American Youth Policy Forum

Supporting Pathways to Long-Term Success for Systems-Involved Youth: Lessons Learned

AYPF Brief

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Introduction

For 25 years, the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) has been committed to informing, educating, and engaging policymakers and policy influencers about issues and opportunities that improve education, workforce, and youth outcomes in the United States. AYPF believes systems and supports should help to ensure all young people are able to succeed in school, earn a family-sustaining wage, and be civically engaged. AYPF has always paid close attention to the needs of traditionally underserved youth – such as youth involved in the juvenile justice system or in foster care – and the importance of providing equitable access to education and workforce opportunities in order for all to live a full and productive adult life.

About This Brief

This brief is a compilation of lessons learned from AYPF's last two years of work focused specifically on systems-involved youth. Following a discussion about the education and workforce barriers these youth face, their outcomes, and the policies that affect them, this brief is organized into three key lessons that AYPF has identified as critical for promoting pathways to postsecondary education, training, and careers for youth involved in the juvenile justice system and/or youth in foster care. Drawing upon research-supported best practices of community-based programs from around the country, these lessons include:

1) **Leveraging authentic youth voice;**
2) **Providing youth with a diversity of comprehensive supports and transitional services; and**
3) **Strategically aligning youth-serving systems and policies.**

Who are Systems-Involved Youth?

Throughout this brief, the term 'systems-involved youth' is used to describe youth involved in the juvenile justice system, child welfare system, or both systems (i.e., crossover youth). Here is how AYPF defines these groups:

Justice-involved youth are children and youth in contact with the juvenile justice system, whether detained, adjudicated, or placed in a facility, on probation, or other kind of system involvement. Youth become justice-involved as a result of personal, property, drug, and public order charges, status offenses – conduct considered criminal when committed by a minor – and technical violations, such as acts that violate probation or parole. In one year, more than 1,000,000 juvenile justice cases are handled by U.S. courts.

Foster youth are children and youth placed under the care of the child welfare system. Some of the leading causes of youth entering foster care are neglect, physical abuse, caretaker or parent drug abuse, or lack of proper childcare. In 2015, more than 400,000 children in the United States were in foster care.

Crossover youth are youth who have come into contact with both the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. Crossover youth may be in these systems at different points or at the same time, and their status may or may not be known to either the child welfare or juvenile justice system. *Dual contact/status youth* are crossover youth who have involvement in both systems, but not at the same time. *Dually-involved youth* are crossover youth who are concurrently involved in both systems. Given the various definitions and involvement with both systems, identifying these youth can be difficult. It is estimated that approximately two-thirds of justice-involved youth have also had some contact with the child welfare system.

Given the challenges that systems-involved youth face in completing secondary education and accessing postsecondary education and family-sustaining careers, it is important for policymakers and policy influencers to have a clear understanding of the barriers these youth face and the opportunities to support these youth on a path to long-term success. Numerous pieces of federal legislation that are being implemented or are due for renewal can help support these youth to access education and training and prepare for careers.

The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) contains a number of provisions to advance equity, giving states an opportunity to redesign their education systems to better support traditionally underserved students, including systems-involved youth. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA) funds the nation's workforce training, supports coordination with adult education and vocational rehabilitation programs, and prioritizes supports and services for out-of-school youth, including youth involved in the juvenile justice system and in foster care. The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA) is in the process of being reauthorized, and the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (FCA), Higher Education Act (HEA), and Perkins Career and Technical Education Act are also due for reauthorization. In addition to ESSA and WIOA, these four pieces of federal legislation can be leveraged to promote equity and remove barriers to education and workforce opportunities for juvenile justice, foster care, and crossover youth.

