



# Investing in Boys and Young Men of Color: The Promise and Opportunity





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## Investing in Boys and Young Men of Color: The Promise and Opportunity

### Foreword

In 2011, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) created the *Forward Promise* initiative within its Vulnerable Populations Portfolio to place a strategic emphasis on the needs of middle school- and high school-aged young men of color. RWJF's goal is to strengthen educational opportunities, pathways to employment, and health outcomes for these young men.

All young people require support on the road to becoming healthy and productive adults, and a young man's path to growing up is likely to involve experimentation and risk-taking as he shapes his masculinity and exerts independence. The data show that for young men of color, those actions—which for other young men might be treated as youthful mistakes—are apt to be judged far more severely and punished with lasting consequences.<sup>1</sup> Helping young men navigate their teenage years successfully is key to helping them reach their full potential.

The barriers they face in their teen years contribute, in part, to the significant challenges that boys and young men of color in the United States face in the areas of education, employment, and health. Young men of color have far worse health outcomes than their white peers.<sup>2</sup> They are also more likely to experience chronic exposure to trauma, which affects adolescent development, and can lead to behavior problems and poor academic performance.<sup>3</sup> They are less likely to graduate from high school and pursue

*Forward Promise is focused on promoting opportunities for the health and success of middle- and high-school-aged young men of color.*



postsecondary education opportunities or to be employed as youth, and they are more likely to face risks that jeopardize their health and success.

In the last several years, there has been greater focus on understanding the challenges facing males of color and identifying potential solutions. While we know more about effective programmatic solutions, we still have much to learn about the systemic barriers that impede the success of males of color. Effecting policy changes in these areas will produce sustainable gains for boys and young men of color.

RWJF worked with the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) to conduct a scan of issues facing boys and young men of color in the areas of education, health, and pathways to employment. We sought to understand both the barriers and opportunities in this work in order to make an informed decision about where to place resources to best influence outcomes for boys and young men of color. This document is a synthesis of the findings from that scan, which RWJF used to refine its strategy for *Forward Promise*.

Going forward, Forward Promise programming will focus on four areas where we believe RWJF's investment can have the greatest impact:

- alternative approaches to harsh school discipline that address behavioral problems without pushing students out of school;
- early interventions that focus on dropout prevention and increasing middle school retention and high school graduation rates;
- mental health-based interventions that tailor approaches to boys and young men who have experienced and/or been exposed to violence and trauma; and
- career training programs that blend workforce and education emphases to ensure that students are college- and career-ready.

As we have talked with other leaders in this arena throughout the process of refining this strategy, however, we have been asked countless times to share the comprehensive results of the scan we embarked upon with CLASP. It is our pleasure to do so with this issue brief, in hopes that all individuals and groups working to advance opportunities for young men of color can identify key entry points for making a difference.

Ultimately, our efforts related to young men of color reflect the Foundation's belief that social factors—our neighborhoods, schools, jobs, income, and so on—have a profound impact on a person's health and well-being. We also believe that these social factors offer opportunities to improve the trajectory of young men of color, especially when they are addressed in an integrated fashion. Our goal is to find effective and practical solutions that are rooted in schools and neighborhoods, that can be replicated in other communities, and that improve the systems and institutions most relevant to boys and young men of color.

Maisha Simmons  
Program Officer  
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation



## Description of the Process

CLASP engaged in several steps to complete this policy scan, including: a review of literature pertaining to boys and young men of color in the areas of education, work, and health; a series of four roundtable discussions with national experts; and online surveys of local practitioners, advocates, and experts; and telephone interviews.

CLASP partnered with researchers and policy experts working on education, employment, and health outcomes for boys and young men of color to develop the roundtable discussions and online surveys. This broadened the pool of scholars and advocates that were engaged in the work. The additional perspective also provided another lens through which to think about boys and young men of color and the policies affecting them.

The work in each of those areas is described below:

### LITERATURE REVIEW

CLASP reviewed documents produced by researchers, national policy and advocacy organizations, professional membership networks, direct service programs, and foundations currently working on issues affecting boys and young men of color. This review led CLASP to identify key issues facing this population in the areas of education, employment, and health. This information helped frame the roundtable discussions.

### ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

CLASP conducted four small-group discussions with nationally recognized experts on the issues facing boys and young men of color. The groups were divided into four topic areas to create more focused conversations and draw on the specific expertise of participants: health, middle school, high school, and out-of-school youth.

Participants were asked to discuss current policies influencing outcomes for boys and young men of color, potential solutions, accessibility of data to make the case for solutions, perceived political will for advancing those solutions, and partnerships that could be created to move solutions forward.

