



# New York City's Young Men's Initiative

## Status Report and Future Directions

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The New York City (NYC) Young Men's Initiative (YMI), launched by Mayor Michael Bloomberg in 2011, was founded in response to the large inequities between Black and Latino young men and their peers in health, developmental, and economic outcomes. Its original purpose was to connect Black and Latino men from 16 to 24 years of age to the tools they need to succeed. The current iteration of YMI, called YMI 2.0, aims to serve all boys and young men of color (BYMOC), not just Black and Latino young men, as well as younger boys and young women. The public-private partnership that supports YMI comprises an annual investment of NYC tax levies of \$22 million (increased to \$27 million for fiscal year 2016) as well as a three-year private investment of \$60 million from Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Open Society Foundation that began in 2012. YMI, which is associated with over 40 program and policy initiatives, was one of the inspirations and models for the federal My Brother's Keeper Community Challenge.<sup>1</sup>

YMI is currently led by three full-time staff members, who report to Deputy Mayor Richard Buery, and a steering committee called the equity committee. The NYC Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO), an organization within the mayor's office that works with city agencies to implement antipoverty initiatives, has been and remains a key partner with YMI in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of YMI programs. Several existing CEO initiatives were incorporated into YMI and expanded at launch in 2011, and CEO has played a role in the development and execution of most other new YMI programs. CEO is directly responsible for program and budget management of most existing YMI programs.

This document briefly describes what has come to be known as YMI 1.0, a synopsis of its successes and perceived gaps in its programming, and a set of recommendations for YMI going forward (YMI 2.0). The report is based on a review of research literature, a review of YMI's internal documents, attendance at the February 2015 YMI Community Convening, and interviews with over 50 YMI stakeholders, including YMI leaders, advisory board members, executive steering committee members, Mayor's Youth Leadership Council members, community leaders, and other YMI partners.

# YMI 1.0

Table 1 lists all the programs and policy initiatives associated with YMI and their funding sources. Some YMI programs are privately funded, others are funded through city tax levies (CTL), and others are not funded through YMI but are aligned with it. YMI 1.0 had four foci: education, employment, justice, and health. Below, we review some of the most notable successes of YMI 1.0 (as identified by the YMI stakeholders we interviewed) and some of the areas in which YMI could be improved.

**TABLE 1**

**Young Men’s Initiative Programs and Policies with Funding Sources**

Funding source	Education	Health	Justice	Employment
Privately funded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Expanded Success Initiative</li> <li>■ Mentoring for REAL</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ CUNY Fatherhood Academy</li> <li>■ Cure Violence (private and CTL funding)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Riker’s Readmission Reduction: ABLE</li> <li>■ Arches: A Transformative Approach to Mentoring Intervention</li> <li>■ Community Education Pathways to Success</li> </ul>	
City tax levies (CTL)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Mayor’s Youth Leadership Council</li> <li>■ Young Adult Literacy Program</li> <li>■ IMPACT Peer Mentoring in Adult Literacy</li> <li>■ Cornerstone: After-School Mentoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Sex Ed Mandate (TA)</li> <li>■ Teen Health Improvement</li> <li>■ Cure Violence (private and CTL funding)</li> <li>■ Health Education Leadership Program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Advocate, Intervene, Mentor</li> <li>■ NYC Justice Corps</li> <li>■ Justice Community</li> <li>■ Justice Scholars</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Jobs-Plus</li> <li>■ Young Adult Internship Program</li> <li>■ WDC Young Adult Employment Expansion</li> <li>■ Scholars at Work</li> </ul>
Policies or aligned programs (both nonfunded)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Special Education Reforms</li> <li>■ Suspensions</li> <li>■ Accountability/School Progress Reports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Teen-Friendly Clinics</li> <li>■ NYC Dads: The Mayor’s Fatherhood Initiative</li> <li>■ Explanation of Benefits</li> <li>■ Family Planning Benefit Program Access Initiative</li> <li>■ Adolescent Preventive Services Program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Executive Order 151: Consideration of Criminal Convictions in Hiring DCAS (Ban the Box)</li> <li>■ Removing Obstacles/RAP Sheet Clean-Up</li> <li>■ Juvenile Justice Reforms/ Realignment</li> <li>■ Neighborhood Opportunity Networks</li> <li>■ Every Child Has an Opportunity to Excel and Succeed</li> <li>■ Pathways to Excellence, Achievement and Knowledge</li> <li>■ Individualized Correction Achievement Network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Executive Order 150: Helping New Yorkers Access Identification</li> <li>■ LEAP</li> <li>■ DigitalWork NYC</li> <li>■ LIFT (Low-Income Fast Track)</li> </ul>

Source: Communication with the New York City Center for Economic Opportunity.

