ESSAY

Essay

MOVING YOUTH FROM RISK TO OPPORTUNITY

For most American youth, the transition to adulthood inspires a mix of excitement and high anxiety. There is excitement about taking steps to realize emerging dreams, aspirations, and possibilities. Yet there is anxiety about making the right choices, seizing the right opportunities, and navigating the predictable crises of confidence that are an inevitable part of growing up. Most of us have lived through those anxieties and spent time convincing our kids and other young adults we know that they will survive the turmoil of this transition; that things will, in fact, turn out okay. For the significant majority of youth in this country, things do end up well. They graduate, find employment, learn to handle new independence, and make responsible decisions.

This group is made up of teens in foster care; youth involved in the juvenile justice system; teens who have children of their own; and youth who never finished high school. These are the young adults who we believe deserve our most urgent attention.

Nevertheless, the transition to adulthood is never an automatic or uncomplicated process. All kids, no matter what their background or financial status, need a set of basic connections to help them navigate the shoals of young adulthood. They need the guidance, the time, and often the financial help of a stable, secure family. They need connections to wider communities that provide access to other mentoring adults and real-life options. And they need access to education and experiences that provide them with a foundation of learning, life skills, and credentials that can help them gain the knowledge and confidence they need to succeed.

Unfortunately, lots of young people, through no fault of their own, do not make enough of these critical connections and do not garner enough of the resources and supports they need. By the time these kids reach their early 20s, they find themselves facing adulthood unprepared, unsupported, and dispirited. Currently, it is estimated that there are 3.8 million youth between the ages of 18 and 24 who are neither employed nor in school—roughly 15 percent of all young adults.[1] Since 2000 alone, the ranks of these non-engaged young adults grew by 700,000, a 19 percent increase over just 3 years.[2] For many of these young people—America's "disconnected youth"—the transition to adulthood is not a time of anticipation and possibility; it is a time of fear and frustration. A significant number of these 3.8 million kids have neither the skills, supports, experience, education, nor confidence to successfully transition to adulthood.

A disproportionately large share of these youth come from minority and low-income families.[3] As a group, their lack of preparation will make it more difficult to secure good jobs with a future; it is more likely that they will have difficulty advancing beyond low-wage work. Their odds of being incarcerated will be greater, as will their chances of being victims of crime. With fewer earning opportunities, adequate housing will be more difficult to find, and they will be more likely to continue living in high-poverty, under-resourced communities. Perhaps most discouraging, with diminished ability to build economic security, they will be considerably less likely to become stable providers for their own kids. In sum, these disconnected youth—as a whole—face a much greater likelihood of bad outcomes, now and in the future, than their in-school or at-work peers.

Who Are America's "Most Disconnected Youth"?

While this overall population faces a much tougher road to successful adulthood, we know that there is a sub-group of young people who face even worse odds. They are, in fact, *the most at-risk kids in the country*—those most likely to consistently fail.

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These are the young adults who we believe deserve our most urgent attention. Their risk is greatest; their hardship is most profound; and their current and future costs to our communities are the most significant. They often are the kids in whom we frequently invest intervention dollars that yield disappointing results. They are the kids most directly affected by our state and local public systems and public policies. In urban and rural communities across the country, these are the kids who depend on:

- foster care systems to help them connect to strong families;
- juvenile corrections systems to treat them fairly and help them find a new beginning;
- public schools to help them gain the knowledge and skills they will need to become productive providers and citizens; and
- public health systems to provide the information and services that can help ensure their physical and mental well-being.

But the sad truth is that these systems have routinely and consistently failed them in their young lives.

In this, our 15th annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, we examine the issues surrounding America's most at-risk young adults. We examine who they are, why it is so critical that we help them, and what they need to succeed. Just as important, we outline a number of ways that we can alter the path of their lives and increase the odds that they, too, can become successful adults.

Teens in Foster Care

For adolescents in our nation's foster care system, the transition to successful adulthood is particularly rocky. In 2000, approximately 16 percent of the roughly 550,000 children in publicly supported foster care were between the ages of 16 and 18. About one-third of these youth had been in care for at least 2 years, and one-fourth had been in care for 5 years or more.[4] It is estimated that each year about 20,000 young people leave the foster care system at age 18 (the age at which most states relinquish legal responsibility for these youth) without being adopted or returning to families.[5]

African Americans are disproportionately represented in foster care. They make up more than 40 percent of the foster care population, even though they represent less than 20 percent of the nation's child population. By contrast, white children comprise only 31 percent of the foster care population, but 64 percent of the country's children. As children move along in age within the foster care system, African-American youngsters are more likely to be in residential or group care instead of family foster care. African-American children also stay in care longer,[6] and they are least likely to be reunified with their families.

The problems of adolescents in foster care are compounded by their considerable and overlapping health and mental health problems. An estimated 30 percent to 40 percent of foster children have physical or emotional difficulties.[7] Those leaving care are at especially high medical risk and likely to have acute, chronic, and complex health needs resulting from past neglect or abuse.[8] Yet a major problem for this population is their lack of even minimal medical coverage.[9] Without appropriate medical coverage these young people run the risk of incurring high medical bills if faced with an emergency, not receiving the appropriate preventive medical treatment, and being untreated for chronic conditions such as asthma and depression.[10] A 2001 longitudinal study of youth leaving care found that 44 percent had problems obtaining health care "most or all of the time."[11]

While many foster youth overcome the obstacles and challenges of growing up apart from their birth families, significant numbers of foster teens and young adults do not. Research indicates that these foster youth are behind educationally and have disproportionately high rates of special educational needs. Some studies report high school dropout rates

among foster youth as high as 55 percent.[12] They also fare poorly on other predictors of successful adult transition. For example, examinations of foster care alumni found that 2 to 4 years after leaving foster care, only half were regularly employed, more than half of the young women had given birth, and a significant number were dependent on welfare support. Nearly half of the population had been arrested, and a quarter had been homeless.[13] A study of employment outcomes among children exiting foster care near their 18th birthday in California, Illinois, and South Carolina during the mid-1990s found that these youth have mean earnings well below the poverty level and earn significantly less than youth in any of the comparison groups both prior to and after their 18th birthday.

All of this is not surprising, given the trauma that many of these young people have experienced, and their lack of family connections and support when they leave foster care. Most have been abused or neglected; some have been abandoned by their families. Many youth in foster care have been placed in marginal group homes, rather than with good foster or relative families. Many have bounced from placement to placement without any real stability or ongoing family ties. These neglected kids have been underserved by the very system that was designed to provide them with the strong families they need.

