when working with immigrant youth. Fear of deportation for undocumented youth, the parents of citizen youth, and the family members also impacts their ability to fully engage in education, employment, and training services (Bird, 2013).

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Lastly, most federal publicly-funded employment programs are closed to undocumented immigrant youth because of their citizenship and work authorization status. This area is ripe for flexible public and philanthropic investments at the state and local level. The potential impacts to policy and systemic changes would support interventions and programming specifically targeted at immigrant youth, regardless of current citizenship status.

Promising Strategies to Improve Employment Outcomes for Young Men of Color

Public and private investments in youth jobs support young people in amassing a wealth of employment experiences, competencies, references, and social and professional networks. Public policies, programming, and philanthropic investments should support strategies which provide for “early work skills,” skill advancement, and credential attainment in order to help young men of color gain access to work opportunities that would ordinarily be closed to them.

Provide Programming to Help Young Men of Color Master Early Work Skills. As cited in “Soft Skills that Foster Youth Workforce Success: Toward a Consensus Across Fields” (Lippman, Ryberg, Carney & Moore, 2015), the key to youth employment success includes mastery of social skills (respecting others and resolving conflict), communication skills (oral, written, non-verbal, and listening skills), higher-order thinking (problem-solving and critical thinking), self-control (ability to control impulses, direct and focus attention, manage emotions, and regulate behaviors), and positive self-concept (self-confidence, self-efficacy, and having a sense of self-pride). Programs that focus on one or more of these areas bolster the employability of young men of color and contribute to longevity in their roles.

Broker Relationships with Employers to Help Young Men of Color Enter into Employment and Gain Work Experience. Local elected officials (mayors, county executives, and city council leaders), workforce development boards, and community-based partners play a critical role in engaging employers and making the case for investments in youth in general, and young men of color in particular. Through a menu of strategies, stakeholders can provide incentives for private sector involvement and assurances to employers that the young men are adequately prepared and trained for the workplace.



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Implement Traditional and Non-traditional Employment Strategies to Achieve Results for Employers and Youth.

- **Subsidized employment:** This includes a range of employment positions in either the public or private sector. Earnings are provided by an employer who receives a subsidy for short or long-term placement and reimbursement for the wages associated with creating and maintaining the position. Particular models of subsidized employment include transitional jobs that combine work-based income and support services for disadvantaged workers to improve their employability, as well as summer employment programs that focus on helping youth to gain work experience while increasing educational attainment and life skills (Hall, 2015).
- **Summer Jobs:** These are short-term, 6–8 week work experiences in the public and private sector. Younger youth gain early exposure to work and earning a paycheck while older youth, through internships and career-focused jobs, are provided with opportunities to increase their technical and occupational skills and broaden their engagement in the private sector.
- **Tryout employment:** These are short-term entry-level work experiences for young people lacking in workplace skills and/or previous work experience. Time frames and wages/stipends are negotiated with the employer, the workforce system, or community-based organization.
- **Publicly funded on-the-job training:** In the public or private sector, training is provided to a paid employee while he or she is engaged in productive work that provides knowledge and skills essential to adequate performance on the job. Public funds are used to subsidize a portion of the wages during the negotiated period of training with the expectation that the employer will hire participants as regular employees without receiving a subsidy after training is completed (Bird, 2013).
- **Customized training:** Implemented by businesses or qualified training institutions, this strategy is designed to assist businesses in training and hiring new workers and provide participants with specialized skills training for vacant positions (Bird, 2013).



- **Youth Corps:** Youth Corps, inclusive of service and conservation corps, prepares young people for jobs and careers. Youth complete meaningful service projects, gain hands-on work experience, leadership and communication skills, and have the opportunity to earn industry-recognized credentials in a variety of fields.
- **Career Academies:** Students interested in particular careers can take contextualized courses in the classroom coupled with work-based learning opportunities. Their education is then supplemented with summer and year-round employment. In an evaluation of career academies, participants had significantly higher monthly earnings, number of months worked, hours worked per week, and hourly wages than the control group (Heinrich & Holzer, 2010).

Policy Recommendations

Public policy interventions are pivotal in dismantling entrenched discrimination and connecting young men of color to progressive employment experiences, including career exposure and exploration, short and long-term work and career pathways with family-sustaining wages. Yet, despite the obvious needs and proven benefits of youth employment, federal investments in youth employment and training have dramatically declined. Since 2000, funding for youth employment by the U.S. Department of Labor has decreased by 33% in the last fifteen years (Department of Labor, 2015).

Since 2000, funding for youth employment by the U.S. Department of Labor has decreased by nearly 33% in the last fifteen years.

