



PROMOTING POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS OF COURT-INVOLVED YOUTH
LESSONS FROM THE NYEC POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS PILOT

MAY 2013

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PROMOTING POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS OF COURT-INVOLVED YOUTH:
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FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the current economy, securing and maintaining a job at a living wage remains a privilege for many in our society. Opportunities for low income youth and young adults who are disconnected from education and the workforce to secure employment and participate in civil society are limited at best. While completion of a postsecondary credential does not guarantee success, it can certainly provide a head start in the labor market.

In 2009, the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) launched the Postsecondary Success Initiative (PSI) Pilot with the belief that access to a quality education can transform a young person's life. As part of the PSI, ten community-based organizations working at the intersection of education, workforce development and youth development established partnerships with postsecondary institutions and served approximately 675 youth and young adults ages 16-24. As a notable percentage of these students were court involved, we decided to learn more about interventions that can promote postsecondary success among this group of students. This paper is an outcome of this work.

During the course of the pilot, we have learned about practices, strategies, and the role that partnerships can play to inform and improve program design, implementation, and policy. We have also learned that there is strength in numbers on many levels. On a programmatic level, while many individual organizations do great work, collectively they can tell a more powerful story. As a national intermediary and coalition, NYEC can help tell the story informed by the collective work of the PSI sites to a broader network and serve as a catalyst for a call to action. In addition, in order to build a national movement towards postsecondary success for all youth, it is critical to expand the "tent," and work with other intermediaries and networks. Through the PSI, we have been able to do so through partnerships with YouthBuild USA, Jobs for the Future, the Corps Network and the Brandeis University Center for Youth and Communities.

NYEC would like to acknowledge and thank the many individuals who have contributed to this report. First and foremost, we would like to thank the member organizations and individuals who were interviewed for this paper: Sophia Morel and Joseph McLaughlin of the Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES); Michael Carey of College Initiative; Ann Higdon and Jerry Farley of Improved Solutions for Urban Systems (ISUS), Inc.; Bruce Saito, Brian Kellaway, and Kari Alire of the Los Angeles Conservation Corps; Maria Fernandes, formerly of My Turn, Inc.; Hector Rivera, Marlowe Barnes, and Chanda Robinson of Our Piece of the Pie; and Don Sands and Kelly Folsom of X-Cel, Inc. Their transformative work with youth and their unwavering commitment to supporting youth on the pathways to education and opportunity for productive futures continues to inspire us all.

We would also like to thank the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, and the Open Society Foundations for their generous support and Steve Patrick, Jessica Spohn and Mimi Corcoran at these foundations for their commitment and encouragement along the way.

We would like to thank and express our appreciation for our partners in the PSI, Jobs for The Future, YouthBuild USA, The Corps Network, and the Brandeis University Center for Youth and Communities for their expertise and dedication. This group has been an important mind trust and sounding board for our work. In addition, we appreciate the thoughtful reviews and input on this paper by David Brown, Linda Harris and Donald Spangler.

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Mala B. Thakur, Executive Director

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the 21st century economy increasingly requires postsecondary credentials in order to earn a living wage, it is crucial that all youth have access to quality postsecondary education and career pathways to become productive and successful adults. Due to many factors, youth of color, particularly African American and Latino young men, are more likely than their white peers to experience court-involvement and incarceration. As they are also more likely than their white peers to become disconnected from education and employment, involvement with the criminal justice system can compound the depth of their disconnection, resulting in devastating effects on educational attainment and economic success. Although the number of youth under the age of 21 confined in residential placements has dropped to a 35-year low, the United States still confines more youth than any other industrialized nation. Even as incarceration rates among youth and adults continue to decline, the impacts of the mass incarceration system that has absorbed one in 34 adults in the past three decades continue to impact communities and individuals. For youth who become court-involved the costs are far-reaching and include a breakdown of family and community relationships, negative impacts on psychosocial development, and loss of educational and employment opportunities.

In 2009, the National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) launched the Postsecondary Success Initiative (PSI) pilot with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, and the Open Society Foundations. The PSI supports a national network of ten community-based organizations that support formerly disconnected youth and young adults ages 16-24 during transition to and through postsecondary education. As 25% of PSI participants were court involved and 19% had a prior juvenile or adult felony conviction, NYEC sought to identify strategies and practices that can support postsecondary access and success for this group of students.

NYEC conducted in-depth interviews with seven PSI sites that work with court-involved youth. In selecting the sites, our goal was to profile programs that work with youth at different points of involvement in the criminal justice system. We have drawn on the diversity of the PSI network to include sites that work with court-involved youth exclusively and sites that support a subset of court-involved students in their programs.