What is truly surprising is our apparent national expectation that upon reaching 18, these high-risk adolescents will be capable of functioning independently. Common sense dictates that in today's world, most 18-year-olds, regardless of their economic or educational status, are not fully capable of assuming adult responsibilities. In fact, in a nationwide survey respondents felt that the average young adult is not ready to be completely on their own until about age 23. A third didn't consider them ready until age 25 or older.[14]

Yet, each year, approximately 20,000 teenagers "age out" of foster care by virtue of having reached the age at which their legal rights to foster care end. Most entered foster care as teenagers, and too few (given current practice and policy) are being reunited with their birth families or adopted. For the most part, adequate preparation for this critical transition is just not provided. Despite the fact that Congress passed the Foster Care Independence Act—also known as the Chafee Act—in 1999, which doubled federal spending and expanded eligibility for services to age 21, neither the funds appropriated (less than $1,000 per year, per eligible youth) nor the state and county systems charged with addressing the needs of this population have so far been up to the challenge.[15]

A state-by-state analysis of policies that promote successful transition indicates that the scope and quality of services provided to current and former foster youths, and the eligibility requirements for these services, vary widely. In general, states provide minimal and uneven assistance with education, employment, and housing, and only a few states provide essential health and mental health services. For example, fewer than one-third of the states offer former foster youth ages 18–21 access to Medicaid coverage. And although most states provide some mentoring services, they generally do not utilize other methods of enhancing youth support networks.[16] Perhaps most important, the inability of foster care systems to routinely place teenagers with strong foster, relative, and adoptive families puts them at great risk

of not having a network of adults available as they transition to adulthood—a transition that is challenging even for youth who have families supporting them.

Youth Involved in the Juvenile Justice System

No experience may be more predictive of future adult difficulty than having been confined in a secure juvenile facility. Many youth are held in detention centers because they have been arrested and are simply waiting for trial; others are incarcerated in secure congregate care facilities because they have been sentenced for a crime. However youth enter juvenile custody, almost all are at significant risk of failure when they exit.

For example, each year, there are more than 600,000 admissions to secure detention facilities. According to recent federal statistics, there are approximately 27,000 youth in these institutions on any given day, an increase of almost 100 percent since 1985. Despite public stereotypes that these are very dangerous youth, fewer than one-third are charged with offenses involving violence. More than one-third are detained for status offenses (non-criminal offenses such as running away) and various technical violations of probation and other rules. Approximately two-thirds of these kids are minority youth, and virtually all of the growth in detention over the past 15 years is due to greatly increased rates of detention for African Americans and Latinos. About two-thirds of all youth admitted to secure detention facilities will enter institutions that are overcrowded and unsafe. By professional standards, such places are unable to provide the kinds of custody or care that these youth require. The needs of detained and incarcerated youth are many and often severe:

- One-half to three-fourths of incarcerated youth nationwide are estimated to suffer from a mental health disorder. Suicide within juvenile detention and correctional facilities is more than four times greater than in the general population. At the same time, researchers and administrators alike decry the lack of appropriate assessment and treatment services for confined youth with mental health problems.[17]
- It is estimated that more than half of all detained youth have drug use problems that require substance abuse treatment, yet relatively few facilities provide such services. One survey found that treatment for adolescent substance offenders was available in less than 40 percent of the nation's public and private youth facilities.[18]
- Academically, incarcerated youth function at a significantly lower level than peers their age. Studies indicate that although 10 percent to 12 percent of the general population suffers from learning disabilities, rates are as high as 42 percent among the correctional population. Yet reviews of educational programs in these institutions consistently indicate that incarcerated youth receive markedly substandard and inadequate educational services. Their educational progress is further compromised because school districts are often averse to re-enrolling youth upon their release and often refuse to accept any academic credits that they may have earned while incarcerated.[19]

Confined youth lose daily contact with their families, lose valuable school time, and are unlikely to have their health and mental health needs met. They are much more likely to be tutored in crime than they are in math, and their mentors are much more likely to be offenders than caring adults. The reality is that months in confinement can increase the odds of negative adult outcomes for a 16-year-old by jump-starting a spiral of

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failure that often becomes impossible to escape. Far too often, incarceration under current practices serves as a trip wire for long-term criminal involvement and future failure.

The overall effects of confinement, combined with our dismal national record for providing quality after-care services for youth once they are released, make adolescent incarceration a significant risk factor for compromised adulthoods. For example:

- Once incarcerated, youth are far less likely to gain the education credentials to succeed. One longitudinal study of incarcerated 9th graders found that only slightly more than half returned to school when released. Of these, more than two-thirds dropped out or withdrew within 1 year of re-enrolling, and 4 years later, only 15 percent had completed high school.[20] Other research also confirms that most released juvenile offenders 16 and older never return to any formal education.[21]
- Incarcerated youth, without appropriate treatment, connections, and support systems, are more likely to re-offend and get re-arrested. Numerous studies point to recidivism rates of 50 percent to 75 percent.[22] In fact, prior confinement is the strongest predictor of future incarceration. It is actually a stronger predictor than gang membership, poor parental relations, prior offense history, and other characteristics.[23]
- The effects of incarceration on prospective employment are profound. Formerly incarcerated youth work 3 to 5 weeks less a year than those never incarcerated—a disadvantage that carries over far into adulthood. Controlling for other factors, the impact of incarceration on employment is greater than the impact of a youth living in a high unemployment area or being a high school dropout. According to the London School of Economics, having been in jail is the most important deterrent to employment, and its effect, even years later, is persistent and substantial.[24]

Teen Parents

According to this year's *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, in 2002 there were nearly 850,000 mothers under age 20. (See page 50.) Despite the good news that national teen birth rates are declining, the reality is that these numbers are still far too high and still well above those of other industrialized countries.

Teen pregnancy and birth statistics clearly reveal that these rates continue to vary greatly by race, ethnicity, and economic status. According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, African-American and Hispanic girls are more than twice as likely as whites to become pregnant at least once before age 20.[25] Teens from high-poverty, low-income, one-parent families are far more likely to become pregnant and give birth than teens from intact families living in more affluent communities.[26]

There is considerable evidence that teenage childbearing correlates with a host of long-term negative life outcomes. Teen parenthood greatly increases the risk of educational failure, and pregnancy is a major reason girls give for dropping out of school. Even after controlling for race, ethnicity, and other personal and community characteristics, having a child before age 20 reduces academic attainment by almost 3 years.[27] According to recent estimates, only about one-third of teen mothers go on to receive a high school diploma after having a child.[28] Among young men who have fathered children, less than half complete high school; and those who do are far less likely to obtain any additional education.

