American Youth Policy Forum

Building Pathways to Postsecondary Success for Vulnerable Populations

Summary of AYPF Discussion Group
July 20, 2016
Washington, DC

On July 20, 2016, the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) convened a day-long discussion group of key thought leaders across research, practice, and policy focused on building postsecondary education and workforce pathways for vulnerable populations, particularly youth involved in the child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems.

Panelists shared the latest research on education and workforce outcomes for youth aging out of foster care and involved in the juvenile justice system, discussed promising practices for providing pathways to education and workforce skills and credentials, and considered policy frameworks and the role of policy to grow, scale, and sustain education and workforce development strategies for these youth.

For a copy of the full agenda from the day, please click here.

Opening Remarks

> *"We want a world where all young people have the opportunity to have a successful life."* – Leticia Peguero

The day started off with opening remarks from Leticia Peguero, Executive Director, Andrus Family Fund (AFF). Peguero gave an overview of AFF and shared the priorities and vision of the foundation: "We want a world where all young people have the opportunity to have a successful life." With a strong commitment to social justice and racial equity, AFF supports direct service, community organizing, and policy/advocacy work, spanning the fields of research, policy, and practice to "do what works" for our nation's most vulnerable youth.

Peguero stressed the importance of looking at the root causes of inequality, placing race and equity at the center of conversations, and working to dismantle unjust systems. Peguero finished by reminding the room that "there is another way" and that part of today's discussion and future discussions is about figuring out what that other way is.

Jennifer Brown Lerner, Deputy Director, AYPF, provided an overview of the day and outlined AYPF's goals in convening the diverse group of thought leaders. With a range of voices in the room, AYPF wanted to listen and learn about the work and priorities of researchers, practitioners, and advocates and identify opportunities to build connections among those focused on the needs of youth involved in the child welfare and/or juvenile justice system.

Research Perspectives

The first panel of the day provided background on current research about education and workforce attainment for foster care and justice-involved youth and effective strategies to support these vulnerable populations.

American Youth Policy Forum

Dr. Amy Dworsky, Research Fellow, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

In her presentation, Dworsky summarized the educational and employment outcomes of young people transitioning out of foster care, including the barriers these youth face in education and workforce attainment. Her data came from the largest longitudinal study of young people transitioning out of foster care in Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois, The Midwest Study.

In terms of educational outcomes, Dworsky shared that youth in foster care lag behind academically when compared to their peers of the same age group or grade level. These youth are less likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college, and, if enrolled in college, earn a college degree than their peers. Yet when considered at age 26, with additional time to "catch up", 83 percent of women and 77 percent of men received a secondary credential (i.e., high school diploma or GED), which is much more typical of the nation's 4-year high school graduation rate (82 percent). However, postsecondary credential attainment remains very low (11 percent for women and 5 percent for men) for these youth, even at age 26. This reflects the fact that these young people need a lot more support while they are in college.

Dworsky cited many reasons for these low postsecondary education outcomes, including:

- Lack of encouragement to pursue college
- Lack of knowledge about financial aid eligibility and processes
- Lack of preparedness for college-level work
- Lack of financial and emotional supports from family
- Mental and behavioral health problems
- Lack of postsecondary student support services familiar with or prepared to address the unique needs of foster care youth

> *"There is a need for supports well beyond the traditional age in which these young people are in postsecondary education."* – Dr. Amy Dworsky

In order to address these barriers, Dworsky stressed the importance of fulfilling both financial and non-financial needs, such as academic, housing, social supports, and wrap-around campus support services. Dworsky highlighted that the research suggests that youth who were allowed to remain in extended care until age 21 were more likely to attend college and successfully complete at least one year of college. The low degree attainment levels among youth involved in the foster care system further underscores the need for systems to better support both college access and persistence for these youth.

Following from these educational outcomes, former foster care youth are less likely to be employed and tend to earn less than their peers— trends that usually progress well into adulthood. Dworsky highlighted employment trends between men and women that showed, at age 21 and 23-24, men and women were employed at similar rates, at about 50 percent. However, at age 26, 82 percent of women were employed and only 39 percent of men were employed. Dworsky reinforced that this trend can be almost entirely explained by involvement in the justice system among young men by age 26.

Dworsky noted that, until recently, few employment programs or policies have specifically targeted foster youth and that rigorous research is limited on the effectiveness of employment programs for these youth. In general, Dworsky discussed the need for rigorous evaluation of both education and employment programs and the need for post-foster care education and employment services that include housing supports and supports for young parents.