UNDERSTANDING SYSTEMS-INVOLVED YOUTH

Education and Workforce Barriers and Outcomes

Young people involved in the juvenile justice and/or child welfare systems often face significant challenges to accessing education and workforce opportunities. For example, youth involved in the juvenile justice system (justice-involved youth) often enter the system with significant educational deficits. Research demonstrates that over a third of adjudicated youth are identified as eligible for special education services.[1] Adjudicated youth also 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, and more than half have reading and math skills significantly below grade level.[2]

Adjudicated youth face significant barriers once released from custody, in part due to often inadequate educational or transitional services provided while incarcerated. According to the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection, education programs in juvenile justice facilities often offer fewer hours of educational programming and less access to math and science courses compared to traditional public schools.[3] This is particularly troubling for youth entering the system already academically behind. It is common for justice-involved youth to face systemic discrimination upon reentry into their community, such as limited access to housing and social services, and barriers to employment and postsecondary education due to criminal record, and their system involvement often perpetuates the isolation and disadvantages that affect their education and workforce success.[4,5,6]

Youth in foster care (foster youth) also face a range of barriers to academic success. Foster youth are more likely to lag behind their peers academically, be suspended or expelled, experience higher rates of absenteeism, and only 50 percent of foster youth complete high school by age 18.[7,8] Youth in foster care are also more likely to experience homelessness, change schools, or move more frequently, all of which can lead to an unstable or interrupted education that has been linked to negative educational outcomes, such as decreased academic achievement and an increased likelihood of dropping out.[9]

Additionally, youth in foster care are less likely to be employed and tend to earn less than their peers as adults.[10] According to the Midwest Study, a longitudinal study that has been following a sample of young people from Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois as they transition out of foster care into adulthood since 1999, men and women were employed at similar rates (about 50 percent) at age 21 and 23-24. However, at age

26, 82 percent of women were employed but only 39 percent of men were employed, a trend that can be almost entirely explained by their involvement in the justice system.[11]

Crossover youth struggle with the education and workforce barriers and outcomes discussed above, and often face mental health problems, drug abuse, unemployment, homelessness, and recidivism. [12] Compared to youth who are only involved in one system (juvenile justice or child welfare), this population experiences higher rates of criminal justice involvement and public support services as adults.[13]

Featured Resource: AYPF Microsite	Featured Resource: AYPF Resource Page
This resource, which draws upon national, state, and local research and data, provides snapshots of education and workforce outcomes of systems-involved youth and explores the challenges they face.	This resource page acts as a hub of both AYPF and partner organization resources related to youth involved in the juvenile justice system and/or youth in foster care.
Click here to learn more.	**Click here** to learn more.

Systems and Policies that Affect Systems-Involved Youth

Youth involved in the juvenile justice and/or youth in foster care often face barriers to accessing opportunities that other public systems provide (i.e., housing, health, transportation, education), further highlighting the importance of federal policies that target these youth and address the challenges they face.[14,15, 16,17]

Legislation and initiatives specifically targeted to these traditionally underserved populations exist to protect youth in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, to define and ensure their rights, and provide access to education and workforce opportunities. Additionally, many pieces of broader youth legislation specifically mention youth involved in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems.

Featured Resource: Education and Workforce Related Policies Affecting Systems-Involved Youth Fact Sheet
This AYPF fact sheet intends to inform researchers, policymakers, and practitioners of the federal legislation that govern systems-involved youth, and highlight grant opportunities. This resource includes legislation and grants specifically focused on supporting secondary, postsecondary, and workforce success among youth involved in the juvenile justice and/or child welfare system.
Click here to learn more.

Related AYPF Resources

- Discussion Group Summary: Building Pathways to Postsecondary Success for Vulnerable Populations
- Policy Brief: Creating Access to Opportunities for Youth in Transition from Foster Care

LESSONS LEARNED

AYPF has identified three lessons that are critical to promoting pathways to postsecondary education, training, and careers for systems-involved youth:
1) Leveraging authentic youth voice;
2) Providing youth with a diversity of comprehensive supports and transitional services; and
3) Strategically aligning youth-serving systems and policies.

Leveraging Authentic Youth Voice

Young people are often their own best advocates and their voices can be leveraged to promote pathways to postsecondary education and workforce opportunities. Youth advocacy and civic engagement is especially powerful for systems-involved youth who can draw upon their own experiences in foster care and/or the juvenile justice system to advocate for change. This kind of authentic youth organizing can lead to positive policy and practice changes reflective of youth experiences. Additionally, through youth organizing and advocacy, young people develop important knowledge, skills, and abilities for success in adulthood.