### ONLINE SURVEYS

CLASP partnered with expert researcher Ivory Toldson, Ph.D., to conduct a series of online surveys to further assess policy issues and opportunities for boys and young men of color. The surveys targeted local- and state-level practitioners, professionals working in youth-serving systems, leaders, and advocates. Four surveys were developed, which mirrored the topical areas of the roundtable discussions. More than 500 responses were received from individuals across the United States, the majority of which came from senior leaders in nonprofit organizations serving boys and young men of color.

### TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

Following the completion of the online surveys, CLASP conducted telephone interviews to fill any gaps in the knowledge about policy issues affecting boys and young men of color. Most of the interviews were with experts representing populations that were underrepresented in the survey responses.



## Setting the Stage for Action: Key Challenges Facing Young Men of Color

The path to adulthood can be especially difficult for many middle- and high-school-aged young men of color. They are more likely to grow up in poverty, live in unsafe neighborhoods, and go to under-resourced schools—all of which affect their lifelong health and well-being. What is at stake for America is the possibility of losing an entire generation of productive men who will fall short of their potential, live less healthy lives, and fail to build and strengthen their communities.

The following findings from the focus groups and survey of the field reflect the key risk factors that practitioners, advocates, researchers, and policy experts believe are currently the most pressing for boys and young men of color:

1. Males of color have the highest rates of suspension and expulsion from school. They face more punitive punishments for school infractions and are far more likely to be referred to the juvenile justice system.
2. Middle- and high school-aged males of color exhibit many early warning signs of dropping out of school, and yet fail to receive the services needed to keep them connected to school.
3. High school-aged males of color have limited exposure to career opportunities through work experiences, internships, apprenticeships, and other work-oriented activities.
4. Males of color who are not in school have limited access to mentors, advocates, or counselors to help them get back on track with their education and/or employment training.
5. Males of color who are not connected to school lack sufficient options for reengagement in education programs.
6. Males of color often encounter teachers and health care practitioners who lack the cultural competency to work effectively with them.
7. Males of color are disproportionately exposed to violence within their communities.
8. Males of color often lack appropriate access to health care services.

To change the odds for young men of color, it is important that we move beyond looking at risk factors to identifying those opportunity factors that play a critical role in helping young men grow up healthy, get a good education, and find meaningful employment. The remainder of this brief puts forth recommendations and ideas for action emerging from this analysis that are based on: promising programs, policies, and approaches; an evaluation of what works; and the interest that exists in spreading successful models to communities that need them.





## RECOMMENDATIONS

### RECOMMENDATION #1: PROMOTE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE APPROACHES THAT ADDRESS BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS WITHOUT PUSHING STUDENTS OUT OF SCHOOL

Graduating from high school is an important step toward success for a young person. Yet, many young men of color face challenges to staying in school. Harsh, broadly applied school discipline approaches in particular often push these young men out of school, taking them off the path to graduation.

Harsh school discipline policies, sometimes referred to as “zero tolerance” policies, began as an attempt to protect students from drugs, weapons, and violence in schools. There have, however, been unintended consequences. Over time, schools and districts have utilized out-of-school suspension and expulsion for far lesser school infractions and relied more heavily on police presence to maintain order on the school campus.<sup>4</sup>

Male students of color, particularly African-American males, have been disproportionately affected by these issues. They are disciplined more severely for less serious infractions in school. The expulsion rate for African-American males is three times higher than for white males, and the out-of-school suspension rate is two times higher.<sup>5</sup> While Latino male students have lower suspension and expulsion rates, these rates are still disproportionate to their representation in the student population. Rates of school arrest are similarly egregious. Lack of teacher preparation, insufficient training in classroom management and culturally competent practices, and racial stereotyping are cited as primary factors driving this phenomenon.<sup>6</sup>

Students suspended or expelled from school lose valuable educational time. They fall behind in coursework and are not supported to catch up. Frequently suspended students often fall so far behind that they drop out of school. Police presence has led to the increased referral of students to the juvenile justice system for minor school infractions. Harsh school discipline has also been shown to have a negative impact on school climate, and the achievement of all students may be affected.<sup>7</sup>

Districts that have eliminated these so-called zero tolerance policies are beginning to report impressive changes. For example, Baltimore City Public Schools revamped their discipline code in 2008 and have seen a significant reduction in out-of-school suspensions. In 2009-2010, the district suspended 6,547 students, as compared to 26,000 in 2003-2004 school year.<sup>8</sup> There is growing interest in returning to common-sense school discipline, particularly in urban districts where the problem seems most pervasive. There is a need in the field for more successful examples from other communities and greater knowledge of alternative approaches to school discipline.

Replacing zero-tolerance policies with common-sense school discipline will help to keep more of our young men of color in school. This approach to discipline holds students accountable for their actions while avoiding unnecessary suspensions and

*Districts that have eliminated their zero tolerance policies are beginning to report impressive changes.*



expulsions. This will strengthen their chances of graduating and pursuing higher education and/or accessing meaningful employment.