## Successes

A common response to questions about the successes of YMI 1.0 was that its most important achievement was highlighting the inequities between BYMOC and their peers as an issue. By establishing YMI, the city announced that reversing the differential outcomes experienced by these young men and their peers was a public policy priority. YMI accomplished this in many ways, but Mayor Michael Bloomberg's strong support of YMI was an important component of YMI's success in putting a spotlight on the importance of these inequities in the city. Stakeholders were aware and proud of the fact that YMI served as a model for President Obama's national My Brother's Keeper initiative. They also attribute growing conversations around implicit bias and structural racism, in part, to YMI.

Almost all stakeholders agreed that justice is the issue for which YMI 1.0 was most successful. Our interviewees gave accolades to several YMI-aligned policy changes related to justice. Among them were Close to Home, an initiative that works to keep juvenile offenders from NYC in settings administered by the city so they remain closer to their families while they receive services and support. Associated with Close to Home is the YMI-aligned Neighborhood Opportunity Network, a network of community organizations, government agencies, local businesses, and community residents focused on connecting probation clients who live in target neighborhoods to opportunities, resources, and services. Arches—a group mentoring program for young adult probation clients ages 16 to 24—was singled out as a successful program. In addition, the justice programming was held up as a good example of the interagency coordination YMI aims for. People admired the fact that although the Department of Probation led the justice efforts, other agencies (e.g., the Administration for Children's Services) and organizations (e.g., City University of New York) were also involved.

Many YMI programs use mentoring as a tactic. This practice was widely lauded by the stakeholders with whom we spoke and particularly by the people who attended the convening. The most important theme that emerged in discussing mentoring was the idea of a "credible messenger." That is, mentors can be most effective when they share common characteristics with their mentees; they should "look like them," be male, be from the same or similar communities, and have gone through similar experiences as the young men.

## Lessons Learned from YMI 1.0

In addition to its many successes, YMI 1.0 also experienced challenges that highlight lessons to carry into the ongoing design on YMI 2.0. Many stakeholders lamented the fact that communication to the public at large about YMI—most particularly to the BYMOC who are its focus—has been inadequate. A number of interviewees asserted that BYMOC in neighborhoods where YMI 1.0 programming took place have probably not heard of YMI.

As a result of both a lawsuit and new policies under Mayor de Blasio and Police Commissioner Bratton, the use of the policing strategy known as stop and frisk has been greatly reduced in New York City from approximately 700,000 stops in 2011 to 47,000 stops in 2015.<sup>2</sup> Significant new investments have been made to improve police–community relations. Nevertheless, YMI stakeholders continue to express concerns about the impacts of a legacy of distrust between police and BYMOC. With the advent of the new administration and the additional investments in community policing, many of these same stakeholders see

this as an opportune time for YMI to forge deeper and more lasting relationships with the New York City Police Department (NYPD).

Stakeholders strongly agreed that health was the domain in which YMI 1.0 programming was weakest, and many discussed the need for mental health programming. In addition to concern about young men who are suffering from mental health problems, many stakeholders spoke at length about the challenge teachers and other school staff face in poor neighborhoods because of the large percentage of students struggling with adverse experiences and trauma. Participants in the YMI convening and the youth in our focus groups spoke of the distraction from gangs and drug sales that face young men as they travel to school, and even within schools.

Stakeholders also expressed confusion about YMI's structure and frustration with the varying levels of engagement among key stakeholders and community partners. Generally, stakeholders felt that, with the important exception of NYPD, the right city agencies were involved. But there was widespread belief that YMI needed continuous input and consultancy with actors outside city government. We heard that community-based organizations (CBOs), both large and small, did not have sufficient input into YMI processes and decisionmaking. Several respondents singled out the faith community as a constituency that was not as involved as it should be. Many interviewees believed employers, particularly the largest employers in NYC, were not being consulted about or involved with YMI. These interviewees were also concerned that YMI programs, as well as workforce development for Black and Latino young men in general, were not being conducted in light of the specific competencies and skills NYC employers expect in their entry-level workers.

The past role of the advisory board was also given negative reviews. Members of the advisory board are unhappy that the board did not have a consultative role and that they merely received information, rather than being truly advisory, even when they hold expertise they believe would be useful for shaping YMI programs. There is resentment among the stakeholders about perceived poor treatment of the advisory board under YMI 1.0, including a sense that YMI did not adequately draw upon the advice and expertise of the board members and that members were insufficiently informed of YMI activities and outcomes.

## YMI 2.0

The evolution of YMI from 1.0 to 2.0 was spearheaded by an executive steering committee consisting of representatives from city agencies who met for the first time in August 2014 and concluded their meetings in December 2014. This committee has now dissolved, and a charter establishing it as the equity committee is in place. The goals of the executive steering committee were to

- assess YMI 1.0's programs and agency policies for BYMOC,
- prioritize new programs and policies that align with the de Blasio administration priorities and the My Brother's Keeper Community Challenge,
- identify new funding for YMI, and
- submit an action plan to the mayor.