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As a result, young women who give birth as teens have significantly lower earnings and greater probability of being poor or receiving welfare. Given their lower education attainment, as well as gaps in their basic skills, young mothers find themselves at a distinct disadvantage in the labor market. When they do work, they have lower family incomes and higher rates of poverty than women who gave birth at a later age.[29] Historically, nearly half of all teenage mothers receive welfare within 5 years of becoming parents.[30] Teen fathers enter the labor market earlier, and although they initially earn more money than their peers, they earn less by the time they reach their mid-20s.[31] Young dads are also often unprepared to provide emotional or other parental support for their children.

In addition to being a critical risk factor for a young person's successful transition to adulthood, teen parenthood is also a social problem with intergenerational dimensions. Children of adolescents are at higher risk of developmental problems than children of older parents. They are more likely to live in poor families headed by single parents and reared by mothers who are less prepared to be successful parents. Researchers have found, for example, that teenage mothers are more prone to have unrealistic expectations regarding children's developmental milestones and less able to provide children with the verbal and cognitive stimulation they need.[32]

High School Dropouts

Numerous studies over the past 30 years confirm what most of us know by intuition and experience: Kids who drop out of high school—and even those who later return and complete equivalency degrees—begin adulthood at a significant disadvantage. Gone are the days when a high school diploma was sufficient to obtain a job that could support a family. Today, high school completion is the minimum entry credential for employment with even modest growth potential, and post-secondary education, even if it stops short of a degree, makes a huge difference in an individual's employment, earnings, and self-sufficiency prospects.

For example, young adults ages 17–24 with less than a high school diploma are three times as likely to be unemployed, underemployed, or working for very low wages than those with a college degree.[33] One study that followed a large group of high school-aged youth from 1979 until 1992 found that 80 percent of those without a high school diploma were unemployed for at least a full year, and half were out of work for 3 or more years between their 18th and 25th birthdays. More recently, in 2000, a time of low unemployment, only half of all dropouts were employed at any given time. Between 1997 and 2001, more than a quarter of all dropouts were unemployed for a year or longer, compared with only 11 percent of those with a high school diploma or GED.[34]

A lack of education and connection to the workforce translates into significant earning differences. Over the course of a lifetime, college graduates make $900,000 more than graduates of high school only. Moreover, even those individuals who attend college without attaining a degree demonstrate significantly higher lifetime earnings. Over the course of a lifetime, individuals with some college training earn $300,000 more than graduates of high school only, and $500,000 more than high school dropouts.[35]

Race, ethnicity, and economic status help us understand who drops out and who stays in school. Compared to white students, African Americans are twice as likely to drop out before

graduation, and Hispanics are four times as likely.[36] Family poverty is also a critical predictor. Among youth in the lowest quartile of income distribution, only 64 percent manage to graduate high school, compared to 86 percent of youth from families in the middle two quartiles and 92 percent of youth from families in the top quartile.[37]

Still, no characteristic may be more powerful at predicting who drops out than *where* a young person attends school. For example, the most dramatic dropout problems are concentrated in 200 to 300 schools in the 35 largest U.S. cities. In these schools, 50 percent or fewer of the students who enroll in 9th grade graduate. Consistent with this, large schools attended primarily by students of color (those with more than 900 students and more than 90 percent students of color) have the highest dropout rates.[38]

The Importance of Investing in America's Disconnected Youth

The youth described in this essay arguably represent our nation's most vulnerable young people. Viewed as a whole, they are largely minority and endure the effects of having been raised in troubled families and in neighborhoods that do not offer the supports and opportunities available in more affluent communities. Most have attended our worst schools, and many have lacked access to adults whose guidance and networks can connect them to mainstream opportunities. Although they may reach adolescence and early adulthood with the same dreams and aspirations of all young people, their ability to realize them is severely limited.

If the human tragedy of having so many young people on the precipice of adult failure is itself not a sufficient stimulus to move us to action on their behalf, it may be useful to consider the likely implications of ignoring this issue. Specifically, if we do not learn to intervene more effectively in the transition of the most vulnerable young people, then we can expect the following outcomes:

- Over the next decade a new generation of children will be born to parents whose ability to provide for them financially will be severely compromised. Given the background and experiences of today's disconnected youth, a significant number of their offspring will be at risk for the same negative outcomes experienced by their parents.
- We will spend approximately $1 billion annually to incarcerate youth in our nation's detention systems, with the disheartening prospect of doing more harm than good.[39]
- We will spend more than $150 billion annually for police protection, corrections, and judicial and legal activities nationally.[40]
- We will spend more than $223 billion at the federal level alone to help our needy kids and families—the amount it currently costs to support federal programs that address substance abuse, violence, teen pregnancy, nutrition, school failure, and workforce preparation.[41] Furthermore, we can expect to spend billions more at the state and local levels.
- Finally, we will lose a sizeable portion of our potential labor market, along with billions of dollars in earnings and tax revenue that could be pumped into our economy annually.

We know that we can avoid a good share of this human tragedy and financial waste. We also believe that as a nation, the best way of doing so is to make more prudent and effective investments in our most at-risk youth—investments

that can help dysfunctional public systems improve results and spend resources more efficiently; investments that can help communities connect kids to opportunities that enhance the skills, knowledge, and relationships they need to make it as adults.

The good news is that we needn't start from scratch. In the following section, we highlight a range of promising and proven efforts that we believe can help move us in a more productive direction.

Crafting New Connections for Our Most Vulnerable Young People

The range of data reported in this essay make it abundantly clear that for many of today's disconnected young adults, their diminished prospects are rooted in the risk factors they experienced as adolescents. Therefore, we believe that the smartest interventions we can advance are those that can prevent kids from experiencing the factors that put them at risk for disconnection, as well as help those who have faced these challenges get back on their feet.

Below, we discuss several efforts in a wide range of states and communities that are addressing the needs of the kids experiencing the various risk factors we have described. While many focus on providing innovative program options, others are trying to reform public systems or refine public policies in ways that can provide opportunities for even larger numbers of at-risk youth.

Connecting Foster Youth to Families and Transition Assistance

For any adolescent or young adult, the most powerful predictor of future success is a connection to a caring and supportive family. For those young people who, through no fault of their own, have been removed from their families, this critical connection is often either temporary or lacking altogether. The fact is, the older a child gets, the less likely it is that foster care systems will find a suitable foster family or relative willing to provide care. As a result, 40 percent of older youth routinely spend at least a part of their adolescence in group homes and other institutional settings, disconnected from enduring family relationships and support.[42] And even those who do get placed with foster families often have a rough ride, as the probability of a disrupted foster placement for an adolescent is much greater than for younger children.