#### IDEAS FOR ACTION

- Engage school district leaders and/or organizations that work directly with schools district leaders to rethink discipline strategies with the goal of improving, rather than simply punishing, behavior. This includes reevaluating the police presence in schools and exploring opportunities to train teachers in such areas as cultural competency and classroom management.
- Develop technical assistance resources that offer schools practical alternatives to harsh suspension and expulsion policies and promote developmentally appropriate ways to improve student behavior and school safety. Share the lessons of schools that have made positive changes and are demonstrating success.
- Support national policy efforts to address the unintended consequences of police in schools and an overreliance on school suspensions and expulsions. Develop and promote common-sense policies that address behavioral problems without pushing young men out of schools and that align with national goals for increasing graduation rates.
- Expand community-based alternatives to juvenile detention such as evening reporting centers, home-based alternative services, and community-based therapy treatment. Specifically, use this strategy to address the disproportionately high rate of young men of color engaged with the justice system.

#### RECOMMENDATION #2: INCREASE THE USE OF DATA TO TARGET INTERVENTIONS TO BOYS OF COLOR AT RISK FOR DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL

Low graduation rates hurt the U.S. both economically and socially. We all pay a price for the academic failure and high rates of high school dropout that are all too common in communities of color. Only about half of African-American, Latino, and Native-American boys graduate from high school on time with their cohort.<sup>9</sup> Although data are difficult to obtain for Asian subgroups, it is known that Asian students from certain countries also struggle with high school dropout, but this is often masked by the aggregation of the data and stereotyping of Asians as high-achieving students.<sup>10</sup>

Dropping out of school is a gradual process—students become mentally disengaged long before they stop showing up in the classroom. Research has demonstrated that there are three primary indicators of future high school dropout: attendance, behavior, and coursework completion.<sup>11</sup> Analysis of these three indicators clearly shows which students are at greatest risk for dropping out of school.

High-minority and high-poverty schools have some of the worst dropout rates in the nation, and are often referred to as “dropout factories.” Several pieces of legislation



have been proposed to identify and target resources to these schools. Tracking the data and putting mechanisms in place to make early interventions based on the data can help get at-risk kids back on track before it is too late. In the last several years, there has been increased emphasis on the identification of dropouts and implementation of services to decrease the dropout rate.

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act presents a significant opportunity to influence this issue by investing resources in dropout prevention. It may also open opportunities to change the accountability system to provide incentives to school districts to keep struggling students engaged in education rather than push them out of school for fear the students will not meet academic standards.

Early intervention to keep kids in school can ultimately help increase graduation rates—and in turn support more of our young people to stay on a path toward healthy and successful lives.

#### **IDEAS FOR ACTION**

- Support districts to create an early warning system using readily available school data to identify boys of color in middle or high school who show early signs of struggle and potential high school dropout.
- Assist schools in the creation of systemic dropout-prevention strategies. Identify successful models and document their work for wide dissemination across school districts and states.
- Advocate for stronger dropout-prevention policies and increased support for dropout-prevention work in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This includes the expansion of current dropout-prevention competitive federal grant programs, greater guidance on the use of data to inform dropout-prevention work in states and districts, incentives to partner with community-based organizations to provide dropout-prevention services, and increased collaboration across youth-serving systems to ensure that the most vulnerable youth receive supports to remain in school.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #3: EXPAND OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG MEN OF COLOR TO WORK, LEARN, AND DEVELOP CAREER-ENHANCING SKILLS**

Boys and young men of color represent an untapped resource in today's economy. These young men comprise a growing segment of the labor force; unfortunately, at the same time, they face historic levels of unemployment and idleness. With only 19 percent of young African-American and Asian teens, and 21 percent of Latino teens working, most youth of color will likely reach adulthood without the benefit of having worked or of high-quality career experiences to fuel aspirations and build work ethic.<sup>12</sup> We are currently missing an opportunity to fully realize these young men's potential.



Added to this, high levels of teen unemployment and idleness greatly increase involvement in high-risk behaviors, which further undermine employment prospects.

The teen years are formative years for developing skills that will enhance participation in the workforce. These are also the years for career exploration and exposure to various industries, occupations, and workplaces. Early work experience positively correlates with future employment success and earnings. A lack of access to jobs during this critical developmental period will have an impact on the earning capacity of young men well into adulthood.

Increasingly, jobs with good wages and advancement opportunities require postsecondary credentials and an employable skill set. Given low high school graduation rates for African-American and Latino males and their relatively low postsecondary matriculation rates, many will be locked out of the high-wage employment market unless new career pathways are built that blend academic skill development with work experience, internships, apprenticeships, and career preparation.<sup>13</sup>

Racism and discriminatory practices still substantially limit access to labor market opportunities for young men of color, and the formal and informal networks are not in place to help young men of color navigate employment environments that are sometimes unwelcoming. Some employers' stereotypical misperceptions of young men of color preclude access to jobs for even those with the credentials and talent.