For more information about the research cited in Dworsky's presentation, see: Supporting Youth Transitioning out of Foster Care: Issue Brief 1: Education Programs and Supporting Youth Transitioning out of Foster Care: Issue Brief 3: Employment Programs

Nina Salomon, Senior Policy Analyst, Juvenile Justice, Council of State Governments Justice Center

Salomon's presentation focused on presenting policy recommendations to address juvenile recidivism and improve outcomes for justice-involved youth, with an emphasis on education and workforce development. Salomon began by describing the research on the educational challenges youth involved in the justice system face:

- One third is identified as needing or already receiving special education services
- More than half are significantly below grade level in reading and math
- About 60 percent have repeated a grade
- The majority were suspended and/or expelled from school
- Many dropped out from school altogether

Youth involved in the justice system tend to be overage and under-credited, meaning they do not have the appropriate number of high school credit hours completed for their age and intended grade. These youth are also disproportionately impacted by collateral consequences – or additional legal sanctions and restrictions imposed on a person because of their record – related to education, employment, and housing.

Salomon focused on drawing an important distinction between young adults involved in the justice system, compared to youth and older adults because of their developmental differences and distinct needs. For example, young adults are more vulnerable to peer pressure and more likely to engage in risky behaviors compared to youth. At the same time, they are more impulsive and less able to control their emotions than adults.

Salomon stressed that states and local systems struggle to provide consistent education and vocational services for youth involved in the justice system. This is due in part to the variation between state run, local run, and privately run facilities. While youth incarceration rates have decreased by 50 percent over the last 15 years, youth are more likely to be in private, as opposed to public, facilities today. A national survey of 50 states found that most incarcerated youth do not have access to the same educational and vocational services as their peers and are not attending schools with the same rigorous curricula and performance standards as traditional public schools. Only 8 states provide the same services and less than half of states include programs for incarcerated students in the state accountability system or are nationally accredited for their educational program. The survey revealed that most states do not collect, track, and report student outcome data for incarcerated youth in all secure facility schools. Three-

quarters of private facilities did not know what data was being collected. Finally, the survey found that policies and practices most states use make it particularly challenging for youth who are returning to their community to make an effective transition to community-based educational or vocational services. In half of states, there is no designated individual or entity primarily responsible for overseeing and coordinating the transition.

Salomon stressed the importance of requiring all schools in secured facilities to provide the same services consistent with traditional public schools; holding schools in secured facilities to the same accountability standards as traditional public schools; adopting a minimum set of student outcome indicators that facilities and states track, analyze, and use to improve school performance; and improving the transition process for youth exiting a secured facility by designating an agency to be responsible for connecting a young person to educational or vocational opportunities upon release.

For more information about the research cited in Salomon's presentation, see: Locked Out: Improving Educational and Vocational Outcomes for Incarcerated Youth and Reducing Recidivism and Improving Other Outcomes for Young Adults in the Juvenile and Adult Criminal Justice Systems

Jessica Kendall, Senior Technical Specialist, ICF International

In her presentation, Kendall shared the findings of the Benchmark Study of the Reentry Employment Opportunity (REO) program— a program aimed at creating pathways to successful reentry for incarcerated adults and youth. The program has been around for about 10 years, with 19 cohorts of grants issued across the program to 190 grantees, exclusively faith-based and community-based organizations from around the country. These organizations have different foci based on the populations they serve, but each program is required to provide group and individual mentoring, case-management services, employment-readiness and education support services, and, as of 2013, ensure that the employment training offer leads to an industry-recognized credential.

Kendall shared the key takeaways of the Benchmarking Study for youth involved in the justice system. She stressed the importance of building relationships and maintaining regular communication with judges and probation officers; providing court advocates to mentor and help youth navigate the court system; and helping youth avoid the justice system altogether by establishing relationships at schools and with police.

> *"Those leaving the justice system, arguably can be some of the most vulnerable [members of society] … and those that are facing some of the greatest barriers"* – Jessica Kendall

Kendall discussed several recommendations from the Benchmark Study. She underscored the importance of organizations building capacity to use research-validated assessment tools to address a participant's unique needs; focusing on trauma-specific and trauma-informed approaches with participants; formalizing partnerships with prison facilities and connecting to program participants early; and aligning objectives between work-release and employment reentry programs since there can be an inability to offer career pathways programs when pressure is placed on individuals, as they leave prison, to get a job quickly, regardless of what the job is.