Systems-involved youth have unique insight into the issues and barriers affecting them, making their knowledge and expertise a valuable resource to policymakers and policy influencers. Policymakers are often far removed from the people that their policies affect and do not always deeply understand the barriers to education and workforce opportunities that youth involved in the juvenile justice system and in foster care face. Therefore, the incorporation of youth voice and advocacy is critical for the development of sound policies aimed at protecting and supporting systems-involved youth.

Best Practice Spotlight: UTEC

The founding of UTEC, Inc. (originally known as United Teen Equality Center) is rooted in youth voice and advocacy. UTEC was founded in 1999 by a group of teens who wanted a safe space in response to gang activity and violence in their community of Lowell, Massachusetts. UTEC seeks to "ignite and nurture the ambition of our most disconnected young people to trade violence and poverty for social and economic success," measuring their impact through reduced recidivism and increased employability and educational attainment. UTEC serves proven-risk young adults, ages 17-25, who have histories of incarceration or serious gang involvement. A majority have no high school credential, and about one-third are also young parents. UTEC's model includes intensive street and correctional facility outreach, transitional coaching, paid work experience in its social enterprises, and enrichment programming, in addition to a strong emphasis on civic engagement and organizing. The long-term recidivism rate of UTEC-enrolled young adults averages less than 15%, compared with a statewide average above 50%.

An example of UTEC's organizing work is its leadership role within Teens Leading the Way (TLTW), a state-wide, youth-led coalition that fights for social change through the policymaking process. In recent years, TLTW has focused their campaign on juvenile record expungement. Many young adults face barriers to employment, higher education, and housing as a result of having a criminal record, and TLTW is working to increase awareness of the issue and to pass legislation for record expungement.

Promoting youth voice and advocacy is also a powerful strategy for helping young people develop important knowledge, skills, and abilities for adulthood, better preparing them for success in postsecondary education and careers. Engaging in advocacy and empowerment activities provides youth with opportunities to develop strong inter- and intrapersonal skills, such as teamwork, communication, adaptability, self-advocacy, and self-regulation. These activities also help youth develop a deeper understanding of how to shape the policies that affect them and their peers.

Best Practice Spotlight: Foster Youth in Action

Foster Youth in Action (FYA) was established in 2008 by foster youth organizers and advocates in California who saw the promise and possibility of a national network of current and former foster youth working together for systems change. FYA believes in the power of youth voice and organizes a grassroots network of foster youth-led groups through training, leadership opportunities, shared learning, and advocacy. With 23 current and pending partners, FYA builds the capacity of organizations to support youth-led advocacy and organizing aimed at fighting to secure rights and opportunities for current and former foster youth.

FYA recognizes that youth organizing is a powerful tool for youth development. FYA's youth organizing approach joins positive youth development principles, community organizing practices, and a commitment to systems change to challenge inequity. Under this approach, foster youth organize, build their groups, identify issues prioritized by their peers in care, and take action through advocacy campaigns. Along the way, youth build essential leadership skills, knowledge, confidence, and connections for a healthy and productive adulthood.

Related AYPF Resources
- Webinar: Leveraging Youth Voice and Advocacy to Support Pathways to Success
- Blog Post: "Do You See Me?": Youth Voice to Address Barriers
- Blog Post: "Nothing About Us, Without Us:" Leveraging Youth Voice for Change-making

Drawn from lessons learned about leveraging authentic youth voice, below are considerations for policymakers and policy influencers to promote long-term success for systems-involved youth.

➢ Policymakers and influencers should consider ways to incentivize the authentic incorporation of youth voice into decision-making processes at the programmatic, local, and state level to better inform policies and practices affecting young people.

