

# Connections

Best Practices in Serving Young Adults



**NYC**<sup>®</sup>

Center for  
Economic Opportunity

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The **NYC Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO)** was established by Mayor Bloomberg in December 2006 to implement innovative ways to reduce poverty in New York City. CEO works with City agencies to design and implement new and evidence-based initiatives aimed at poverty reduction, and manages an Innovation Fund to support its efforts. CEO also maintains an ambitious research and evaluation agenda that includes developing an alternative poverty measure and evaluating programs to determine which are successful in reducing poverty and increasing economic stability among New Yorkers. The Center received the 2011 Innovations in American Government Award from the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovations at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.



In 2011 New York City launched one of the most comprehensive and expansive public-private initiatives designed to address disparities between young black and Latino men and their peers. The mission of the **Young Men's Initiative (YMI)** is to connect black and Latino young people to opportunities that can lead them to success and help them achieve their professional, educational and personal goals.

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# Many young people in New York City are unprepared to achieve economic and career mobility.

Sixty-four percent of black and 60% of native-born Latino young men who are out of school and without a high school diploma are also out of work.<sup>1</sup> 15.8% of young New Yorkers are disconnected—unattached from both school and work—compared to 14% in the United States as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Being disconnected results in not only decreased earnings in the short-term but also reduced earnings into adulthood, as young people entering adulthood lack the work experience they need to gain further employment and experience.<sup>3</sup> Like many places in the country, the economic recession has exacerbated problems for young people in New York City; the youth unemployment rate hovered above 30% for the duration of the recession, three times the city's overall unemployment rate.

New York City has made impressive strides in recent years on a number of important indicators. High school graduation and college readiness rates have risen rapidly: in 2005, only 50% of high school students were graduating in four years and only 16% were college ready, but by 2011 67% were graduating in four years and 25% were college ready.<sup>4</sup> Yet youth are not a monolithic category, and despite this progress, at-risk and disconnected young adults face a range of different barriers that further impact their ability to connect to educational and em-

ployment opportunities. Latino and black 4-year high school graduation rates still lag nearly 19 percentage points behind their white peers in New York City,<sup>5</sup> and 15% of young people ages 18-24 have less than a high school diploma.<sup>6</sup> Of the more than 650,000 individuals living in public housing in New York City, nearly 30% are under age 18, and while research has shown that these young people may be at risk for poor educational outcomes, it also suggests that stable, supportive affordable housing can help young people reach educational success.<sup>7</sup> Young parenthood, which is found to reduce the likelihood of a young person continuing education beyond high school and increase the likelihood of dependence on public assistance, has dropped dramatically in both New York City and nationwide; nonetheless, black and Latina young women represent a disproportionate percentage of the more than 19,000 teen pregnancies a year, and the Bronx has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the country.<sup>8</sup>

Against this backdrop, the Center for Economic Opportunity (CEO) has piloted strategies to alleviate barriers and reduce disparities for young New Yorkers seeking economic and career mobility. Founded by Mayor Bloomberg in 2006 to launch and rigorously test innovative antipoverty programming for low-income New Yorkers, CEO has implemented youth programs with a wide range of city agency partners and community-based providers. The launch of the NYC Young Men's Initiative in 2011, created to address disparities between young black and Latino men and their peers, has resulted in many new programs and program expansions. Half of CEO's investments have focused on addressing the needs of young people, and its experience in youth programming has yielded valuable lessons about successful strategies in serving vulnerable youth. CEO has learned about the importance of targeted programming and approaches in meeting the needs of widely diverse populations of young people—both in addressing the range of barriers they face as well as building their innate strengths and assets.

## Youth Development Concepts

This brief explores what CEO has learned in its six years of youth-focused programming, including programs that help young people increase their literacy, gain paid work experience, reduce involvement in the criminal justice system, find employment in in-demand careers, and more. CEO has learned that designing programs that ensure vulnerable young people find a pathway out of poverty requires interventions that offer a mix of education, employment, and participant supports. These three pillars are present within each program, but are varied and customized. Rather than pursue a one-size-fits-all strategy, CEO's programs are designed to meet each young person's needs and build on each young person's strengths.

Across a wide range of programs, CEO has identified strategies centered on five key concepts:



**Asset-Based Strategies:** Many successful programs focus on proactively building youth's assets, strengths, and abilities appropriate for their developmental stage, facilitating the encouragement of positive behaviors and helping to ensure a healthy transition into adulthood. These strategies provide youth with encouragement and engagement to help them meet high expectations.