In closing, Kendall stressed the importance of family engagement and the need for a "whole family approach." She also discussed the need to ensure that programs foster soft skills and life skills, as well as offer opportunities for independence, autonomy, and control to promote buy-in and inclusion among program participants. Not only does there need to be collaboration among systems, but there needs to be collaboration between the participants and the program.

For more information about the research cited in Kendall's presentation, see: Lessons In Reentry From Successful Programs And Participants: The Final Report of the Reentry Employment Opportunities Benchmarking Study

Practice Perspectives

For the second panel, four leaders from across the country, who work directly with youth who have juvenile justice and/or foster care system experience, presented an overview of their programs and offered lessons learned from their work.

Monique De La Oz, Senior Director of Learning and Career Development, Phipps Neighborhoods

De La Oz shared information about two programs that are a part of Phipps Neighborhoods in Bronx, New York: NYC Justice Corps and Career Network: Healthcare. Strategic partnerships that are structured intentionally and include employers, community based organizations, and a local community college are critical to the success of these programs. For the NYC Justice Corps, which serves young people with juvenile justice involvement, employers help create the curriculum through which graduates receive an OSHA credential. A partnership is also in place with Youth Represent, an organization that helps young people deal with the legal consequences of their juvenile justice history to help increase their likelihood of success. Sometimes young people are not even aware of their "rap sheet," let alone the employment barriers associated with having that history, so this organization is an important partner in helping youth navigate these issues.

The Career Network: Healthcare program is a privately funded program designed for 18-26 years old individuals with health career aspirations. Employers are involved at all levels of the program and Montefiore Medical Center serves as the main employer. Program participants gain exposure to the workplace and receive advice on ways to thrive within that culture. Recently, Montefiore has provided employment pathways for participants to higher earning careers, and more hospitals have joined the initiative and provide training and employment opportunities for program participants. In addition, Hostos Community College offers courses in the health fields for participants to take classes in areas of interest for further career exploration.

Case management plays a vital role in both of these programs. For instance, in the Career Network: Healthcare program, young people have weekly meetings with their case manager, who helps them identify classes and connects them to a career navigator. De La Oz mentioned that the program is hoping to add a retention specialist to help improve their employment outcomes.

One lesson that De La Oz shared is that sometimes the young person may not be ready to participate in one of these programs, and therefore there must be opportunities for young people to restart and try again to complete a program when they are better prepared to succeed.

Geoff Foster, Director of Organizing and Policy, UTEC

Foster outlined UTEC's model of working in Lowell and Lawrence, Massachusetts predominately with "proven-risk youth," also known as impact youth, a population that is high on the risk scale. Within their program, half of youth are parents, and many of them have a history of gang involvement and are involved in the juvenile justice system. According to Foster, the program is not a second chance but rather "a 12th chance" for many youth, since many have a long history of experiencing failure.

Given this population, the program uses a scaffolded approach, starting the participants in low-skilled jobs and ultimately leading them towards the opportunity to be involved in running a social enterprise. UTEC has two social enterprises within their organization: a mattress recycling plant and a full-service café and catering enterprise. UTEC also has a unique culture that is meant to build a sense of belonging; among their values is showing "mad love," which means accepting everyone unconditionally and offering everyone a clean state.

In order to prepare currently incarcerated youth for their future, they are matched with a transitional coach, who they begin meeting with 6-9 months before their release. UTEC participants are also given the chance to participate in community organizing, so that they will be lifelong advocates for issues that affect young people with justice involvement.

The success of UTEC – 83 percent of youth are not arrested in the last 2 years since leaving UTEC and 82 percent are employed two years later – can be credited to some unique program features including a memorandum of understanding with the two nearby counties that allows for data sharing with sheriffs, and a plan to start identifying youth behind walls and providing them access to more of UTEC's services and training prior to their release. Moving forward, UTEC is putting a renewed focus on meeting the young people's basic needs, including that of permanent housing.

One lesson that Foster shared is the importance of engaging employers to ensure that their proven-risk young people have real pathways to long-term employment. UTEC has a partnership with Whole Foods, for instance, which makes it more likely for UTEC participants to access employment and provides Whole Foods with a source of well-trained potential employees.

Jodi Rosenbaum, Founder and CEO, More Than Words

Rosenbaum runs More Than Words (MTW), a nonprofit, social enterprise bookstore and café in Boston and Waltham, Massachusetts that works with youth in the foster care and juvenile justice systems on workforce development and training. Youth work for pay for 20 hours per week and receive case management to access supports and build life skills that will position them for future employment.

