

# Breaking the Cycle of Poverty in Young Families

## *Two-Generation Strategies for Working with Disconnected Young Parents & Their Children*

ISSUE BRIEF

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Over 1.4 million youth ages 15–24 are out-of-school and out-of-work (OSOW) and raising dependent children.<sup>1</sup> When youth are out of the education system, lack early work experience, and cannot find employment, the likelihood is poor that they will have the means to support themselves and the needs of their children.<sup>1</sup> Too often, this traps their family in the cycle of poverty for generations. Unless communities offer alternative pathways to connect with ladders of opportunity, many of these young families will be unable to achieve financial independence. To meet the needs of young families, many human service organizations have begun utilizing two-generation approaches for working with OSOW youth and their families. These programs use strategies that address the developmental needs of young parents *and* their children.

The National Human Services Assembly (NHSA), an association of America’s leading human service providers, set out to document quality two-generation programs in place within its member organizations and identify the elements of those programs that strengthen young, vulnerable families. With support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, NHSA conferred with 32 organizations regarding two-generation programs serving young families led by OSOW parents ages 15–24 years. The two-generation approach seeks to re-engage young parents in education and/or work; nurture the parent-child bond; improve children’s wellbeing; and connect the family with

economic, social, and/or other supports. This discussion brief summarizes the findings of this work. The full report, to be released in late 2013, will feature in-depth case studies, elements of effective two-generation programming, and recommendations for future work.

### Why OSOW Young Families?

Young people who are out-of-school and unemployed while raising children face a formidable set of challenges that affects not only their own future but that of their children as well. Common barriers to achieving financial independence include a lack of educational credentials, inadequate soft skills, and limited or no early work experience. Additional obstacles that some OSOW youth encounter can include depression or other mental health conditions, exposure to violence, homelessness, lack of citizenship, and past involvement in the juvenile and/or criminal justice, foster care, or child welfare systems.

These obstacles significantly impact the financial independence and future wellbeing of OSOW young families. According to the Aspen Institute, over 20% of U.S. children under age 18 live in poverty, and Child Trends notes that those families are also more likely to be headed by a young adult ages 18–24. Growing up in poverty takes its toll; adverse childhood experiences,

#### About the Cycle of Poverty

“...poverty undermines child well-being in two critical ways. The lack of income often prevents parents from meeting children’s basic needs and investing in resources and experiences that will help their children develop. The stress created by living in poverty undermines a parent’s ability to devote time, energy, and attention to the job of being a good caregiver.... The tragic consequence is that children born to parents in the lowest fifth of the income scale are very likely (42%) to end up there as adults.”

—Annie E. Casey Foundation<sup>2</sup>

## Organizations Consulted During Research\*

Adventist Community Services  
Alliance for Children and Families  
Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies  
Association of Junior Leagues International  
Catholic Charities USA  
CenterLink  
Child Trends  
The Dibble Institute  
Goodwill Industries International  
International Association of Jewish Vocational Services  
Jewish Community Service Baltimore  
Jewish Family Service San Diego  
Lutheran Services in America  
Martha O'Bryan Center  
National Center on Family Homelessness  
National Crittenton Foundation  
National Fatherhood Initiative  
National Urban League  
National Youth Employment Coalition  
Northern Virginia Urban League  
Prevent Child Abuse America  
Salvation Army  
Salvation Army Eastern Michigan Division  
Salvation Army Metropolitan Division (Chicago)  
Search Institute  
United Neighborhood Centers of America  
United Way Worldwide  
Volunteers of America  
Youth Advocate Programs, Inc.  
YWCA  
Seattle | King | Snohomish  
YWCA USA

*\*This discussion brief does not necessarily reflect the opinions of these organizations.*

including socioeconomic conditions, disrupt early brain development, impair long-term health and economic mobility, and are associated with unhealthy behaviors later in life, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Additionally, parents who experience high levels of adversity in their childhoods are “less likely to be able to provide the kind of stable and supportive relationships that are needed to protect their children from the damages of toxic stress.”<sup>3</sup> Since OSOW young parents are themselves still developing, their ability to fully mature *and* contribute to the development of their children is impacted. This makes the short window of opportunity for program interventions to bolster family development vitally important.

## The Two-Generation Approach to Strengthening OSOW Young Families

Using a two-generation approach to strengthen OSOW young families' connections with each other and their communities can successfully address the unique challenges they face. This strategy provides both children and young parents with developmental opportunities; educational, social, and economic supports in the community; and services to nurture the parent-child bond.

The Aspen Institute identified three main types of two-generation programming: Whole-Family, Parent-Child, and Child-Parent approaches.

- > **Whole-Family Approach:** Using a holistic view of the family, interventions are designed to engage both parents and children simultaneously.
- > **Parent-Child Approach:** Programs are directed at parents of children who also receive some sort of support.

- > **Child-Parent Approach:** Programs primarily serve children, but parents receive some support.<sup>4</sup>

## Elements of Success

High-quality, two-generation programming requires a multifaceted, tailored approach to service delivery. NHSA's research identified the following elements of success (a companion report will detail these and other elements).

- > **Positive Youth Development:** Effective two-generation programs apply the fundamentals of positive youth development theory. In practice, this means that programs pair young people with a caring, knowledgeable adult whom they trust and that the program culture is positive. Providers identify and build on youths' strengths and encourage young people to provide input and take ownership of their decisions and their lives. Flexible program structures enable case managers to creatively tailor services to the unique situation of each young family.
- > **Baby Boosts:** Successful programs deliberately promote children's healthy development through multiple services. Case managers assure children receive well-child health care, are monitored for developmental delays, and obtain necessary treatment. Securing early childhood education and care helps both children and parents. Other services develop youths' abilities to effectively parent through education about stages of child development and practices to raise their children in a nurturing environment.
- > **Family Development:** Quality two-generation programs attend to the family as a whole. In the short-term, programs stabilize family life by connecting them with governmental and nonprofit programs for stable housing, food, health care, and services. Providers help young parents develop a family “mindset” and build skills for managing a household.