Diversity of Comprehensive Supports and Transitional Services

Continued education and workforce training is necessary for success in today's labor market.[18] While supports that focus on preparing youth for transition from secondary education to postsecondary education and/or the workforce are important for all youth, they are particularly necessary for systems-involved youth whose systems-involvement further exacerbates barriers to educational and workforce opportunities. Systems-involved youth need a diversity of comprehensive supports and transitional services to successfully access education and employment opportunities and to become self-sufficient adults. Programs across the country are providing education and workforce opportunities for foster care and justice-involved youth, rooted in principles of positive youth development and coupled with supportive transitional services.

A critical component of programs that provide comprehensive supports for systems-involved youth is a pathway to secondary credential completion and access to postsecondary education. Given that youth exiting systems may not have completed high school, opportunities to earn a traditional high school diploma or equivalency diploma allow students more options in accessing postsecondary education and life-sustaining employment. Additionally, programmatic supports such as providing financial scholarships, college counseling, and tutoring services, or referrals to these services, after completion of a secondary credential can support enrollment in and completion of postsecondary degrees.

Career counseling, job training, and work-based experiences are critical components of a diversity of comprehensive supports important for ensuring systems-involved youth successfully access workforce opportunities. Structured and supported work experiences expose young people to various career options and provide the opportunity to build employer-desired skills such as punctuality, teamwork, and communication. Participation in job training programs or workshops can support entry into the workforce through advice on resume writing and interviewing. Apprenticeships and internships serve as experience in an actual work environment, learning not only job-specific tasks but also transferrable skills important for any work environment. Paid job training and employment is especially important for youth who need opportunities to work and earn a wage to support themselves and possibly any dependent family or children.

Best Practice Spotlight: iFoster

iFoster, a national non-profit based out of California serving foster youth, has developed a comprehensive job training and job placement program that identifies industry needs and matches foster youth to provide an avenue to additional postsecondary and career opportunities.

iFoster partners with twenty national employers—like Starbucks, Krogers, and CVS—and provides qualified potential hires. iFoster communicates with employers to learn the work culture and what core competencies their entry level jobs require and matches these with the skillsets and interests of the youth and employer upon the start of the job. If youth are not yet ready to enter the workforce after training, iFoster works with partner organizations to find internship opportunities. While the jobs that youth begin with are entry level, there are opportunities within each organization to be promoted, and iFoster works with employers to ensure flexible schedules and even provide scholarships if a young person is pursuing postsecondary education. Over 350 youth have been employed in permanent, competitive jobs through iFoster's job program in its first two years, with over a 90% retention rate in living-wage jobs. Youth participating in the program average about 3 months before a promotion, and two-thirds of those employed in permanent job placements are attending college. Youth served by iFoster have collectively earned over $14.5 million to-date.

Education and job training paired with comprehensive social supports, such as housing, food, transportation, trauma-informed care, mental health care, and other health services are critical for helping systems-involved youth successfully transition to adulthood and self-sufficiency. Comprehensive services that address the holistic needs of systems-involved youth are more likely to be effective than the provision of stand-alone services. Too often, youth reentering their community or exiting foster care lack the resources and supportive networks central to transitioning to postsecondary education and employment opportunities. Caring adult advisors, counselors, and mentors that provide education and career guidance, connect youth to educational and workforce opportunities, and assist youth in ensuring their health and safety needs are met can help to fill this void.

Best Practice Spotlight: Civicorps

Since 1995, Civicorps has supported young adults in Oakland, California earn a high school diploma, gain job skills, pursue college, and begin a path to family sustaining careers. 99 percent of Civicorps students live in poverty and are students of color, half are justice-involved, and a quarter are former foster youth. Civicorps is the only high school diploma program in the Oakland Unified School District for young adults ages 18-26 that have not previously earned a high school diploma. Through their holistic model, Civicorps boasts a 72 percent graduation rate (among the highest in Oakland), and one year after graduation, 73 percent of graduates are still enrolled in college and/or employed.