MTW places a major emphasis on evaluation and data. Youth enter their own data into the case management software and fill out regular surveys. During performance reviews, staff members analyze the data so that their decision-making can be neutral and objective.

After youth graduate from the program, MTW provides two years of follow-up support to ensure youth continue to experience success in education, employment, and self-efficacy. The outcomes data at MTW indicate that 83 percent of graduates have obtained a GED or diploma, but staff recognize that

they must focus more time and effort on providing support for college access and success as an area for future improvement.

One lesson that Rosenbaum shared is that the power of work can be a vehicle to transform lives because of the tangible feeling of control it provides to young people. Young people at MTW also report feeling a sense of camaraderie, which, in turn, makes them more likely to develop positive habits and succeed.

Melissa Sawyer, Co-Founder and Executive Director, Youth Empowerment Project

Sawyer opened her presentation with stark information: New Orleans has per capita the third highest population of youth involved in the justice system, and Louisiana has per capita the highest population of youth involved in the justice system of all states. The Youth Empowerment Project (YEP), she explained, serves a serious need, providing young people who have juvenile justice experience with training and pathways to long-term employment.

YEP runs a number of programs including a bike shop, where young people come to see riding bikes as reliable transportation for themselves and repairing bikes as a way to support themselves. Among the innovations of her program include a partnership with Bard Early College High School to bring high quality educational programming. There is flexibility in the duration and dosage of their programs – for instance, age does not necessarily dictate which program a person can enter and how much support one will receive – which allows the YEP staff to serve the most urgent needs of young people, while spending money most efficiently.

Sawyer often advocates for her program by making an economic argument: there are $360 million dollars in lost wages due to incarceration. The outcomes of YEP may begin to address that problem; YEP has three times the state average of young people enrolled in postsecondary education who maintain good retention rates. However, YEP participants have not been able to earn credentials at comparable rates, so the program plans to make improvements in that area.

One lesson that Sawyer shared is the importance of building a sense of camaraderie and "family" among program participants and staff to ensure the long-term stability of young people. Staff are representative of the communities they serve, YEP has low staff turnover, and of its program graduates, four work there now full time, while six work their part time. "Once you're in YEP, you're part of the YEP family indefinitely," Sawyer stated.

Policy Perspectives

Moderator: Monique Miles, Director, Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund and Deputy Director, Aspen Forum for Community Solutions, Aspen Institute

The final panel discussion of the day was asked to share ideas on relevant policy frameworks and to identify policy opportunities moving forward. Miles served as the moderator for this panel and opened the discussion by sharing her own observation of the day: "It's not that we have to teach our children to be resilient. It's that the waters are toxic. These systems are toxic. Instead of teaching our children how to swim in toxic waters, we need to purify the water."

> *"It's not that we have to teach our children to be resilient. It's that the waters are toxic. These systems are toxic. Instead of teaching our children how to swim in toxic waters, we need to purify the water."* – Monique Miles

Each panelist then described their organizations' relevant policy framework and engaged in a discussion with each other and the audience.

Kisha Bird, Director, Youth Policy, Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)

Bird responded to Miles' framing comment to say "it is not just that the water is toxic, but rather, we need new water." She continued that the explicit focus of CLASP's youth policy team is on race and equity. The team is asking questions about how education and employment training can combat structural and institutional racism by specifically looking at opportunities within implementation of youth-serving legislation such as the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). As for federal policy, Bird acknowledged that national organizations do not necessarily have all the answers, but rather need to ensure federal policy remains flexible enough for good state decision-making to develop appropriate, local, context-specific solutions.

Outlining CLASP's recently released report, *Realizing Youth Justice: Advancing Education and Employment through Public Policy and Investment*, Bird emphasized the following opportunities for policymakers moving forward:

- Greater emphasis on understanding the needs of boys and men of color as well as girls and women of color
- Reform within the criminal justice system
- Recognizing education and employment training as a re-investment strategy that can include diversionary strategies and "Ban the Box"[1] efforts
- Revising school disciplinary policies and reshaping the roles of school resource officers
- Addressing mental health needs and the cultural competence of providers
- Expanding and/or creating new funding opportunities to encourage social enterprise endeavors
- Revisiting governance structures to encourage/mandate more cross-agency/system collaboration

Jennifer Miller, Founding Partner, Child Focus, and Lead Consultant, Foster Care Working Group of Youth Transitions Funders Group