Young men of color are more likely to have spent time in the juvenile justice system in part because of factors outside of their control: attending schools with harsh disciplinary policies, growing up in communities without after-school programs or other resources that keep kids out of trouble, and being exposed to violence at an early age. The very fact that these young men may have on their record a history of engagement with the juvenile justice system creates a barrier to employment.

For example, the Alameda County Department of Health set up a program to train and employ young men of color for careers in emergency medical services. The program was designed in part to give young men in the juvenile justice system a viable career path. They discovered that having a record made it difficult for even the best trainees to get jobs. The Alameda County Chief of Probation is currently advocating for a new statewide policy that would allow young people who have previously been involved with the juvenile justice system to apply for government jobs.

Addressing the real barriers to employment faced by young men of color must be part of any program or policy that expands their employment or career-enhancing opportunities. Bringing these young people fully into the labor force will allow our economy to benefit from their skills and potential.

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## IDEAS FOR ACTION

- Target resources to communities with high youth unemployment rates that have created a youth employment infrastructure to expand work-based opportunities, including work experience, internships, apprenticeships, transitional jobs, community service, and on-the-job training. Assist communities in blending their workforce, education, and career-technology resources to provide career training and work experience options for youth who have been disconnected from school.
- Provide incentives to increase employer engagement in the development of pipelines and trial employment activities to expose in-school and out-of-school youth to careers and emerging opportunities.
- Provide support to organizations working to broker greater access to labor market opportunities for minorities as a result of community or regional economic development.
- Support efforts that will help youth involved with the justice system to successfully access and navigate the labor market.
- Provide incentives to leadership in the local workforce system to prioritize creating paths to work opportunities for young men of color that offer higher wages and a meaningful career trajectory.

## RECOMMENDATION #4: ELEVATE THE IMPORTANCE OF A “CARING ADULT” IN POLICY AND PROGRAMMATIC EFFORTS TO RE-ENGAGE OUT-OF-SCHOOL MALES

Young people don’t grow up accidentally. They require support from their families and society on the road to becoming healthy and productive adults.

Currently, there is no one system responsible for helping young people who have fallen off track to navigate back to school and access employment and training. As a result, many youth fall through the cracks and spend immeasurable time being idle. Across all racial and ethnic groups, the literature emphasizes the significance of having supportive environments and relationships, and the existence of a caring adult to facilitate positive transitions into adulthood. Moreover, in examining support structures and relationships among males of color, numerous studies suggest that Southeast-Asian-American, Native-American, African-American, and Latino students all suffer from living in environments that provide limited access to community resources and formal support systems.<sup>14</sup>

Out-of-school males of color often interface with multiple public systems and community-based organizations, ranging from the juvenile or adult criminal justice system to child welfare system. These systems, however, often fail to connect young men to resources and information about available educational and employment options. A successful youth employment delivery system in communities must have a well-trained case management function that partners with other public systems. The case manager is responsible for engaging youth by identifying and meeting needs in the areas of education, employment, basic skills, and wraparound supports. The importance of this role cannot be overstated.<sup>15</sup> This point was further reinforced in survey research

*Elevate the importance of a ‘caring adult’ in policy and programmatic efforts to reengage out-of-school males.*



and lessons learned from the Department of Labor’s Youth Opportunity Grant Program,<sup>16</sup> in which young males of color cited the importance of “case managers or teachers” as the single most helpful element of their experience reenrolling in an educational program.<sup>17</sup>

Surveys give us valuable insight into where we need to make improvements in the system. Scaling up investments in programs that support the role of these “caring adults” can help put young people back on the path to leading healthy and successful lives. Strengthening overall case management can also increase the effectiveness of other individual programs and resources aimed at improving education, employment, and health.

#### IDEAS FOR ACTION

- Support national and local policy efforts designed to create cross-system approaches to dropout recovery and reengagement programming and that emphasize the importance of a “case management” function to assist youth in navigating social, education, and employment options.
- Provide technical assistance and professional development activities to professionals who work with youth in a variety of fields (such as alternative and traditional education, juvenile justice, employment and training, and youth development) to support their practice with and understanding of working with males of color, the unique challenges facing out-of-school youth, and the role of caring adult advocates critical to the success of these young men.
- Identify and fund culture-specific mentoring initiatives that have a proven track record of serving males of color and have strong linkages to local education reform and collaborative youth employment efforts.

#### RECOMMENDATION #5: PROVIDE OPTIONS FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL MALES TO ATTAIN A SECONDARY CREDENTIAL WITH PATHWAYS TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

A good education can come in multiple forms, and for students who may not have had the opportunity to succeed in school the first time around, getting a second chance can make all the difference. Today, students of color, especially those living in high-poverty urban and rural communities, face overwhelming odds to successfully completing high school. They also face additional challenges when they go back to complete their education.