Through Civicorps' charter school, students earn a high school diploma at their own pace, and all students have an individualized learning plan, access to one-on-one tutoring, and complete an academic portfolio. During the school day, students are engaged in trauma-informed case counseling, mindfulness, mentoring, and financial literacy training. Students also participate in paid job training, working 32 hours a week on contracts with 11 public agencies and earning nearly $13 per hour. While on the job, students gain important occupational and soft skills, and also have the opportunity to earn industry certifications though some of the East Bay's largest employers. During job training, students also attend evening classes two nights a week, working towards graduation. Additionally, for one year post-graduation, Civicorps offers career and college supports. Civicorps helps graduates apply for jobs, get placed in internship or union apprenticeship programs, enroll in community college, and access services not found on college campuses during evening classes, such as tutoring, special education support, and case counseling.

Policy also plays a critical role in supporting the transition of systems-involved youth from secondary to postsecondary education and/or workforce opportunities. ESSA provides an opportunity for states to use funding for purposes of transitional supports. Title 1, Part D of ESSA focuses specifically on prevention and intervention programs for neglected, delinquent, and at-risk youth, which encompasses youth involved in the juvenile justice system and youth in foster care. Changes to Title 1, Part D aim to promote transition from juvenile justice facilities to school and/or work, and support reentry back into society. ESSA also requires a state and local education agency point of contact for child welfare agencies, to ensure that foster care provisions are being implemented at both the state and local levels. Additionally, WIOA prioritizes career services and supports for justice-involved and foster youth, and the WIOA one-stop centers specifically support the transition to employment opportunities through high-quality career services, education and workforce training, and other support services.

Relevant AYPF Resources

- Webinar: Promoting Pathways to Long-Term Success for Systems-Involved Youth
- Blog Post: Supports Are Essential for Success

Drawn from lessons learned about providing youth with a diversity of comprehensive supports and transitional services, below are considerations for policymakers and policy influencers to promote long-term success for systems-involved youth.

➢ Policymakers and influencers should support the replication and scaling of programmatic models that holistically address the education, employment, health and safety needs of youth, rooted in youth development and trauma-informed care.

- Policymakers and influencers should incentivize education and paid job training/ employment models that provide youth with opportunities to build skills and earn a living wage.

- Given the increased priority in transition planning under ESSA and WIOA, policymakers and influencers should consider how transitional services can be better coordinated to facilitate both successful transition out of foster care or the juvenile justice system and into secondary or postsecondary education, training programs, or work.

Aligning Youth-Serving Systems and Policies

Systems alignment across youth agencies is necessary to provide structured and supported pathways for young people to postsecondary and workforce opportunities.[19] Establishment of common language and goals and alignment of policies and procedures provides consistency for those navigating the system and potential for capacity building. States and localities across the country are taking various measures to align youth-serving systems to improve education and workforce outcomes for their systems-involved youth.

Best Practice Spotlight: Social Enterprise Model

Many programs that serve systems-involved youth are using social enterprises to both provide workforce training and development, and also earn revenue to support organizational programming. Here are a few examples:

Civicorps: Civicorps operates two social enterprises, Environmental Management and Recycling, which produced 40% of the organizations revenue in FY15-16. In the Environmental Management Social Enterprise, youth work 32 hours a week, earning AmeriCorps Education Awards and graduating the program with $1,500 to fund postsecondary education. The Recycling Social Enterprise also provides opportunities for truck driving pre-apprenticeships with Waste Management.

More Than Words (MTW): More Than Words empowers systems-involved youth to generate over $2 million in gross sales from their online, retail, wholesale and pop-up used book businesses while gaining critical skills and experience. In addition to this paid work approximately 20 hours per week, youth receive intensive case management to support their plans for future education, work, and life. After 6-12 months in the enterprise, graduates receive two years of career services after transitioning to other jobs and postsecondary education.

UTEC: Through UTEC's Workforce Development and Social Enterprise Program youth earn income while also participating in training at UTEC's café, catering services, mattress recycling, and woodworking businesses.

Youth Empowerment Project (YEP): YEP's Work and Learn Center, a job training program focused on skill-building through work-based experiences, allows youth to receive an educational stipend for their time working at one of three of YEP's businesses, a bicycle repair shop, a thrift store, and a graphic design studio.