Miller shifted the conversation to ask "can we improve safety and permanency if we focus on well-being?" Well-being, as defined by 2012 memo from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), is a "focus on social and emotional well-being to attend to children's behavioral, emotional, and social

[1] "Ban the Box" is an international campaign to remove the checkbox about involvement with the justice system from employment and college applications.

functioning – those skills, capacities, and characteristics that enable young people to understand and navigate their world in healthy, positive ways." Miller shared the Youth Transition Funders Group's *Investing to Improve the Well-Being of Vulnerable Youth and Young Adults: Recommendations for Policy and Practice* which aimed to both reinforce the message from ACF and provide concrete strategies for philanthropic partners to actualize. These include emphasizing coordination among multiple systems such as child welfare, education, workforce, and health; utilizing a lens of race and equity to approach decision-making; responding to youth voices; and creating a common language across all partners to jointly understand the responsibilities and desired outcomes.

Jennifer Pokempner, Child Welfare Policy Director, Juvenile Law Center (JLC)

Stating that "creating policy is necessary in order to do good service work," Pokempner articulated that her organization works to identify unique barriers facing justice and foster care system-involved youth and chip away at the most common ones. She shared the example of JLC's efforts to ensure these vulnerable populations are guaranteed access to a high-quality high school credential.

As states are working to implement ESSA, Pokempner sees concrete opportunities to share best policy and practice examples, particularly with regard to the school stability requirements for foster care youth. In addition, she identified the pending reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) as another area where there is a unique opportunity to build on the targeted efforts to serve youth involved in the foster care system and to guide and support the development of policy to address barriers facing justice-involved youth.

Thaddeus Ferber, Vice President, Policy Advocacy, Forum for Youth Investment

Ferber began by indicating that the goal of our policy work should be to move from the exception to the norm in terms of policy supporting the type of cross-system, coordinated work discussed by both the research and practice panels. Ferber outlined the variety of ways he thinks policy can support the work either through funding and/or breaking down cumbersome barriers, including:

- Collective Impact[2]
- Place-based initiatives that coordinate multiple services for youth including Promise Neighborhoods, Choice Neighborhoods, and Performance Pilot Partnerships
- Recent Uniform Guidance that allows all federal agencies to blend certain funding for similar activities
- Pay for Success
- Evidence-based policymaking

Following the presentations, there was discussion about concrete opportunities to build a common framework to serve vulnerable populations, stemming from research-supported best practices. The

[2] Collective Impact is a framework for fostering large-scale social change by leveraging cross-sector collaboration and coordination between different systems, institutions, and organizations.

framework would create a shared understanding of goals and outcomes that could be applicable both to specific federal legislation as well as interpretation/guidance for implementation by states and localities.

Conclusion

This thought leaders' discussion brought together voices from across research, practice, and policy to explore building postsecondary education and workforce pathways for youth involved in the child welfare and/or juvenile justice system. As described above, the panels offered the latest education and employment-related research on foster care and justice-involved youth, shared program models and lesson of best practice, and discussed the policy frameworks of their organizations and the policy opportunities to support the success of these vulnerable youth. Several major themes emerged from the day-long discussion:

Basic Needs

The importance of ensuring a young person's basic needs like housing, safety, health care, child care, etc. are met so postsecondary education and work are attainable and sustainable was reiterated throughout the day. In order to ensure these basic needs are met, the ability to work and earn money is crucial for vulnerable populations who are often responsible for supporting themselves and their families.

Skill Development

In addition to the financial barriers youth face to accessing and succeeding in postsecondary and work, the importance of basic skill development such as literacy and social skills (i.e., professionalism, behavior management, cultural competence, self-efficacy, executive functioning, etc.) was repeatedly underscored.

Mentorship

In order to overcome barriers to education and workforce pathways, it is important that youth receive authentic mentorship and intensive case management that help youth navigate complex systems, access wraparound and transitional services, and mitigate the impact of collateral consequences. It was highlighted that practices should be trauma informed and engage whole families in a multigenerational approach to support.

Data and Research

The importance of data collection and analysis for continuous improvement and markers of progress was stressed. Also, it was made clear that more research is needed in order to better understand what specifically works for youth in foster care and/or court-involved youth.

Flexible Policies

The importance of flexible federal policymaking for customizable state/local implementation was emphasized. Ideally, advocates and the youth themselves should be involved in the policy process, from formation to implementation to promote sound policies.

For copies of all the resources from this discussion group, including PowerPoint presentations, speaker bios, and the full list of attendees, please visit AYPF's event resource page.