**Mitigating Risk:** The stress and disruptions of growing up in poverty can cause many young people to develop unhealthy coping mechanisms. Programs that help participants replace those risky behaviors with more positive ones are able to help young people decrease their emotional distress and self-defeating behavior. These strategies incorporate proper assessment, monitoring, and development of coping skills.



**Skill-Based Strategies:** Many youth come into young adulthood with limited educational attainment, unprepared for the rigor of either continuing education or higher-skill jobs. Many programs focus on enhancing young people's economic

mobility by boosting their academic and vocational skills. Skill-based programs emphasize either academic or occupational preparation in order to ensure participants' success in the labor market.



**Caring Adults:** Strategies that connect each young person to a reliable adult ensure participants' specialized attention and one-on-one support during their participation in youth programs. These caring adults, including case managers, mentors, and coaches, provide supportive guidance and connections to individualized services to meet each individual's needs.



**Community Connections:** Many programs focus on leveraging community resources in order to engage youth as partners in their own development as well as in their communities' development. Strong programs focus on facilitating connections and referrals to additional services in the community, and create opportunities for young people to connect with and contribute to their communities.

This document offers an overview of promising youth development strategies, intended to help providers, agencies, and funders alike better understand what strategies are helping young people gain an economic foothold and prepare for a lifetime of income and career mobility. We examine lessons learned in addressing the needs of specific populations of youth—court-involved, limited educational attainment, public housing residents, and parenting youth—and in each section we highlight successful strategies.

# Court Involvement

Programs focused on youth with criminal justice backgrounds utilize strategies that mitigate the negative impact of involvement in the justice system, address the underlying causes for risky behaviors, and build up participants' individual strengths through education and job training to help them attain economic stability. Best practices include:



**Group Activities:** Cohort-based programming can give young people alternative ways to bond with their peers.

Research has shown that, “peer pressure becomes much more intense for youth in this environment, as does group solidarity.”<sup>9</sup> The NYC Justice Corps utilizes a cohort approach, where young people work together over a six month period to build pro-social relationships with one another through various workshops and community service opportunities—an approach intentionally designed to promote positive interactions and relationships among Corps members.<sup>10</sup>



**Cognitive Behavioral Therapy:** Court-involved young people can benefit from assistance that helps them learn to cope with and develop healthy responses to stress.

Studies have shown that strengthening self-control is a key to bringing order to a young person's behavior and ultimately to reducing recidivism.<sup>11</sup> For example, the Adolescent Behavioral Learning Experience (ABLE), which works with incarcerated young adults on Rikers Island, uses Moral Reconciliation Therapy, a form of cognitive behavioral therapy focused on decreasing recidivism among criminal offenders, as a means for young people to improve personal responsibility and decision-making.



**RAP Sheet Cleanup:** Helping participants learn to read and clean up their RAP sheets is an important precursor to employment, when appropriate. For example, one criminal record repair program in New York City found that nearly 58% of criminal records contain at least one error.<sup>12</sup> NYC Department of Small Business Services' Employment Works program helps participants to strategically answer the 'conviction question' on applications and in interviews, and several programs including the NYC Justice Corps and Justice Community contract with organizations such as Youth Represent to provide legal assistance in fixing errors that often appear on RAP sheets.



**Credible Messengers:** Programs that hire case managers and mentors who are both skilled at connecting youth to needed services and have personally been involved in the justice system can give young people the opportunity to build positive relationships with and learn from adults who have successfully turned their lives around. The Center for Court Innovation has found that young adults playing the role of 'influencers' had a significant impact on their peers and communities when they modeled and promoted positive behaviors.<sup>13</sup> The NYC Department of Probation (DOP) encourages providers within its Arches program to hire credible messengers as mentors, and NYC Department of Health and Mental Health's (DOHMH) anti-violence initiative, Cure Violence, hires credible messengers as street outreach workers and “violence interrupters” who are well-connected within the neighborhoods they serve.



**Community Benefit Projects:** The opportunity to give back to the very communities in which they engaged in risky behaviors has proven to be beneficial to young people. Research has shown that when communities work together to meet common goals they are able to channel youth behavior toward positive outcomes, a principle of restorative justice.<sup>14</sup> NYC Justice Corps and DOP's Justice Community both provide opportunities for their participants to engage in community mapping activities designed to identify local needs that can be filled by participant-designed and implemented projects.