Given this, it is imperative that we do more to promote the chances that adolescents removed from their homes can connect to strong families and do more to help those in foster care successfully transition to adulthood.

At the Casey Foundation, we have spent decades promoting strong family connections for kids, particularly those in foster care. For 25 years we have provided high-quality foster care services in each of the New England states through **Casey Family Services**, our direct service arm. We recruit committed, talented foster parents and support them with training and a range of ongoing services that enable them to provide a stable family connection for even the most vulnerable adolescents. The program encourages and assists each child in maintaining a connection with his or her birth family. Casey Family Services, for example, also provides counseling and support to children making the transition from foster homes to their birth or adoptive families, or to independent living. We try to provide all of our foster kids with the necessary supports once they age out of care. In

most cases, the key elements of a successful transition are helping them complete school, make plans for the future, maintain enduring relationships with family members or caring adults, and find an affordable place to live.

Casey Family Services helps young adults make these and other critical short- and long-term decisions by providing a variety of resources, from tuition and housing assistance to counseling and training. Perhaps most important, our social workers, foster parents, and kin resources remain connected to these foster kids after they have officially left care. The results are impressive. A 2001 study of Casey Family Services alumni found that 73 percent had graduated from high school or earned a GED; 48 percent had received education beyond high school; 68 percent were currently employed; and 61 percent were in regular contact with their foster, adoptive, and/or birth parents.[43]

At the system level, we have also put Casey's experiences and principles to work through our national **Family to Family Initiative**, now being implemented in 35 cities and 16 states, including cities as large as New York, Los Angeles, and Cleveland. In Family to Family, our goal is to help child welfare systems connect all of the children in their care to supportive and protective families and communities. The agencies involved in our Family to Family Initiative have committed to developing networks of foster care that are family-centered, culturally sensitive, and located in the neighborhoods where children currently live; and to ensuring that all kids, including adolescents and their siblings, are routinely placed with families, rather than in institutional settings. Through a variety of creative strategies, these state- and local-level systems are increasing the number and quality of foster and kinship families; making better decisions about child placement and treatment through the use of a team decision-making approach that involves foster families, birth families, and child welfare personnel; and establishing networks of neighborhood-based services that are providing birth and foster families with the ongoing support they need.

Family to Family's results indicate that these systems are making a significant, positive difference for young people. In Cleveland, for example, among youth 15 and older who entered the child welfare system for the first time, placement in their network of family foster homes increased from 4.1 percent to 19 percent between 1996 and 2003. During that same period, group home placements declined from 6.2 percent to 2.5 percent, while placements in detention facilities were reduced from 5.6 percent to 1.6 percent. Family to Family is now being replicated in a number of settings nationwide. We believe that it represents a proven model for how our nation's foster care systems can help more vulnerable young people, including adolescents, develop the stable family supports and connections they need to successfully transition to adulthood.

While Casey Family Services and Family to Family provide strong examples of how we can more effectively work with adolescents in care, we must also do much more to help vulnerable young people as they transition from, or age out of, foster care.

A major national effort to help foster care alumni transition to successful adulthood is the **Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative** (JCYOI). JCYOI is a nonprofit, single-purpose, grant-making foundation, supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Casey Family Programs,[44] that brings together the people and resources needed to help youth in foster

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care and foster care alumni gain access to education, employment, health care, housing, and supportive personal and community relationships. To date, this effort has been launched successfully in nine sites—Atlanta; Denver; Des Moines; Jacksonville; Kansas City; Nashville; Detroit and Traverse City, Michigan; and Portland, Maine—with plans to bring on five more sites in the coming year.

A key component of JCYOI's approach is to engage youth directly as key partners and catalysts to improve outcomes for youth leaving foster care. The Initiative does this in each site by establishing and working closely with youth leadership boards and community partnership boards, which bring youth and civic leaders together to develop new options for transitioning youth. For example, in Michigan, the youth board has been instrumental in advancing new policies that ensure that youth receive key documents, such as birth certificates or proof of residence, that are required to open bank accounts and participate in other routine financial transactions. Nashville's youth board started a "suitcase drive" to collect luggage for youth in and leaving foster care to replace the ubiquitous plastic trash bags historically issued to carry their belongings. The response was so overwhelming that excess suitcases were donated to other cities, and the luggage drive is now statewide.

Each site is also developing Opportunity Passports™, a tool designed to organize resources to create opportunities—financial, educational, vocational, health care, entrepreneurial, and recreational—for alumni of the foster care system and for youth still in foster care. The Opportunity Passport has several components, including a personal debit account; a matched savings account (also known as an Individual Development Account, which can be used for education or for other critical purchases, such as housing); and a range of "Door Openers." These are locally developed benefits that may include pre-approved registration for community college courses, expedited access to job training or adult education courses, mentors, assistance with finanacial aid applications, part-time jobs, and pre-certification for subsidized housing. Almost 400 Opportunity Passports have been issued to transitioning youth to date.

Another innovative program to help foster care alumni make a successful transition to adulthood is the Casey Foundation's **School-to-Career Partnership**, which is administered through the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. The School-to-Career Partnership provides employment training and placement services to help transitioning youth get, keep, and succeed at adult jobs, as well as supports that can improve career, academic, and life success. In contrast to standard job training programs, which focus on placement, the School-to-Career model establishes a range of observable and measurable goals for both youth and their employers. Partners include public and private nonprofit child welfare agencies, for-profit employers, community-based organizations, and the youth themselves. In 2003, more than 340 youth across eight program sites were placed in jobs with an average salary of $7.92 per hour. Fifty-one percent received health benefits, and the program had an 81 percent retention rate.

A program modeled on the lines of the School-to-Career Partnership, but with an entertainment industry focus, is the **Rowell Foster Children's Positive Plan** (RFCPP), which annually sponsors more than 60 foster

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youth to participate in fine arts programs, camps, and cultural activities. Additionally, it provides older and former foster youth with employment opportunities on the East and West Coasts. For example, last year, RFCPP enabled more than 30 foster youth to participate in entertainment-related employment training. It has placed foster youth with such notable entertainment corporations as Viacom, Paramount, and BMG Music. RFCPP is piloting an accredited class on the campus of Dorsey High School in Los Angeles, which has a student population that is one-third foster youth.