In addition to retaining and expanding successful programming from YMI 1.0, YMI 2.0 will align with both the My Brother's Keeper Community Challenge and Mayor de Blasio's priorities with new programming in tutoring for students in kindergarten through second grade, recruiting male teachers of color, and expanded mentoring for high school-aged youth. CEO will lead the implementation and evaluation of YMI programming. YMI will also make police-community relations a priority.

YMI will make equitable outcomes a high priority; this priority will manifest in three ways. First, YMI, in conjunction with the Center for Information for Data Intelligence (CIDI), will produce a disparities report that documents health, developmental, and socioeconomic outcomes for BYMOC compared to white boys and young men and also compared to girls and young women. Second, YMI will lead efforts to both reform policies and practices within NYC agencies that create unintended barriers for BYMOC and ensure a culturally competent workforce. Third, YMI will serve as a resource to NYC government agencies for conducting diversity and equity trainings within agencies.

YMI 2.0 will concentrate its programming resources in six focal neighborhoods—the South Bronx, East Harlem, Southwest and Southeast Queens, the North Shore of Staten Island, Brownsville, and East New York—even though some programs will retain a citywide reach. These neighborhoods were chosen because they are communities with high rates of poverty and large populations of BYMOC experiencing significant disparities across key indicators of social well-being.

## Recommendations

Based on the literature and YMI documents we reviewed and conversations with stakeholders, we have developed six main recommendations for YMI as it develops an action plan for 2016 and beyond.

### **Complete the Disparities Report for Release As Soon As Possible**

YMI has acted strategically in documenting inequities between BYMOC and their peers. They have established a detailed list of indicators from appropriate sources to measure inequities, and they have consulted with CIDI about a coherent process to choose the most significant indicators and present them effectively. It is important for YMI and CIDI to follow through soon on the goal of producing a disparities report. Following CIDI's suggestion to focus on a small number of citywide indicators and a larger number of community-level indicators in YMI's focal neighborhoods would be a good start to completing this work.

### **Continue to Emphasize Equity**

YMI has been very intentional and strategic about how to influence policies affecting BYMOC in NYC. They have adopted the premise that structural racism, embedded in the organizations and institutions within which BYMOC live their lives, impedes their development from birth to adulthood. The implication of that premise is that some existing policies and procedures within city agencies (among other entities) harm BYMOC. YMI invited agencies to conduct policy reviews to identify harmful policies and programs and has established a roadmap to systems change that will guide agencies as they try to change these policies and programs. This roadmap includes a strategic goal of establishing YMI as a resource for agencies and other organizations in NYC as they work to dismantle roadblocks that disproportionately affect BYMOC. For this

goal to be actualized, political will supporting YMI's efforts is necessary. City and agency leaders could assist YMI's efforts in pushing for equitable outcomes by showing their support for these efforts, leading meaningful policy reviews within agencies, and holding staff at all levels accountable for progress toward benchmarks on the path to equity.

## Make and Carry Out a Strategic Plan for YMI Programming

The process YMI used to formulate its programmatic goals is not as clear as the process that informed the work toward the disparities report or the work on equity. We believe YMI could be more intentional in setting its plan for programming in several areas. First, an important part of this planning process should be to consider the vast amount of NYC programming that touches the lives of BYMOC that is not sponsored by YMI. Cataloging non-YMI programming in YMI's six focal neighborhoods could be particularly helpful. Given that YMI does not have the resources to run all needed programming, YMI should develop a careful plan for how to manage the balance between its own programming and supporting other programming that serves BYMOC. YMI's close relationship with CEO will facilitate this process.

Second, YMI should take a thoughtful approach to determining its age range of focus. YMI 1.0 focused on Black and Latino men from 16 to 24 years of age. YMI 2.0 programming includes addressing literacy of children in kindergarten through grade three, which aligns with the My Brother's Keeper Community Challenge. Yet there does not appear to have been a focused discussion in the executive steering committee about the ideal focal age range for YMI. Stakeholders we spoke with felt no resources should be diverted from the 16- to 24-year-old age group. However, they also believe prevention efforts would be wise investments during the middle school years, when young men who are going to slip off track usually begin to do so.