# Limited Educational Attainment

Programs focused on out-of-school youth with limited literacy and numeracy help to build participants' reading, math and job readiness skills while simultaneously helping to address other barriers that may have contributed to and resulted from limited academic attainment. Best practices include:



**High Expectations for Learning:** A key to helping young adults learn is nurturing their innate thirst for knowledge. One study of successful strategies for at-risk youth found that a “diversity of learning environments and experiences can broaden the students’ interests,” and as a result students will be more likely to assume greater responsibility for their own learning.<sup>15</sup> CEO’s Project Rise, which offers paid internships conditioned on participants’ consistent engagement in an appropriate educational activity, is showing promising results in increasing both participants’ academic attainment and their work readiness.



**Mental Health Screenings:** In recognition that some young people suffer from an undiagnosed learning disability or mental illness that prevents learning, it is important that programs are sensitive to these issues and refer youth for treatment when appropriate. One community-based provider of DOP’s Justice Scholars utilizes an evidence-based mental health screening tool to identify which services the young person needs, while other community organizations hire licensed professionals to conduct a holistic assessment of all participants in their programs.



**Integrate Practical Skills with Academic Preparation:** Many young people will better succeed in hands-on in-

struction or learning that is relevant to their lives, such as lessons contextualized for budgeting or parenting. Research has shown that career-focused education and training can be both more appealing and more productive for young people.<sup>16</sup> In recognition of these findings, the Department of Youth and Community Development’s (DYCD) Young Adult Literacy Program (YALP) began integrating career exploration and internship experiences in the summer of 2009, and an evaluation of the program found that young adults who were offered the opportunity to get a paid internship as part of their educational experience had better program attendance and retention.<sup>17</sup>



**Primary Person:** Youth with limited educational attainment often come to programs with the very same barriers that prevented their success in school, and need close and careful program staff support in order to identify and address those barriers. Research has shown that the engagement of teachers and counselors is key to young people’s ability to identify and access the resources they need.<sup>18</sup> The Community Education Pathways to Success program, developed by the Youth Development Institute, a model for YALP, utilizes a ‘primary person’ who can work with each student to address individualized needs within and outside the classroom.



**Alternative School Settings:** For young people for whom traditional schooling has not worked, program settings that offer alternative instruction and approaches in their communities can be far more successful. Research has shown that multiple educational entry and exit points are essential for meeting young people’s diverse educational needs.<sup>19</sup> For example, YALP is offered at both CBOs and public libraries in the Bronx, Queens, and Brooklyn.

# P ublic Housing

Programs focused on young public housing residents seek to harness the strengths of a concentrated community by leveraging existing neighborhood networks to strengthen the community in which the programs are embedded. Programs utilize place-based strategies, saturating a community with work-oriented interventions and supports. Best practices include:



**Place-based Setting:** Programs offering a range of services geographically located within the community being served provide young people a safe place in which to develop their assets.

As research has shown, “community schools and family centers can provide youth with safe spaces for productive alternatives to occupy out-of-school and weekend time.”<sup>20</sup> CEO’s Jobs-Plus program, a workforce development program situated at and open to all public housing residents within targeted developments, has consistently enrolled young adults as 30% of program participants. By locating its programming inside of or adjacent to public housing developments, Jobs-Plus gives young people easier access to services.



**Intensive Case Management:** Especially crucial for young people striving to envision and plan for a better future, programs that offer participants extensive follow-up and frequent contact with program staff are better able to help them navigate barriers to employment. The Jobs-Plus program uses intensive case management as a component of its coaching. Tailored to the needs of housing development residents, this technique helps participants craft long-term career and financial goals and develop plans that take into account their unique financial needs as recipients of subsidized housing.



**Open-ended Skill Development:** Programs that offer young people the flexibility to engage in academic and work preparation over a longer time horizon gives participants the opportunity to achieve the kinds of meaningful skill gains necessary to achieve economic mobility. The Jobs-Plus program offers participants the opportunity to access services without an end date, giving them the flexibility to combine work with skill development at a pace that meets their needs, and the opportunity to re-engage after disconnecting from the program or losing an initial job.



**Mentorship:** Providing young people with positive role models and relationships with caring adults in their communities can be critical to keeping them on track to graduate, pursue college, and go on to successful careers, a strategy that is especially important as adolescents’ self-esteem, competence, and self-concept are developing.<sup>21</sup> DOP’s Cornerstone Mentoring Program works with youth in grades 5-9 in public housing to ease their transitions between elementary school, middle school, and high school by offering group mentoring within housing developments as well as community service activities.