Given the lack of opportunities for foster youth to obtain quality post-secondary education, some transition efforts have specifically focused on bolstering foster youths' access to college. For example, in San Jose, California, the Silicon Valley Children's Fund launched their **Youth Education Scholarship** (YES) program as a pilot project in 2000 and began bringing it to scale last year. This initiative provides transitioning foster youth with scholarships for college tuition, books, food, and transportation, plus a comprehensive support system that includes outreach, mentoring, and counseling services. Since 2000, 28 foster youth have received YES scholarships, and it is estimated that 1,000 will be eligible over the next 5 years. To date, 85 percent of YES scholars have returned for a second year of college (compared to a 33 percent national rate for foster youth), and more than 95 percent have maintained a GPA of 2.0 or above. Similarly, California State University, Fullerton, through its **Guardian Scholars Program**, annually provides an array of financial and other supports to up to 10 former foster youth between the ages of 17 and 23. In addition to paying all annual fees, academic tuition, and textbook costs, the Program offers on-campus housing, employment opportunities, individual counseling, and mentors who can assist with various needs and help students plan for their post-graduate future. In 2003, 7 Guardian Scholars received their bachelor's degrees.

To help foster care youth get ready for higher education, Seattle's **Tree House Coaching to College Program** offers a pre-college preparation and access program that matches transitioning youth with coaches who help them define educational goals and navigate the college application and financial aid systems. It produces up to $4,000 in scholarship assistance per year. Last year, 151 youth benefited from this aid.

Reforming Juvenile Justice and Building Bridges for Confined Youth

One critical starting point for helping detained youth is to re-examine and address our national over-reliance on indiscriminately locking up so many young offenders in the first place, particularly since such a large percentage are detained for non-violent offenses. In light of what we know about the generally negative impact of confinement on successful adult transition, it is clear we must do more to avoid unnecessary imprisonment and establish more effective ways of getting troubled youth the help they need.

Over the past decade, a number of communities have successfully accomplished this and done so without compromising public safety. These jurisdictions have been part of the Casey Foundation's **Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative** (JDAI), a multi-site effort designed to reform our nation's juvenile detention systems. Through JDAI, places as varied as Chicago, Illinois; Portland, Oregon;

and Sacramento, Santa Cruz, and Ventura County, California, have demonstrated that by using better screening tools, accurate data, and more effective community-based alternatives to incarceration, it is possible to reduce the costly confinement of youth in detention significantly without increasing youth crime or recidivism.

By employing JDAI's principles and strategies, these sites have drastically decreased average daily detention populations, increased the use of community programs, reduced the numbers of youth who fail to appear for trial, and decreased the re-arrest rate. For example, Chicago and Multnomah County (Portland) reduced their average daily populations by 37 percent and 66 percent, respectively, while achieving improvements in relevant public safety outcomes. Multnomah County became the first site nationally to successfully reduce racial disparities within its detention population.

By reducing overcrowding, the detention facilities participating in this initiative have also become safer and more responsive to those youth for whom incarceration is appropriate. Furthermore, these sites have saved millions of dollars by redirecting funds from expensive secure detention facilities to more cost-efficient alternative programs.

One state that has taken several juvenile justice reforms to scale is Missouri. Since closing its large juvenile training schools 20 years ago, Missouri has become a national model in juvenile corrections. At that time, **Missouri's Division of Youth Services** (DYS) began to experiment with smaller correctional programs across the state, and their largest new unit housed only three dozen teens. DYS divided the state into five regions, allowing confined youth to remain within driving distance of their homes and families. And it began staffing its facilities primarily with college-educated "youth specialists," rather than traditional corrections officers. Over the next decade, DYS developed a distinctive new approach to juvenile corrections—one that relies on counseling and personal development, rather than punishment and isolation, as the best course for delinquent teens.

Today, the available data suggest that Missouri is well above the pack in assuring the health and safety of confined youth, preventing abuses, and fostering learning. Most significant, Missouri achieves far more success than most other states in reducing the future criminality of youthful offenders. The most recent DYS recidivism report, compiled in February 2003, shows that 70 percent of youth released in 1999 avoided recommitment to a correctional program within 3 years. Compared to states that measure recidivism in similar ways, these success rates are exceptional. Missouri's lower recidivism rates do not come with a high price tag. The total DYS budget for 2002 was $58.4 million—equal to $103 a day for each young person. Missouri's spending rates are lower than those of states with significantly higher recidivism rates, such as Florida (approximately $271), Louisiana ($270 a day per young person ages 10–16), and Maryland ($192 for each youth ages 10–17).[45]

A community-based effort that has shown extremely positive results is **Multi-Systemic Therapy** (MST), designed as a cost-effective alternative for youth with serious behavior disorders who would normally be confined in out-of-home settings.[46] MST identifies key individuals in each youth's social network who can help them target and change problem behaviors at home, in school, and in their community. For example, MST equips parents to deal more

effectively with a youth's negative actions and generally helps them overcome barriers to effective parenting. MST enables youth to build stronger social support circles of friends, extended family, neighbors, and church members. MST therapists provide treatment and services in the home, in schools, and in other community locations. These include monitoring and disciplining youth, as well as establishing strategies to help youth cut ties with negative influences and develop relationships with more positive peer networks. MST also provides educational support, vocational training, and employment assistance. Treatment generally lasts approximately 4 months, with 60 hours of therapist–family, face-to-face contact.[47]

Evaluations have shown that MST services are highly effective and cost-efficient compared to the traditional juvenile justice interventions of confinement, probation, or residential treatment. Youth on probation are three times less likely to commit new offenses, two times less likely to be re-arrested, and three times less likely to be placed in out-of-home placement in the future. Savings from using MST strategies are also significant. For example, in South Carolina, the state's use of MST (at an average cost of $3,500) instead of institutional placements (average cost of $17,769) saved the state more than $14,000 per youth on treatment alone. This amount does not include the savings derived from a decrease in future crime and future confinement.[48]

Avoiding the unnecessary use of confinement is a critical element of a strategy to prevent young offenders from becoming disconnected young adults. However, we also need to advance efforts that help those youth who are detained to re-connect to school, work, and community upon their release. The best programs take a comprehensive approach, helping youth become economically self-sufficient and building on their strengths.[49]

A New York City-based program taking this approach is the **CUNY (City University of New York) Catch Program**, established in 1991 to provide transitional services for young inmates returning from Rikers Island (the City's largest detention facility) to their home communities. CUNY Catch offers outreach and programming for those who are detained and awaiting trial for a wide range of criminal offenses or who have been sentenced to less than 1 year at Rikers Island. It helps inmates make the transition from jail to community-based campuses for continued counseling, training, and education. A full-time transitional care specialist works as a permanent liaison between the university and the facility, providing workshops, seminars, and motivational programming for students several days each week.