The U.S. Department of Education estimates the “event dropout rate”<sup>a</sup> of students living in low-income families is 4.5 times greater than the rate of their peers from high-income families.<sup>18</sup> Males of color are more likely to drop out than their female peers. Latino males have the highest annual dropout rate at 22 percent, followed by American

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<sup>a</sup> “Event dropout rate” measures the proportion of students who drop out in a single year without completing high school.



Indian/Alaska Natives at 17 percent, and African-Americans at 12 percent, as compared to 7 percent for white males.<sup>19</sup> Over the course of four years, less than half of African-American males who begin ninth grade actually graduate.<sup>20</sup>

The White House Council on Community Solutions notes there are 6.7 million American youth ages 16 to 24 who are neither employed nor enrolled in school. Just 63 and 68 percent of African-American and Latino out-of-school youth, respectively, have earned a high school diploma by age 28, as compared to 79 percent of white out-of-school youth and 92 percent of all youth in the same age cohort.<sup>21</sup>

Many young people who have dropped out of school are determined to return and complete their education. However, they often face obstacles to school reengagement.<sup>22</sup> The GED is a critical education option for this population that can lead to positive employment and opportunities to pursue postsecondary education and training.<sup>23</sup>

Communities with progressive recovery policies and programming can and do help young adults complete their education and get back on track. Those programs that work should be expanded and replicated to help these students fulfill their visions for the future.

#### IDEAS FOR ACTION

- Support national policy efforts to provide incentives to districts to recover and further the education of high school dropouts. Implement four-, five-, and six-year cohort graduation rates so that districts can accurately account for students who return to school and complete their education.
- Support state- and district-level activities to plan for and fund dropout-recovery efforts, and advocate for cross-agency efforts to support the reengagement of males of color in education.
- Target resources to local cross-system approaches that engage youth-serving agencies and organizations in the research, planning, funding, and implementation of appropriate school and work interventions for out-of-school males.
- Invest in states and localities to provide flexible schooling options for older students. Examples may include non-traditional school hours that enable students to attend school around their work schedules; school-work partnerships where students can earn school credit for relevant employment activities; competency-based education that assesses the knowledge of the student instead of the number of hours they attend class; concurrent enrollment in high school and community college; or career/technical education that trains students in a skill or career that will enable them to immediately enter the workforce.
- Scale up local programmatic approaches that have a demonstrated track record for out-of-school males within the context of a broader comprehensive local strategy. Several communities with large minority populations have adopted sound programmatic approaches that feature strengths such as effective case management,

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wraparound supports, and partnerships with other systems to provide needed services.<sup>24</sup>

**RECOMMENDATION #6:  
INCREASE THE CULTURAL COMPETENCY OF HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AND  
EDUCATORS WHO WORK WITH BOYS AND YOUNG MEN OF COLOR**

Young people are not a monolithic population. It is important that teachers and health workers understand the roles of race, ethnicity, and gender in the context of educating young men or color or meeting their health needs. In addition, if these young men also come from unstable families, experience severe poverty, or are exposed to violence in their communities, those factors shape their attitudes and behaviors in profound ways that influence how they learn and view their own health. Adolescent young men in particular are also more likely to experiment and take risks as part of a normal process of growing up. Educators and health professionals who understand the impact of these experiences will be better able to help young men of color thrive in school and in life.

Unfortunately, the fields of education and health suffer from a dearth of culturally competent teachers and health professionals to serve special populations such as males of color, immigrants, and gay, bisexual, and transgender people. To effectively work with diverse populations, educators and health professionals must understand the unique cultural, language, and health issues affecting these groups.

Cultural competency is crucial to closing disparities in health and education. Services that are respectful of and responsive to the beliefs, practices, and cultural and linguistic needs of diverse communities are needed to help bring about positive outcomes.<sup>25</sup> Communities and their education and health care systems must be able to address the needs of their diverse populations without cultural differences hindering the conversation and delivery of services.<sup>26</sup>

Lack of cultural competency often is discussed in two ways: the lack of diversity among educators and health professionals; and the lack of consistent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable individuals to effectively work in the cross-cultural situations commonly encountered in these fields. There is a widely held belief in communities of color that people would receive better care from teachers and health care providers who look like them. For example, the presence of male teachers of color has important social and emotional effects on their male students. The unfortunate reality, however, is that there are too few males of color in the college pipeline to fill this void in the immediate future.<sup>27</sup> Thus, there are two matters requiring solutions: the longer-term goal of increasing the number of males of color in these professions, and the more immediate goal of increasing the cultural competency of all professionals in these sectors to more effectively work with and care for boys and young men of color.