Maximize the Implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to shine a light on the employment crisis facing young men of color and target interventions to serve them. WIOA provides federal funding to states and local workforce areas to provide employment, education, and training services to low-income youth. WIOA implementation presents an opportunity for states and local communities to improve access and quality of these services for low-income young adults and out-of-school youth who are disproportionately young people of color (Belfield, Levin & Rosen, 2012). WIOA requires 75% of Title I Youth formula funds to be spent on employment and training interventions for out-of-school youth. WIOA also requires that at least 20% 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). 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” (Bird, Foster & Ganzglass, 2014).

States and local workforce development boards could better serve out-of-school youth, including young men of color, by:

- Setting service goals, funding benchmarks, and prioritizing this population for workforce services beyond Title I Youth funding (e.g. through governors’ statewide set-aside allocations).
- Implementing 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 workforce development boards to set aside up to 10% of their Title I Adult formula funds to support transitional jobs strategies.
- Making use of the on-the-job training emphasis in WIOA and connecting with employers to encourage utilization of the increased reimbursement rates to participating employers (up to 75% of wages, increased from 50% under the previous law).
- Ensuring that state and local youth employment plans detail how they will support and implement a continuum of services and interventions for the targeted population along a career pathway, including: pre-apprenticeships/apprenticeships and integrated education and training in partnership with adult education providers and postsecondary institutions.
- Leveraging WIOA strategic planning processes to connect to state and local education opportunities. For example, create and strengthen dropout recovery systems and strategies (including reengagement centers) to help young men without a high school credential earn one through the implementation efforts of the newly reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

It is crucial that all stakeholders - city leaders and agencies, nonprofits, private sector and industry employers-be vocal in how these resources are leveraged to support robust work experiences during the summer and beyond.



WIOA also underscores coordination across sectors. For example, noting that partnerships with Departments of Health and Human Services and Housing and Urban Development could serve to strengthen local summer jobs efforts, recent guidance from the U.S. Department of Labor emphasized expanded work experience and encouraged local programs to

coordinate summer employment with other youth-serving agencies (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015, March). It is crucial that all stakeholders—city leaders and agencies, nonprofits, private sector and industry employers—be vocal in how these resources are leveraged to support robust work experiences during the summer and beyond.

Expand and Invest in Ban the Box Policies and Enforcement. Policy vehicles that remove barriers to work based on criminal history and involvement with the criminal justice system—such as “Ban the Box” legislation—can have a positive impact on the employment prospects of young men of color. Federal, state, and local governments should adopt these fair hiring policies and work with the private sector to change their hiring practices. Nationwide, over 100 localities have instituted “Ban the Box” policies to reduce the stigma of incarceration and base employment decisions on applicants’ qualifications. More work is needed to monitor enforcement of these policies and to connect them to system wide workforce and economic development planning.

Target Policies that Support Young Men of Color Who Are Fathers.

Federal and state policy must address child support enforcement. Earlier this year, the Obama Administration proposed new federal child support enforcement regulations issued by the Office of Child Support Enforcement. The proposed rule emphasizes flexibility, efficiency, and modernization and addresses the overuse of jail for child support enforcement and penalizing noncustodial parents that have no capacity to meet their payments. It also offers provisions which could provide a new funding stream for states to implement employment 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 - which disproportionately impact noncustodial parents who are young men of color (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2015). Should the Obama Administration fail to finalize these proposed regulations, it will be imperative for all stakeholders that are invested in the well-being of young men of color who are fathers to ensure that the next administration moves forward with finalizing these rules.

Promote Economic Security for Young Adults. At the federal level, expand the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) to childless workers under age 25. EITC links benefits to earnings and is limited for workers without children and noncustodial parents who work. Unfortunately, EITC is only accessible to eligible individuals without dependent children if the workers are ages 25–65. In 2012, EITC benefited over 27 million people, lifting 6.6 million (including 3.3 million children) out of poverty, and is one of nation’s most important anti-poverty programs (Lee & Barnes, 2014). Bi-partisan proposals would lower the eligibility age to 21 and raise the maximum



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credit, providing needed supplemental income for low-wage workers. These improvements to the EITC stand to benefit 13.5 million workers, including 2 million African-Americans and 3.3 million Hispanics/Latinos (Marr & Huang, 2015).