As programs and agencies that serve systems-involved youth often have limited funding streams, braided and blended funding across systems and programs can provide the resources needed to improve youth outcomes. While many programs receive grants from the federal government, programs are innovative in how they bring additional revenue to their organizations. For example, some programs use their social enterprises not only as job training for youth, but revenue for the organization. A common challenge among programs serving systems-involved youth is the limited amount of unrestricted funding. Federal grant programs like the Performance Partnership Pilots (P3) help address this challenge by allowing for flexibility in the use of discretionary funds across multiple federal agencies.

Another key aspect of system alignment and opportunity for improvement across youth-serving systems is the ability to collect and share data and information. Collecting and sharing data is essential in assessing the needs within a locality or state and understanding the impact of interventions. In order to ensure youth involved in foster care and the juvenile justice system successfully access and transition to postsecondary education and workforce opportunities, it is essential that local and state education, child welfare, and juvenile justice agencies are sharing information and communicating with one another about the progress and outcomes of these youth. Data collection and sharing is also critically important for programs that serve systems-involved youth. Data collection is necessary upon entry into a program to fully understand each youth's needs and evaluate the appropriate services and referrals. Additionally, data sharing and communication among youth-serving programs within a locality and state allow for more efficient provision of services.

Best Practice Model: Florida Data Systems

Florida has a comprehensive statewide longitudinal data system that links education and workforce data across multiple youth-serving agencies. The Education Data Warehouse (EDW) collects disaggregated data on student performance while in the PK-20 education system, and the Florida Education & Training Placement Information Program (FETPIP) collects disaggregated data on student performance after exiting the education system or while exploring postsecondary opportunities. These data are used for internal and external data requests tied to accountability and research purposes and are available to a variety of stakeholders, such as educators, parents, students, state leadership, postsecondary institutions, and more.

The EDW makes it possible to determine key data points that will inform future decision-making across key agencies working with youth in foster care. For example, information such as the total number of foster care students in grades 3-10 receiving free and reduced price lunch might provide better coordination amongst the child welfare agency and other support services to address hunger. Related, the FETPIP can show the total number of foster care students who are high school graduates and either employed full-time or continuing their education in Florida or out-of-state one year after graduation. This information will be utilized to guide decision-making in both the child welfare agency and institutions of higher education to support foster youth transition into college and the workplace.

Relevant AYPF Resources

- Webinar: The Role of Data to Support College and Career Readiness and Success for Students in Foster Care
- Blog Post: Voice from the Field: Getting Systems-Involved Youth on a Path to Success

Drawn from lessons learned about strategically aligning youth-serving systems and policies, below are considerations for policymakers and policy influencers to promote long-term success for systems-involved youth.

➢ Policymakers and influencers should encourage partnerships among state and local juvenile justice, child welfare, and education agencies, education providers, employers, community-based organizations, and other important entities that can pool resources and work together to better serve the diverse needs of youth.

➢ Policymakers and influencers should encourage and reduce barriers to blending and braiding multiple funding streams to better serve youth.

➢ Policymakers and influencers should consider ways to increase data collection and sharing among various state and local youth-serving systems and programs to better assess the needs of youth and identify the appropriate services to support them.

Conclusion

AYPF believes systems and supports should help to ensure all young people are able to succeed in school, earn a family-sustaining wage, and be civically engaged. Our work over the past two years has focused on examining the barriers and outcomes experienced by systems-involved youth, and the education and workforce opportunities and pathways available to youth in foster care and involved in the juvenile justice system. Given that postsecondary education and workforce training are increasingly necessary in today's labor market, rather than primarily focusing on outcomes like decreased recidivism as a measure of success, AYPF continues to explore how programs, systems, and policies can support systems-involved youth to completion of a secondary credential and participation in postsecondary education and/or the workforce. Through work with community-based programs across the country, it is clear that leveraging authentic youth voice, providing youth with a diversity of comprehensive supports and transitional services, and strategically aligning youth-serving systems and policies are critical to promoting pathways to long-term success for these youth. Policymakers and policy influencers should consider these lessons learned in efforts to support systems-involved youth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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