The sites identified a variety of social, economic, and psychosocial development barriers that can hinder success of court-involved students, including social stigmatization arising from court involvement, lack of access to resources and services, low expectations of educational success, lack of employment opportunities, probation and parole requirements that do not support postsecondary goals, and gaps in academic attainment and college readiness. To mitigate these barriers, the sites have developed a variety of practices and interventions including:

- ***Providing Intensive Case Management*** to connect youth to social supports and resources in the community, as well as to maximize contacts with supportive adults. Sites have developed a variety of case management approaches including a *relationship-based* approach grounded in youth development to provide youth with a stable adult presence; an *education-focused* approach to facilitate college transition and set educational and career goals; and an *intensive* approach to maximize the number of contacts with supportive adults throughout the program.
- ***Establishing an Organization-Wide College-Going Culture*** to facilitate attachment to education and instill in youth a belief that they can succeed in college.
- ***Facilitating Student Engagement and Peer Mentoring*** to provide students with peer models of success and to increase their sense of belonging in the program.
- ***Developing the Social Capital*** of the students to increase access to resources, social networks, assets, and opportunities.
- ***Sealing Juvenile Records*** to improve the employment prospects of students.

- ***Supporting Hands-on Learning and Work Experiences*** to provide students with opportunities to earn certificates with value in the labor market and develop workforce skills.
- ***Providing Social and Academic Supports*** to connect students with resources in the community and mediate gaps in academic knowledge.
- ***Developing Partnerships*** to provide students with community resources and supports, such as healthcare, housing, and legal aid.

Informed by the interviews, our work as an intermediary on the PSI, as well as our understanding of the landscape of practice and policy work on issues affecting court-involved youth, NYEC has developed recommendations for practice, policy and systems change that can promote postsecondary access and success of court-involved youth. These recommendations are outlined below.

1. Recommendations for Program Design:

- ***Build Social Capital and Foster Community Engagement*** to increase the number of positive peers, networks, and resources that the students can draw upon for support, as well as to facilitate community integration of students.
- ***Facilitate Identity Shift*** to support the development of positive identities leading to an increased attachment to positive activities, peers, and institutions.
- ***Integrate Postsecondary Education and Workforce Development*** to connect students to employment opportunities that can support them financially as they work towards long-term educational and career goals.

2. Recommendations for Implementation Strategies

- ***Develop Partnerships with Multiple Service Providers*** to maximize resources and supports that can be offered to students.
- ***Align Resources and Services*** on state and local levels to coordinate interventions and ensure that court-involved youth are receiving necessary supports and resources.
- ***Create the Right Mix of Staff*** to develop organizational expertise in responding to the unique needs of court-involved youth, such as understanding of the criminal justice system, the consequences of court involvement for career planning, and effective case management strategies.

3. Recommendations for Practice

- ***Support Academic and College Readiness*** to close gaps in academic and college knowledge and promote development of skills needed for college success, such as time management and study skills.
- ***Support Career Planning*** to assist students in creating educational plans that align with careers that are open to individuals with felony records. At the same time, students should receive legal aid to check the accuracy of criminal records and to expunge and seal records.
- ***Promote Peer Mentoring*** to provide students with opportunities for interaction with peers who can serve as models of educational and community success and to facilitate creation of strong peer networks and safe environments.

4. Recommendations for Policy and Systems Change

- ***Support Funding Options That Sustain Multiple Pathways*** to fund programs that provide a continuum of opportunities and services for youth at various stages of involvement in the criminal justice system, including diversion programs for youth who are at risk for court-involvement.
- ***Support Comprehensive Programs that Serve Court-Involved Youth But Do Not Exclusively Focus on This Population*** to provide youth with program environments that do not signal their court-involved status to communities and employers and create opportunities for interaction with peers who are not court-involved. Funding entities should support models that include court-

involved youth in comprehensive programs that have the capacity to support this population but do not focus on it exclusively.

- **Maintain and Increase Investment in Programs** to ensure that providers have the support they need to sustain and scale the work of supporting court-involved youth in transition to postsecondary education and the workforce.
- **Facilitate Cross-System Communication** to ensure that professionals working with different systems that support court-involved youth are not working at cross-purposes and without understanding the requirements of each system.
- **Build Strategic Partnerships** with postsecondary institutions, state and local agencies, and community-based organizations to offer expanded services and resources to court-involved participants.
- **Expand Access to Federal Financial Aid** to ensure that all youth can afford quality postsecondary education options.
- **Dismantle the School-to-Prison Pipeline** to prevent the tracking of students, particularly students of color and students with disabilities, from schools into the juvenile justice system.

Finally, we recommend *building the evidence base* through evaluation of the impacts of practices that promote postsecondary success in court-involved students. In order to identify and scale promising interventions that can increase educational success, economic potential, and stability of court-involved youth, we need more evaluation and better quality data on the impact of these programs on long-term outcomes for court-involved youth.