As a nation, we are already spending significant resources to educate young men of color and to keep them healthy. Increasing the cultural competency of our educators and health workers to more effectively serve this population will make their existing efforts more relevant and more effective.



### IDEAS FOR ACTION

- Expand education and career pathways to connect low-income male students of color to teaching and health professions. Create partnerships with two- and four-year colleges to create a pipeline from high school to college in these professions and provide supportive services to ensure student success.
- Work with national policy and advocacy organizations to ensure that the policies within the Affordable Care Act related to cultural competency and diversity are implemented thoroughly.
- Expand the pool of continuing education providers that currently serve in the education and health fields to include those with experience in addressing issues of cultural competency.
- Develop strong curricula in graduate school programs and professional organizations to enhance the cultural competency of both teachers and health professionals.

### RECOMMENDATION #7: CHANGE THE PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE OF HOW YOUTH SYSTEMS PROVIDE SERVICES TO YOUTH EXPERIENCING VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA

Recent advances in neuroscience, molecular biology, and genomics have given us a much clearer understanding of how formative experiences during early childhood and adolescence have a lasting impact on health and well-being. Healthy development during these stages provides the building blocks for achievement in school, work, and life. Conversely, exposure to toxic stress—from extreme poverty, neglect, or abuse, for example—can interrupt normal brain development with long-term consequences for learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health.<sup>28</sup>

The more that interventions and systems help to prevent and heal trauma rather than simply masking or reinforcing its effects, the more effective they will be.

Communities of color, particularly those in high-poverty environments, often face steep rates of violence and trauma. The number of young people who are perpetrators or victims of, or witnesses to, violent and traumatic events in their communities is alarming. These communities often do not have the infrastructure and capacity to deal with this issue in a comprehensive manner. They lack comprehensive violence-reduction strategies that consider the impacts of poverty, unemployment, and other factors.

In addition, too few positive interventions are in place to support youth of color affected by violence and trauma. When youth display attitudes and behaviors typical for a traumatized individual, their behaviors are not recognized as signs of trauma. As a result, adults are not implementing interventions to help heal the trauma. For example, if a young man is a non-critical victim of a gunshot wound, professionals will often treat his physical injury without addressing any mental or emotional needs. In contrast,

*Change the philosophy and culture of how youth systems provide services to youth experiencing violence and trauma.*



a woman who is a victim of domestic violence is often connected to a set of support systems that address her physical safety as well as emotional well-being.

Too often, society relies on bluntly punitive measures to respond to aggressive or high-risk behavior that has its roots in trauma, thereby exacerbating the problem. Policies like suspension, expulsion, and the presence of police in schools, for example, tend to reinforce the feelings of mistrust, hopelessness, and isolation that are commonly attributed to trauma. Moreover, the ways in which young men of color are typically characterized in the media and treated by those working in social service systems contribute to a lack of empathy for young men of color among broad segments of the public. Thus, it is sometimes difficult to garner support for more developmentally appropriate, less punitive interventions.

Youth living in distressed communities are significantly affected by the traumas they experience in their surrounding environments. Traumatic stress negatively influences their social and emotional development, school attendance and academic achievement, and ability to be hopeful about their futures. This sense of hopelessness can often lead to irresponsible or risky behaviors. Many of these young people are also themselves engaged with youth systems, such as child welfare or juvenile justice. These systems' responses to the perceived apathy or anger in these youth is often not one that promotes healing or aspiration. Rather, the punishments that youth face in these settings fail to acknowledge the traumas that underlie their actions, thereby missing an opportunity to integrate a healing component into treatment. The trauma-informed care approach, in contrast, acknowledges that trauma has happened and seeks to implement services in a manner that does not re-traumatize individuals.

Behavioral problems and chronic school absence are urgent problems in communities of color and are often precursors to academic failure, dropping out, social disconnection, and exposure to violence. Since high-school dropouts are over-represented among juvenile and adult violent offenders, increasing school attendance and addressing behavioral problems directly promotes the goal of preventing violence.

There are practical instructional and mental health-based interventions that effectively address these issues for both targeted students with identified behavioral challenges and for the broader student population.<sup>29</sup> Interventions that understand and address underlying trauma are beginning to gain traction around the country. We need more research, development, and deployment of such programs to ensure that every young man who has suffered the effects of traumatic stress has an opportunity to be well and succeed.

#### **IDEAS FOR ACTION**

- Reform policies in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems to make trauma-informed care a key tenet of their work with youth. Policies should recognize the presence of trauma symptoms, acknowledge the role that trauma plays, and identify less punitive methods for dealing with youth in these systems.