## TWO-GENERATION CASE STUDY: YOUTH ADVOCATE PROGRAMS, INC. (YAP)

Youth Advocate Programs (YAP) provides a unique, community-based alternative for young people who would otherwise be homeless or in the juvenile justice, child welfare, or behavioral health systems. Through YAP, young people are able to stay within their home communities and near their families. Community advocates work with young people to help them graduate from YAP having developed positive connections with pro-social people, places, and activities within their community. They are able to live safely in a secure and stable home, with improved skills, having their basic needs better met, and as part of a strengthened, more cohesive family.

YAP's model is research-based and uses program evaluations and new research to continuously improve its program delivery. The federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National Council on Crime and Delinquency, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, among others, have recognized YAP's model as a promising or effective alternative to institutional care. Grounded in the belief that each child has unique needs and assets, YAP uses a strengths-based approach to bring about change. Advocates are matched with young people with whom they share strengths, interests, and culture, including the same neighborhood. The advocates work with the youth and their families to create holistic, individualized plans to reconnect youth to their communities, including:

- > Engaging youth, their families and broader family teams (parents, caregivers, and others who are supportive of the youth) to create individualized plans of support.
- > Serving as case managers who unify services across educational, employment, health, child welfare, and other systems and engage youth in purposeful activities to achieve the goals in the young person's plan.
- > Organizing supportive community residents, organizations, associations, and other community resources to support the youth, family, and family team.
- > Involving youth and their families in giving back to the community, developing their sense of value and competency, and enhancing youth ownership in and connection to the community.

- > Most importantly, championing youth and providing unconditional support. YAP employs a "no-reject, no-eject policy": youth will not be kicked out of the program because their case is tough and/or complex.

### Parenthood

For young parents, the advocates integrate parenting and child wellbeing into the individualized plan and its implementation. The flexibility of the YAP model enables this whole-family, multi-generational approach in all programs. For example, a YAP fatherhood program in Atlantic City, New Jersey, helps strengthen young fathers' involvement in their children's lives by developing not only their understanding of what it means to be a nurturing dad but also their ability to use conflict resolution skills to resolve interpersonal conflicts.

### Trauma

Most YAP youth have experienced trauma, both before and during their involvement with a system. Trauma is often misunderstood or ignored, causing further isolation and disconnection from the community. Youth in YAP often have parents who also experienced trauma, which impacts their ability to parent and care for their children. Because of this, YAP works with the young people's parents, not just the youth, to address trauma.

### Challenge

While YAP maintains a no-reject, no-eject policy, sometimes system mandates can jeopardize a youth's progress. For example, if at the end of YAP's services, the youth doesn't meet a specific system-imposed requirement, the referring authority may place the youth into the system/institution for which YAP was the alternative. However, YAP's commitment to keeping youth safely home in their communities doesn't end when a system mandate forces a youth back to an institution. YAP works in partnership with state and local governments to reduce reliance on policies and practices that favor institutionalizing youth and to promote policies and practices that maximize the use of effective community-based alternatives.

> **Social Connections:** Social and emotional support in the form of connections with family members, peers, neighbors, and community groups that will support the young family is vital to long-term success. Creating or supporting a network of young parents is one way programs reduced social isolation and made programs fun.

## Programmatic Challenges

Challenges have been identified by academics, policy experts, nonprofit leaders, and field workers to the use of two-generation strategies. Policy and program inertia can become a major barrier. One of the foremost challenges to these programs is that the primary systems that affect young families—primary and secondary education, welfare, workforce development, higher education, child welfare, and juvenile justice—often have conflicting priorities. Funding silos make it hard for providers using a two-generation strategy to cobble together the wide range of resources that young families need to get on their feet. Resource limitations are a major problem, too, because there is a finite amount of funding available. Finally, the absence of high-level coordination, conflicting goals, and different rules about legal age tend to make it difficult for agencies and programs to work well together. These are all challenges, however, that can be

mitigated through strategic “work arounds”—many of which are currently employed by existing programs.

## Moving Forward

The future economic prosperity of the nation is directly tied to the capacity of today’s children and youth to contribute as the workers and business owners, parents, and civic leaders of tomorrow. With 1.4 million young parents out-of-school and out-of-work, their future—and that of our nation—is at risk. Utilizing a two-generation approach to reconnect OSOW young families with ladders of opportunity appears to be a promising strategy to change this trajectory and interrupt the cycle of poverty in communities nationwide.

More in-depth research is needed. Utilizing data collected through quantitative analyses and program evaluations will provide much needed insight into the design of these programs. But we must also look beyond best practices to the complex interplay between programming and public policy. By identifying obstacles to quality interventions, “work arounds” currently used in the field, and developing recommendations for effective policy at the local, state, and federal levels, we can expand and replicate this intergenerational approach to reconnecting OSOW youth and their families.



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### Endnotes

- 1 | The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2012). Youth and Work: Restoring Teen and Young Adult Connection to Opportunity. *Kids Count Policy Report*.
- 2 | The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (n.d.). *About Casey*. Baltimore, MD: Author.
- 3 | Shonkoff, Jack P, & Garner, Andrew S. (2011). The Lifelong Effects of Early Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress. *Pediatrics 129(1): e232–e246*.
- 4 | Aspen Institute. (2012). Two Generations, One Future: Moving Parents and Children Beyond Poverty Together. *Ascend Report*. Washington, DC: Author.

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