When young people return home from Rikers, Catch staff members help them develop options for gainful employment and offer ex-offenders academic and vocational assistance and referral services on several local college campuses. The post-release program includes a GED preparation class that helps ex-offenders earn certification, learn the workplace skills they need to get and keep a job, and apply to college. The CUNY Catch Program reports a 95 percent success rate for students who have taken the GED test. Latest results indicate that 50 percent of the program participants enrolled in college; the rest received job placement assistance.[50]

Preventing Teen Pregnancy and Helping Young Parents Succeed

In order to reduce the risk that youth will fall prey to long-term disconnection and

disadvantage, it is essential to take on the challenge of reducing adolescent pregnancy, especially in low-income communities where teen childbearing continues to be entrenched and widespread. Although teen pregnancy rates have dropped nationwide, they continue to be much too high, particularly among adolescents of color, and more must be done to help young people make better decisions about responsible sexual behavior. Similarly, we need to develop strategies that can better support young moms and dads so that they can more effectively acquire skills, meet parental responsibilities, and compete in the job market—all to increase the odds that they will achieve economic security for themselves and their children.

Our experiences indicate that the most effective teen pregnancy prevention efforts, including those that promote abstinence, contain three essential components: (1) They stress a high degree of community involvement. (2) They promote and advance communication between youth and their parents and other adults. (3) They provide adolescents with information and high-quality services to make smart decisions about sexual behavior and protect themselves from unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

These three components were core to the Casey Foundation's successful **Plain Talk Initiative**, which was first implemented in Atlanta, San Diego, Hartford, and New Orleans in 1993 and is now being replicated in several cities nationally. Plain Talk is a neighborhood-based initiative that combines adult-focused community outreach and education with youth-focused improvements in services. One key element of the Plain Talk strategy is to train and equip neighborhood adults to provide young people (both male and female) with accurate and straightforward facts about teen pregnancy, STDs, and contraception.

The other element of the Plain Talk strategy is to increase adolescents' access to reproductive health services that are culturally effective and developmentally appropriate and offered at locations and hours that are convenient for teens. By 1997, an independent evaluation found that the incidence of pregnancy and disease was significantly reduced among Plain Talk youth. For example, participating females were 70 percent less likely to get pregnant than those who had not been exposed to the Plain Talk strategies, and males were significantly less likely to have caused a pregnancy. Youth were 80 percent more likely to get routine reproductive health care and half as likely to have an STD.

In addition to Plain Talk, other efforts that stress youth development and lots of interaction with adults also have had a strong impact on helping young women avoid early pregnancy. For example, the **New York City Children's Aid Society's Carrera Program** is an after-school sex education, pregnancy prevention, and youth development program aimed at high-risk black and Hispanic urban youth ages 13 through 15. Adult involvement with youth is a significant program element, based on the belief that parents and other supportive adults have the moral authority and responsibility to become involved to improve teens' reproductive health outcomes.

The Carrera Program has several activity and service components. These include a job club, which offers stipends, bank accounts, employment experience, and career awareness; academic support, including individual assessment, tutoring, PSAT and SAT preparation, and college application assistance; comprehensive family life and sexuality education;

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arts; and athletics. The program also provides mental health services and medical care (including reproductive health care, primary care, and dental care). It operates daily during the school year and summer. A multi-site, multi-year comparative evaluation of 600 youth involved in the program showed that participants demonstrated a better knowledge of sexual health issues. Females were less likely to have ever had sex and were more successful at resisting pressure to have sex. Additionally, sexually active females were significantly more likely to have used condoms along with other contraceptives, and 3 years after participating in the program, they had significantly lower rates of pregnancy and birth.[51]

Some successful, male-focused pregnancy prevention efforts have effectively targeted young Latino and African-American males. For example, **Hombres Jovenes con Palabra (HJCP; Young Men with Word)** is a prevention program for young men in Los Angeles and other sites that builds upon traditional Latino values and culture. It focuses on the concept of "El Hombre Noble" (the noble man) as the foundation of male responsibility. Through interactive educational workshops and presentations, the program helps participants build the knowledge, skills, and will to prevent pregnancy and violence, while developing a positive identity as men of dignity and responsibility. Most are young Latinos between the ages of 14 and 17, and a large proportion have low incomes. About half are sexually active, and approximately 10 percent to 15 percent are already fathers. While originally developed among urban youth in Los Angeles, HJCP is now offered through a variety of institutions throughout the country.

The **Be Proud! Be Responsible! Program** in Philadelphia seeks to prevent pregnancy and disease by building on African-American youths' sense of community. It stresses the importance of protecting one's community, as well as oneself, against the potentially negative consequences of high-risk sexual behavior. Through small-group discussions, videos, role-playing, games, and exercises delivered in six 5-hour sessions, participants learn about responsible sexual behavior and the importance of smart choices. Follow-up with 157 young black men 3 months after participating in the program documented significant reductions in sexual activity and unprotected sex.[52]

To help address the needs of young adults who have already had children, a number of states have used the guidelines of the 1996 welfare reform legislation—the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Act (TANF)—to organize and support their efforts. Among the most successful of these is California's program, **Cal Learn**, a mandatory program for all unmarried custodial teen parents under age 19 who receive welfare and do not have a high school diploma or GED. Cal Learn relies heavily on case management services, provides other support services, and issues sanctions and bonuses according to school progress. A four-county evaluation by UC Berkeley found that graduation rates for participants (usually through a GED) were significantly higher than for non-participants and that positive impacts were greatest among those teen parents who had dropped out of school.[53]

Other states have collaborated with state universities or community colleges to design specialized case management and educational services for teen parents. Some, like **Arizona**, allow teen parents to continue their education at post-secondary institutions

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or to receive special GED or other parenting classes at state universities or community colleges. In **Illinois**, teen parents engaged in post-secondary education are eligible for the benefits that TANF adults accrue when they attend post-secondary institutions. If they maintain a 2.5 grade point average, they can attend school for up to 36 months without it affecting their lifetime 60-month time limit for receiving TANF benefits.[54]

New Jersey is providing child care and other important services to teen parents in high schools. For example, through the **School-Based Youth Services Program**, on-site services at high schools for TANF teen parents are designed to provide teenagers with a comprehensive set of services on a "one-stop-shopping" basis. On-site services include health care, mental health and family counseling, job and career training, substance abuse counseling, and referral services. Several of the sites also provide transportation, child care, tutoring, and family planning.