- Provide training on trauma-informed care to juvenile judges, attorneys, staff in social service systems, and school leaders. Engage professional associations to maximize reach and accessibility. Ensure that issues of cultural awareness, family preservation, and sensitivity to sexual orientation and gender identity are incorporated.
- Create an effective system to respond to the mental health issues of juveniles who come in contact with the justice system. Screening for mental health issues must use instruments that are culturally competent and responsive to gender. Developmentally appropriate, community-based therapies should be prioritized.
- Identify and elevate school-based strategies that effectively address the mental health needs of youth living in distressed communities. Expand the capacity of schools to intervene when students witness or experience trauma and violence in their homes or communities.

**RECOMMENDATION #8:  
INCREASE ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE SERVICES FOR BOYS AND YOUNG MEN OF COLOR**

Unfortunately, boys and young men of color do not access health care services at the same rate as their white peers. This is an even more pervasive problem among low-income boys and young men, who may be less likely to have health care coverage. This is due, in part, to a lack of awareness among parents that their children are eligible for coverage. There are currently about 4.3 million children eligible for public programs that lack health services in the United States.<sup>30</sup> Texas, California, and Florida—states with very high populations of people of color—account for 40 percent of eligible children that are not enrolled.<sup>31</sup>

Proximity of services is another significant barrier. In rural areas, health services are often very far away and cannot be accessed readily. In urban areas, transportation may be a challenge despite health services being relatively more accessible. Parents may not have the flexibility with employers to get time off to take children and youth to appointments, particularly if providers are not centrally located.

Gay, bisexual, and transgender (GBT) boys and young men of color face unique health barriers. They are more likely to contend with significant mental health issues as a result of the prejudice and discrimination they experience based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Many are not accepted by their families and communities and, as a result, become homeless, which has major implications for their physical and mental health. Their unstable housing situations often lead to involvement in prostitution, which increases the likelihood they are exposed to disease. There is insufficient policy work happening to address the health needs of GBT young men.

There is, however, a great deal of work happening nationally and at the state level to ensure greater access to health insurance. Less is known about efforts to ensure that boys and young men of color specifically are getting the medical care they need. These two areas must be addressed jointly.



#### IDEAS FOR ACTION

- Increase the number of schools offering comprehensive health services within their buildings. Models exist for school-based health centers that offer services to address physical health, mental health, dental care, health promotion, and sexual and reproductive health.
- Encourage “no wrong door” outreach, enrollment, retention, and utilization efforts targeted to low-income and low-wealth communities. Such approaches help youth connect to health services through any system or agency with which they interface, regardless of whether it is health- or education-focused.
- Support the Department of Health and Human Services’ “Connecting Kids to Coverage Challenge” aimed at identifying and enrolling children who are eligible for Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Advocacy efforts should ensure there is targeted identification of eligible boys and young men of color and their families.
- Support state-level efforts to improve the policies, practices, and systems that apply to enrollment and utilization of health care and other resources. This includes connecting individuals and families to a bundle of public benefits, including nutrition and income security; and providing the services that families need to thrive economically.



## Factors for Consideration

Roundtable and survey participants were asked to discuss a number of critical questions: challenges to policy reform work, impressions of the will of public officials and policy leaders to make change nationally and locally, and the accessibility of data to quantify the issues facing boys and men of color and to build public will for interventions. The participants identified eight underlying issues that can impede the effectiveness of efforts for boys and young men of color:

1. Racism and lack of understanding as a very real barrier to policy change
2. Dearth of political leadership on issues facing communities of color
3. Insufficient support for community activism
4. Lack of collaboration among youth-serving systems
5. Inadequate public funding to low-income, high-minority communities
6. Scarce attention paid to issues of boys and young men of color in suburban and rural environments
7. Uneven access to data for certain communities of color
8. Ineffective use of data to reform policies and practices for boys and young men of color

To be successful in any work for this population, the issues need to be addressed proactively and intentionally. Doing so will maximize our efforts to ensure boys and young men of color are leading more healthy and productive lives. To address these issues, we recommend the following actions:

- **Acknowledge and discuss the role racism plays as a barrier to policy change.** The United States remains a nation divided on the issue of race. Boys and young men of color have unequal access good schools, good jobs, and good health services, which has significant implications for their health and ability to thrive. Lack of understanding of the historical and ongoing institutional barriers that perpetually block communities of color from opportunity creates a charged environment that can inhibit positive changes in policy and practice. Creating opportunities for frank discussion builds understanding and engenders trust upon which we can build. Addressing and removing those systemic barriers is critical to the success of this work.
- **Identify and support political leaders willing to champion issues facing communities of color.** At all levels, there are too few political or government leaders willing to stand up and speak explicitly about the needs of males of color, or to implement policies that target services to this population. We need to work with political leaders to increase their voice on issues for males of color. By working in partnership with political leaders and identifying specific ways to be supportive of their efforts, we can assist them in being more outspoken for males of color.
- **Develop stronger community organizing and activism efforts.** There are many individual organizations in communities interested in or working on this issue, but there are few communities with an organized grassroots effort aimed at improving conditions for males of color. Parents and youth, in particular, need to be directly involved in community organizing that affects them. More, and more effective, community advocacy can help turn up the pressure on policy leaders to take constructive action. Communities need increased capacity to organize and be effective advocates for solutions for boys and young men of color. Ultimately, solutions that are grounded in the community are more effective and sustainable because they are more likely to address the real needs of the community.