Third, YMI should consider a trauma-informed approach to its programming. Recent work has established that people who experience maltreatment and trauma are best served in trauma-informed systems (Vooris 2015). According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, a trauma-informed "program, organization, or system . . . (1) *realizes* the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; (2) *recognizes* the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; (3) *responds* by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and (4) seeks to actively resist *re-traumatization*."<sup>3</sup> In light of the concerns about mental health and the difficulties BYMOC have in school and other environments caused by adverse childhood experiences, YMI 2.0 may consider taking steps to make all its programming trauma informed, in keeping with the framework of the NYC roadmap to health.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, YMI 2.0 would benefit from a strategic plan regarding programming for the target population, not just for the programming it sponsors, but for all programming in its six focal communities that affects BYMOC profoundly. Possible strategic goals in this plan include

- defining what constitutes YMI-aligned programming and clearly communicating which programs count as YMI aligned, and
- expanding programming for middle-schoolers in the YMI portfolio.

## Go Beyond the Colocation of Programming in the Six Focal Neighborhoods

YMI 2.0 is in accord with the latest science and with the sentiment of its stakeholders in identifying neighborhoods where the needs are large as focal points for action. Experts widely accept that where people live influences their overall health and well-being (Khare 2015), and a life course perspective on health calls attention to the particular relevance of place to the health and well-being of young people (Blum 2014; Urban, Lewin-Bizan, and Lerner 2009).

YMI lacks the resources to undertake full-fledged neighborhood-level interventions such as the federal Promise Neighborhood effort or the Harlem Children's Zone. It is possible, however, that YMI could go beyond the simple colocation of YMI programs in the six focal communities and help support a more comprehensive place-based initiative in its focal neighborhoods. YMI could intentionally engage collective impact initiatives that are already operating in any of the focal neighborhoods.

Another possible strategy is to take advantage of YMI's connections to CEO to generate a comprehensive list of NYC programming in the focal neighborhoods and play a convening, coordinating role with the city agencies providing this programming. Some of our stakeholders talked about creating a system in which there is "no wrong door" for a young man of color to walk in for services. In other words, there should be systems in place for referral and communication such that a young man is linked to the full range of services he needs no matter where he originally presents for care.

As YMI 2.0 goes forward with an emphasis on place, it would be helpful for its leaders to reflect on effective steps after key places are identified. Some objectives might be

- forging an institutional connection to any existing place-based initiatives in the focal neighborhoods to take advantage of the connections among CBOs that this partnership has already made, and
- providing community data support to existing place-based initiatives in the focal neighborhoods.

## Forge an Institutional Connection to the NYPD

The stakeholders to whom we spoke indicated NYPD is ready to begin a dialogue and relationship with YMI. A high priority for YMI 2.0 should be to build stronger ties with NYPD to take advantage of efforts already underway within that agency.

Possible strategies include

- inviting a representative from NYPD to serve on the equity committee;
- arranging to get timely updates on NYPD-sponsored youth and young adult programming, such as the Summer Youth Police Academy, the Police Athletic League, Law Enforcement Explorers, and session presentations; and
- considering developing YMI programming that enhances or complements NYPD programming.

## Make and Carry Out a Strategic Communications Plan

As YMI 2.0 goes forward, it might consider a strategic communications plan. In such a plan, an organization first identifies the important constituencies for its work and identifies the specific audiences for the knowledge it wants disseminated. It then identifies products—white papers, one-page “highlights,” blogposts, and webinars—that are appropriate for each of the audiences it has identified.

Important audiences for YMI dissemination efforts include funders, employers, BYMOC themselves, the advisory board, NYC government employees, members of the equity committee, CBOs that work citywide on issues affecting BYMOC, local CBOs and community leaders in the six focal neighborhoods, and the public at large. Each of these audiences is entitled to different levels of information, is interested in different topics, and requires different products to ensure the best level of information penetration.

Strategies for achieving this goal should include

- developing a list of all the major groups and individuals who are YMI stakeholders;
- deciding on the type, level, and frequency of information each group of stakeholders should receive;
- understanding the most effective means for YMI to communicate directly with each group of stakeholders;
- identifying widely used information channels to indirectly communicate with stakeholders and regularly pushing information about YMI out to these channels;
- cultivating personal ties to reporters and public relations professionals with an interest in the focal communities or population who can be allies in disseminating information about YMI; and
- consulting with and updating the advisory board regularly about YMI processes and news.

## Conclusion

Redressing the inequities BYMOC face in NYC is of paramount importance because their energy, talent, and enterprise are precious resources the city will need to draw on for its future prosperity. YMI was a pioneer in making equity for these young men a prominent public issue before it became a national issue. Its recent reimagining of its work on policy and programs shows promise that YMI 2.0 will be even better than YMI 1.0. We offer these comments and insights as part of the effort to improve the initiative going forward.

## Notes

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3. "Trauma-Informed Approach and Trauma-Specific Interventions," Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, last updated August 14, 2015, <http://www.samhsa.gov/nctic/trauma-interventions>.
4. New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, "Health Department and First Lady Chirlane Mccray Announce Creation of Roadmap for a More Inclusive Mental Health System," press release, January 28, 2015, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/pr2015/pr006-15.shtml>.

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