Similar to pregnancy prevention efforts targeted to males, a number of community-based efforts nationally are now specifically reaching out to young fathers. One Baltimore-based example operates through Casey Family Services, which has created the **Fatherhood Program for Adolescent and Adult Fathers** to serve young men in one of the city's neediest neighborhoods. The program helps young dads—some as young as 15—get an education, find better jobs, secure housing, and establish better relationships with their children. Like other father-focused programs, this effort recognizes that young dads need a comprehensive effort that can offer assistance with issues like employment, health, substance abuse, education, and finances and help with legal matters such as child support, visitation, and custody. A new program to help fathers is "Dads 101," a 6-week training program for new and expecting dads.

Dads Make a Difference is a program of the Healthy Families Initiative, in San Angelo, Texas, and is designed to promote fathers' emotional connections to their children, as well as enhance their ability to provide financial support. Fathers are contacted within a few days of the birth of their child and invited to participate in a wide variety of program activities, including home visits, group meetings, team parenting sessions, father-child play sessions, and recreational activities. The program helps dads develop a greater capacity to provide financial support for their children through remedial education, job training, and employment placement. Of the more than 150 families currently enrolled in Healthy Families programs, approximately 86 percent of the dads receive parent training, 88 percent are employed or in an employment training program, and 74 percent provide some financial support to their children.[55]

Ensuring Educational Success for Our Most Academically At-Risk Youth

Most of the youth discussed in this essay share a common characteristic: They're at risk of reaching young adulthood without the academic credentials, skills, and knowledge to compete successfully in the job market. Because school failure is both an antecedent and a result of the risk factors we have discussed, it is critical that we help more high school-aged youth graduate and provide those who have already dropped out with a chance to regain the ground they have lost.

Countless studies confirm that the most successful schools for at-risk adolescents share certain common traits: They are small so that

youth can form close relationships with mentoring adults; they are demanding, with high expectations for both students and teachers; they promote innovative and creative curricula and instruction; and they view parents and community members as partners in their work with students. Nationally, these principles are being put into practice through a variety of new educational structures, including restructured high schools, charter schools, small schools, and many school choice initiatives.

Some cities are converting large comprehensive high schools into several smaller schools that are housed in one building. For example, the **Julia Richmond Education Complex** in New York City was initially a failing, aging school with 3,000 students and a graduation rate of just 33 percent. During a 3-year period (1994–1996), it was restructured into four new smaller high schools: Vanguard High School, a 400-student school with a typical high school course of study and organizational structure; Manhattan International High School, designed for 310 students with limited fluency in English; Talent Unlimited Performing Arts High School, a 400-student specialty school that also offers basic courses; and Urban Academy, which provides an academically rigorous college-oriented curriculum for 120 students. All schools have physically separate class space with some shared spaces such as a gymnasium, library, or science lab. In addition, students at the complex can take advanced placement courses at local community colleges. Overall achievement and school completion results are vastly improved from pre-conversion rates. The schools in the complex now have a graduation rate that exceeds 90 percent and comparatively high college acceptance rates.[56]

The Oakland Unified School District is establishing a series of small innovative schools across the city and had opened 15 as of September 2003. One of the first was **ASCEND (A School Cultivating Excellence, Nurturing Diversity)**, which began in 2001. Central to the mission of this low-income, minority school is a commitment to the Outward Bound Expeditionary Learning model. This type of instruction emphasizes project-based learning that extends across curriculum areas and takes students out of the classroom and into the community. Every course shares common characteristics: an emphasis on student-led inquiry, connections to the community (through interactions with local experts and service learning projects, for example), and an integrated curriculum with a strong emphasis on the visual and performing arts.[57]

Some cities have used charter school legislation to create smaller, stronger schools for at-risk students. The **Maya Angelou Public Charter School** in Washington, DC, is an alternative high school designed to create a learning environment in a lower-income urban community where teens, particularly those who have not succeeded in traditional schools, can reach their potential. Through small classes, a strong academic and technology-rich curriculum, a focus on critical life skills (like decision making, budgeting, and finance), a residential program for students needing additional support, and school-run nonprofit businesses (including a catering business), students develop the academic, social, and employment skills that they need to build rewarding lives and promote positive change in their communities.

Results achieved at Maya Angelou clearly demonstrate that at-risk youth with histories of poor school performance and court involve-

ment can succeed, given appropriate interventions. On average, Maya Angelou students improved their SAT scores by 18 percent, substantially higher than the District as a whole. In total, 46 percent of students who graduated from Maya Angelou between 2000 and 2002 were court involved when they entered the school, and only 6 percent were court involved when they graduated. All Maya Angelou students have paying jobs while they are enrolled in school, and they are required to save part of their earnings. Graduates had saved an average of more than $1,000 by their senior year, and more than 70 percent of the 2000–2002 graduates enrolled in college.[58]

Although these varied efforts succeed for many adolescents, legions of kids still drop out of our schools annually. Even among those who do remain until graduation, far too many are not academically prepared to either succeed in college or advance in the workplace. The vast majority of dropouts seeking to resume their education do so through adult education courses, which usually do not offer academic credentials and often lack appropriate curriculum, adequate technology, and well-prepared instructors. As a result, these programs have significant retention problems with younger students.[59] We must do more to provide older adolescents and young adults who have not been academically successful with quality opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to become productive, contributing adults.

Community colleges can be particularly valuable, given research indicating that college training, even if it does not result in a degree, can significantly increase one's lifetime earnings. The best community college programs recognize that many youth do not believe they have the necessary academic skills, are uninformed about how to access the community college system, or cannot afford the costs. They work to address these issues and establish routes for disconnected young adults to transition back to school.

For example, some have developed "bridge institutions" or pre-college programs, often offered in partnership with community-based organizations or adult education programs. Others have developed individualized programs that are tailored to the specific needs of these non-traditional students and have bolstered their outreach efforts, counseling and support services, and work-based learning programs so that students can explore careers and also learn the "soft skills" demanded in any workplace.[60]

There are several good examples of community colleges working jointly with community-based organizations to improve access for disconnected young adults. For example, **Austin Community College** in Austin, Texas, helps hundreds of low-income students move from unemployment or dead-end jobs into potentially well-paying careers in 13 different industries (including health care, public safety, construction, and semiconductor technician training) by working closely with city and local employers, high schools, and community-based organizations. Graduates earn industry certification as well as college credits toward an associate's degree. Over the past 4 years, the program has graduated more than 350 participants, with a placement rate of 85 percent.[61]