- **Increase the level of formal collaboration among youth-serving systems.** Boys and young men color, particularly those in poverty, are often served by multiple systems, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, child welfare, public health, or juvenile justice. Each system has its own priorities, programs, and outcomes. There is a great deal of overlap in their respective services; yet, the communication and collaboration among systems is lacking. It is a struggle to change major systems, but there must be an effort to engage them in streamlining and coordinating efforts for the benefit of boys and young men of color.
- **Increase public funding to targeted programs in low-income communities to address the issues of boys and young men of color.** Most youth-serving systems are severely underfunded to meet the service needs of boys and young men of color. In high-poverty communities, the needs of youth of color are far greater than the funding allocated to serve them. Lack of funding, however, should not be used as an excuse for inaction. There are many cost-effective policy reforms that can be implemented, and systems can find ways to share resources while working to increase the dollars allocated to them. There are several examples of effective targeted programs in these communities that can be scaled up and replicated to achieve positive results for boys and young men of color.
- **Consider the needs of boys and young men of color from all geographic settings—urban centers, suburban environments, and rural areas.** Suburban and rural areas are facing increased poverty, immigration, and migration from cities. As a result, non-urban areas are experiencing struggles similar to those found in cities. Issues of employment and transportation become particularly critical in suburban and rural communities because they often lack the public transportation infrastructure of cities. The plight of boys and young men of color in those non-urban areas is often more easily masked because the population is less concentrated. Solutions in this work will need to reflect differences in where boys and young men of color live.
- **Increase access to data that are appropriately disaggregated to paint a clearer picture of needs and assets.** Public access to education, employment, and health data that are disaggregated by race, gender, and age is increasing, but still has a ways to go. In addition, data for Asian-American and Native-American populations are sorely lacking. For Asian-American youth, the aggregation of all countries under a single category is misleading. Many studies place Native-Americans in a general “other” category that captures many small ethnic groups. Greater public will and regulatory mandates are needed to increase the amount of disaggregation that is done, and to make this data available in a user-friendly format for public use.
- **Maximize the use of data to inform programmatic and policy improvements for boys and young men of color.** There is a great deal of outcomes data collected from multiple agencies or systems that are not disaggregated by race and gender for public use. Without this level of analysis, it is difficult to make the case for changes to increase the effectiveness of programs or policies. Decisions being made about funding priorities or agency goals should also be driven by an analysis of demographic and outcomes data that are disaggregated by multiple variables such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status.



## Conclusion

The needs of boys and young men of color are very complex; yet meaningful and sustainable change is possible. The recommendations in this document represent the ideas and energy of hundreds of advocates, practitioners, researchers, and policy experts as they reflect on the most pressing issues currently facing boys and young men of color. They do not represent the full breadth of issues to be grappled with for the success of this population, but this analysis represents a strong starting point for the work.

Engaging in this work to forge stronger pathways to education, employment, and health for boys and men of color holds great promise. The needs are tremendous, but there are clear openings where philanthropy can make a significant difference and help advance policies that currently block the road to success for boys and young men of color.



Opportunities exist at the national, state, and local levels to shape both policy and practice in powerful ways. National organizations, state leaders, local systems, community-based organizations, and advocates all play a unique role as the torchbearers for boys and young men of color. There is much to be done in the realm of legislation and regulatory reform, in the reframing of social service systems to be explicitly supportive of boys and young men of color, and in programmatic efforts on the ground that are geared toward youth of color.

Many foundations already are making investments to influence particular issues such as health, juvenile justice, or education. Building on existing work to specifically focus on strengthening the future for males of color and their communities is a sound next step. For foundations with a specific emphasis on boys and young men of color, an increased understanding of the issues and policies undergirding many of the programmatic strategies that are funded will increase their impact and effectiveness. Networking and sharing perspectives will strengthen the work of philanthropy in this area. This is an optimal time for philanthropy to take bold steps to grapple with one of the major issues of our nation—the future and success of boys and young men of color. Strengthening their ability to get a good education, have meaningful employment, and live healthy, productive lives will strengthen our entire nation.

America's prosperity depends on giving every young person a fair chance to thrive and succeed. We are moving forward the promise we have made to our young men, who represent the nation's future. The strength of our society depends on whether young men of color have the opportunity to become healthy adults who contribute to their communities and society.



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