**Jobs in the Community:** Many young people who are resistant to leaving their communities benefit from work experiences that expand their understanding of and connections to the larger economy outside of their neighborhoods. But for young people that need to stay close to home for work, place-based job development can be a crucial first step. CLASP found that in, “communities where youth are afforded fairly limited exposure to work, there is little opportunity to develop the skill set for success.”<sup>22</sup> By locating employment opportunities in the community, the Jobs-Plus program has been able to help young people overcome fears, transportation challenges, and personal barriers that prevent them from finding work outside of their neighborhoods.



## Young Parents

Programs targeting young parents, those working with mothers, fathers, or both, are designed to help participants navigate the new challenges of parenthood while also helping them fulfill their own personal development needs. Best practices include:



**Peer-to-Peer Support:** Young people preparing for or working through the challenges of parenthood benefit from the opportunity to share with peers in a safe and honest space. The US Department of Health and Human Services, found that the, “use of small group sessions provides fathers with the opportunity to learn parenting techniques and discuss common concerns with other fathers.”<sup>23</sup> The CUNY Fatherhood Academy program uses a cohort model to bring together young fathers for group activities addressing topics such as men’s health, self-motivation, conflict resolution, and financial literacy, with the ultimate goal of increasing their job readiness as well as their engagement with their children.



**Teen Parenthood Counseling:** Child-birth places often unforeseen stresses on many young people, ranging from post-partum depression to interpersonal conflict, and many successful programs focus on helping youth cope with those new challenges. As explained by the Department of Health and Human Services, “Addressing mental health—in providing basic needs for teen parents such as housing, parenting, and childcare, mental health services are often overlooked.”<sup>24</sup> City hospitals have improved how they interact with teen parents, and a CEO-funded study showed

improved interactions between teen mothers and hospital staff and resulted in teens’ better understanding of labor, decreased anxiety, and increased likelihood to seek care or assistance in the future.<sup>25</sup>



**Child Support Strategies:** Programs that help young parents navigate the challenges of child support in the context of work, including debunking myths, can significantly improve young people’s willingness and ability to be in compliance. Research has shown that Fatherhood programs are able to increase the proportion of fathers making child support payments, because they help both fathers and mothers understand their rights and responsibilities, help them manage child support debt, and in some cases establish flexible child support payment arrangements in partnership with the child support agency.<sup>26</sup> The Mayor’s Fatherhood Initiative NYC Dads began the Parent Pledge Project, which creates child support and parenting agreements through mediation rather than through the courts, using trained mediators in community-based settings.



**Connections to Health Care:** Programs that connect first-time parents with health services can help young mothers learn the parenting skills they need while also forging a meaningful relationship with a caring adult. A study of nurse home visits for teen mothers found numerous benefits such as reduced incidence of repeat pregnancy, reduced rates of maternal arrest, and reduced likelihood to use public assistance.<sup>27</sup> The Nurse Family Partnership of New York, operated by DOHMH, pairs participating mothers with a registered nurse from early in her pregnancy until the child is two years old. DOHMH also operates a teen health initiative offering an online portal and app to help young people connect with teen-friendly clinics and across the city.



**Connections to Child Care:** in order to achieve educational goals, build personal assets, and develop economic stability, young parents need access to reliable and affordable childcare. The Center for Assessment and Policy Development explains, “Helping teens consider all facets of their decision about child care in light of their own needs and the needs of their child is often a delicate process.”<sup>28</sup> CEO’s Child Care Tax Credit, launched in 2008, offers a local child care tax credit on top of existing state and federal credits targeted to low-income families with young children; in 2010, 24,000 households received credits totaling \$10 million.<sup>29</sup> Additional child care subsidies available through the NYC Human Resources Administration help to ensure teen parents are able to attend high school. The Jobs-Plus program, with guidance from the NYC Office of Financial Empowerment, added formal financial counseling to its model to ensure that all program participants have access to financial empowerment tools, including screening for and assistance accessing the Child Care Tax Credit and other crucial benefits.

## C onclusion

Young adults, in a critical phase of their development, bring a diverse range of assets and challenges. CEO’s experiences operating and testing innovative programming for youth has showed that the most successful programs are those that craft targeted interventions guided by broad concepts of developing young people’s assets, alleviating young people’s risk, boosting young people’s academic and occupational preparation, connecting young people to caring adults, and engaging young people with their communities.

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