Community Bright Spots: Connecting Policy to Practice

PowerCorpsPHL (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania): PowerCorpsPHL is a City of Philadelphia AmeriCorps initiative that operates in close partnership with two local non-profits: the Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) and EducationWorks. Every six months, PowerCorpsPHL engages 68 young adults, ages 18–26, in transforming their lives through service. PowerCorpsPHL members are predominately male (82%) and people of color (96% are African-American, 3% Hispanic/Latino and 1% White). Roughly 75% have been involved in the justice system and 20% in the foster care system.

PowerCorpsPHL members provide six months of full-time AmeriCorps service to city departments, tackling pressing environmental challenges by improving stormwater management, increasing tree coverage, and revitalizing public land. Since launching in 2013, PowerCorpsPHL has experienced incredible success. From September, 2013–March, 2015, PowerCorpsPHL members diverted 164 tons of debris from parks and green stormwater infrastructures and planted nearly 3,800 trees. Additionally, they revitalized over 2,900 acres of public land by building trails, restoring creek beds, constructing berms and rain gardens, elevating trees for safety, clearing inlets, refurbishing park benches and playground equipment, and removing invasive plants and debris to allow native plants to thrive.

Equally impressive is the personal and professional transformation that has taken place in PowerCorpsPHL members. Through their service, PowerCorpsPHL members develop technical skills which can be applied to jobs in a variety of industries. Additionally, PowerCorpsPHL members gain essential 21st century workforce skills, including teamwork, leadership, conflict resolution, accountability, time management, and network building. Above all, PowerCorpsPHL members develop radically different community identities, the majority seeing themselves for the first time as leaders, role models, and agents of change. Despite significant personal and systemic barriers to their success, nearly 80% of PowerCorpsPHL members complete their term of AmeriCorps service. To date, the program has graduated five cohorts of opportunity youth, totaling 236 individuals (approximately 25% of whom enrolled in multiple cohorts). Upon completion of their service, each PowerCorpsPHL alumni receives customized support to pursue their education and career goals. Of those, 90% successfully transition to career-track employment, postsecondary education or additional national service.



Project Rise (Kansas City, Missouri): Project Rise is a project of the Full Employment Council (FEC) which reengages youth ages 18–24, who have not worked or attended school in at least six months. Project Rise offers education, paid internships, and case management to young adults who lack a high school credential. Successful completers receiving a high school diploma or high school equivalency will receive a scholarship to attend post-secondary in-demand occupational training. The implementation study found that participants who were attracted more by the educational instruction than by the internship were substantially more engaged with the program. The study also found that most of the men in Project Rise were young men of color. Nearly 66% of Project Rise participants had a prior arrest and 13% had been convicted of a felony. Project Rise activities at FEC also include gender-specific programming, including men’s groups designed to address issues related to identity, fatherhood, communication skills, and pre-internship activities to prepare young men for later internships (Manno, Yang & Bangser, 2015). Participant outcomes include a 48% graduation rate and 50% college enrollment (Full Employment Council, 2016).

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YouthSource System (Los Angeles, California): The Economic & Workforce Development Department funds 13 YouthSource Centers, located in low-income areas across the city that prepare youth and young adults ages 16–24 for college and careers. Program services, targeted to areas of Los Angeles that have the highest dropout rates, are delivered in partnership with the LA Unified School District and community-based organizations. While not exclusively serving young men of color, the YouthSource system prioritizes service to out-of-school youth which are overwhelmingly young men of color. The YouthSource Centers help their participants earn a high school diploma or equivalency, obtain training and subsidized jobs, and assist with the transition to postsecondary education.

Las Artes Arts and Education Center (Pima County, Arizona): Las Artes combines community service arts projects with “earn and learn” strategies to help youth and young adults gain employability skills, academic skills, and to earn their secondary school credential. Students also reap emotional benefits from program components which offer support on a variety of issues ranging from language barriers, to anger management and legal intervention.

Youth UpRising (Oakland, California): Following racial tensions which erupted in violence in East Oakland in 1997, Alameda County and the City of Oakland made an unparalleled investment in East Oakland youth by providing support for the planning of a one-stop health and human services center (Youth UpRising) designed by and for youth. Today, among its many offerings, Youth UpRising provides education and training

to help young people to acquire the necessary skills to increase their competitiveness in the marketplace. The organization prepares youth to transition into the workforce through career exploration in local high-demand local industries, including food manufacturing, data management, and digital media. Youth UpRising is also a community-based partner with the City of Oakland's summer jobs program and provides early work skills training for youth by offering job placements in both the private and public sectors. Through their career and education services, 400 youth are placed into jobs each year and more than 600 young people are provided with comprehensive educational and employment services. YouthUprising reports that a remarkable 84% of summer employment participants enroll and participate in credit recovery/academic activities.

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