Chicago's **West Side Technical Institute** (WSTI), part of Richard J. Daley College, provides a good example of a pre-college program designed with input from employers and

college faculty and offered in community-based settings where case management and job placement are part of the package. WSTI serves students who lack 9th grade proficiency in math and reading and helps them quickly qualify for college-level technical programs to improve the skills necessary for job advancement. Technical certificate program areas include manufacturing, office technology, and computer graphics. A recent review of results showed that of 500 students who entered with below 9th grade academic ability, more than half successfully entered a college certification program.[62]

In Oregon, **Portland Community College** has developed College Bound, an innovative alternative high school program for at-risk youth ages 16–20. It provides students who have 8th grade math and literacy skills with an intensive one-term program of college prep courses. Upon successful completion, students qualify to move to mainstream college courses that count toward their high school diploma and an associate's degree. Their results have been impressive. For example, in 2001, 378 students entered (students' average high school GPA was 1.3). With an average attendance rate of 94 percent, almost 77 percent of the College Bound participants gained the reading proficiency required for college-level courses.[63]

In addition to community college programs, there are other specialized programs that successfully maximize the potential and build upon the resilience of young adults who have dropped out of high school. One of the best is **YouthBuild**, which helps young adults gain their GEDs or high school diplomas through classroom training in an alternative high school, while providing them with counseling, leadership training, and employment skills through a construction training program and job experience on community rehabilitation projects. In 2002 there were 203 YouthBuild programs across the country. Since 1994, more than 25,000 young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 have participated in the program and have helped create more than 10,000 units of affordable housing nationwide.[64] An evaluation of YouthBuild found that the program achieved better retention and academic results than most comparable programs.[65]

Many of these examples show that it is possible to provide a new lifeline even to those who have reached late adolescence without adequate academic preparation.Yet much still needs to be done to help this nation's more than 3 million disconnected young people. More targeted investments aimed at helping our 2- and 4-year colleges reach out to this population—particularly those who have not earned high school degrees—are badly needed. Also necessary is a re-examination of current policies that deny Pell Grants (the primary source of federal tuition aid to low-income students) to individuals convicted of even minor drug offenses.

Finally, we should also strengthen and restructure the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), which provides federal funding for job training and other employment services for adults and youth. Results from WIA-supported efforts have been generally positive since its enactment in 1998. In FY 2001, for example, national performance for employment, retention, earnings, and credentialing for both younger and older youth have exceeded established national targets. At the same time, current funding levels provide access for only a very small number—roughly 125,000—of the eligible population. In addition, we need to promote greater coordination between WIA and schools in order to reach

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Knowing more about long-term school enrollment, work experience, and family formation among vulnerable youth would help identify policies and supports that can more effectively help them move from a troubled adolescence to a responsible and healthy adulthood.

out to, and better support, out-of-school youth. According to a recent General Accounting Office report, about 70 percent of WIA programs have focused on preemptive strategies to help in-school youth avoid academic failure. While this is critically important, more must be done to help schools also reconnect dropouts to these important services.[66]

Conclusion

In this 15th annual *KIDS COUNT Data Book*, we have tried to highlight what we believe is a critical national problem: the significant share of our young people who are reaching adulthood with little hope and capacity for long-term success. We have discussed which youth are most at risk of not making a successful adult transition, and we have highlighted examples of efforts nationally that are making inroads toward improving the odds that more of these youth can make it as adults.

We hope that this information is helpful for promoting *greater understanding* of these issues among policymakers, practitioners, parents, funders, and the public. Yet we need to recognize that achieving *positive results* for our at-risk youth requires that we take specific *actions*.

First, we need to get our goals right. As the data we have described illustrate, any of the risk factors discussed in this essay can result from and contribute to the others. Decreasing detention, reducing teen pregnancy, or increasing high school graduation and achievement are absolutely critical goals. However, in our view they are only a means to a more important end: an increase in the numbers of American kids who reach adulthood with the skills, tools, opportunities, and confidence to succeed in the economy and contribute to its success. To reach this goal, we need efforts that are more holistic and comprehensive than anything currently being done in our states and cities.

Second, we cannot reach this goal if we do not acknowledge and address the fact that most of the risk factors and bad outcomes we have discussed disproportionately affect poor kids of color. At least at a basic level, we need to better understand the ways in which current systems that serve families and kids fail to achieve appropriate results for African-American, Hispanic, and other minority youth—and we need to take steps to resolve these issues. We must also do more to involve parents and others in low-income minority communities as full partners in developing strategies, in order to better ensure that the policies we promote are fair and equitable and that the services and practices we pursue are relevant to, and trusted by, the very communities where they are most needed.

This is a challenge, but certainly not impossible. In our work with states, cities, and local communities over the past decade, we have seen strong examples of policymakers, practitioners, and communities working together to shape effective and responsive strategies for reducing minority detention, recruiting minority foster families for older youth, reducing teen pregnancy rates among youth of different cultures, and increasing minority youths' academic achievement.

Third, we need to develop better data about youth in transition—data that systematically examine the overlap among the four key vulnerable youth groups identified in this essay. Research studies tell us, for example, that many teen moms drop out of high school, and we know that those teens who drop out of high

school are more likely to enter juvenile justice facilities. However, apart from a small number of states, such as Illinois, there are not many examples of integrated state and local information systems able to provide data about youth involved in *multiple* systems. This information would greatly contribute to our ability to identify those who are most at risk.

Similarly, we need to do a better job of tracking outcomes for youth as they move into adulthood. Knowing more about long-term school enrollment, work experience, and family formation among vulnerable youth would help identify policies and supports that can more effectively help them move from a troubled adolescence to a responsible and healthy adulthood.

Finally, and most important, we must acknowledge that we will not make any real headway toward the goal of improving successful adult transition without a genuine national, state, and local commitment to this goal. Acting more holistically and comprehensively; promoting more accurate, timely, and integrated data; and successfully addressing the disproportionate numbers of poor and minority kids at risk of lousy adult outcomes—all this will require an unprecedented level of commitment and collaboration. We need parents, residents, schools, colleges, community-based service providers, police, employers, policymakers, funders, and others who are willing to assume ownership and responsibility for seeing that more youth reach adulthood with a good shot at making it, and who are willing to work together to achieve this result. Put more simply, all of us need to respond to this issue with the same tenacity we would employ if our own adolescent sons and daughters, nieces and nephews were at risk.

These are difficult issues to address, and doing so requires us to make hard choices about how we work and how we use our time and resources. Yet, in light of the way we currently use public money, and given the investments we will ultimately make should we choose to ignore this critical issue, the choice ought to be a simple one. We *can* invest more sensibly, we *can* work more effectively, and we *can* do better by our most at-risk kids.

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