THE ISSUE

In recent years, the attention of policymakers, community leaders, and other stakeholders has increasingly focused on reversing the trend of exponential growth in the number of individuals who are incarcerated or are under correctional control in the United States. Although incarceration rates have begun to decline, the far-reaching impacts of the “tough on crime” policies that led to increases in prison populations during the past three decades continue to impact communities and individuals. These include immense correctional costs to federal, state, and local governments, breakdown of community and family relationships, and loss of educational and employment opportunities for incarcerated individuals.

The mass incarceration system is fraught with structural inequalities that pervasively impact youth of color, making them more likely to experience arrest and incarceration than their white peers. The inherent structural inequality of the criminal justice system mirrors inequities in access to quality education and the workforce, with young men of color in particular more likely to experience disconnection from education and employment. For youth who are contending with multiple barriers to educational and labor market success, involvement with the criminal justice system can result in devastating impacts on educational attainment and economic mobility.

The 21st century economy increasingly requires individuals to hold postsecondary degrees and credentials with value in the labor market in order to earn living wages. For youth, court-involvement can interrupt participation in education and the workforce during the time that youth are expected to develop important academic, college readiness, and workforce readiness skills. The resultant loss

of opportunities for employment and socioeconomic mobility can lead to poverty and cycles of recidivism, further enmeshing individuals in the criminal justice system. Thus, ensuring that court-involved youth have equal access to quality education, career pathways, and opportunities for personal, civic, and professional development is one of the key social justice issues of our time.

In order to move youth out of the criminal justice system, we need to support programs that provide

opportunities for education and training, workforce participation, and civic engagement. Programs that support postsecondary access and success can provide these opportunities and allow court-involved youth to build critical assets that can serve as protective factors against further engagement in the criminal justice system: career pathways that lead to economic success, positive peer and adult relationships, participation in campus life and community activities, and formation of positive identities as life-long learners. Despite the challenges that they are facing, court-involved youth possess tremendous reserves of resilience and talent and require programs that look beyond mitigating barriers to success and provide opportunities and safe environments than can support

their aspirations for the future.

This report draws upon the National Youth Employment Coalition’s (NYEC) work as an intermediary on the Postsecondary Success Initiative (PSI) and highlights promising practices from community-based organizations (CBOs) that are supporting postsecondary access and success of court-involved youth. NYEC launched the PSI pilot in 2009 to support a national network of ten CBOs that assist formerly disconnected youth ages 16-24 in transition to and through community college, with the ultimate goal of continued

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postsecondary attainment and employment at a living wage.

In the PSI framework, postsecondary education is broadly defined to include one, two- and four-year college degrees, industry-recognized credentials and certificates with value in the labor market. The PSI strengthens formal partnerships between CBOs and postsecondary institutions; highlights promising interventions that support college access, persistence, and completion in disconnected youth; and informs national and state policy. NYEC supports PSI sites by sub-granting funds from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, and the Open Society Foundations, establishing a community of practice for the sites, and providing technical assistance.

According to NYEC's preliminary analysis of data from the PSI, 675 participants were served across the ten PSI sites as of December 2012. At the time of entry into the program, 25% of participants reported that they were court-involved and 19% reported that they had a prior juvenile or adult felony conviction. Our interviews with the sites indicated that court-involvement leads to significant additional barriers to postsecondary education access, persistence, and completion for these students. These data and the knowledge we gained about the work of the sites in the course of our work as an intermediary, prompted us to take a closer look at the practices that support postsecondary success of this group of students.

NYEC has conducted in-depth interviews with seven PSI sites that work with court-involved youth, either exclusively or as a subset of students served by their PSI programs. In selecting the sites, our goal was to profile programs that work with youth at different points of involvement in the criminal justice system, including youth who are reentering their communities after a period of incarceration, youth who are participating in diversion programs, youth who are on probation or parole, and youth who have completed their supervision requirements and are in the process of sealing and/or expunging their criminal records.

This report provides an overview of the context and major impacts of the mass incarceration

system, with a specific focus on economic consequences of incarceration, as well as the evidence for the positive impacts of postsecondary education on public safety and recidivism rates. We will then provide profiles of each of the sites, with a focus on key promising practices from their work in supporting postsecondary success of court-involved youth. We will also provide recommendations for practice and policy and systems change.

MASS INCARCERATION

During the past few years there has been a reversal of the trend of the exponential growth in the number of incarcerated individuals in the United States. Yet, although 2011 has marked a third consecutive year of declines in the total number of Americans under correctional control¹, the United States continues to incarcerate more of its residents than any other nation in the world.² Overall, accounting for individuals on probation, parole, and in jails and state and federal prisons, a total of 6,977,700 Americans, or 1 in 34 adults were under correctional control in 2011.³ Although the United States continues to confine more youth than any other industrialized nation, the number of youth under the age of 21 in residential placements has dropped from 107,637 in 1995 to 70,792 in 2010, a 35-year low.⁴

The most staggering feature of the U.S. criminal justice system is that it disproportionately impacts people of color, particularly African American and Latino men. Analysis of state and federal inmate data for 2008 indicates that African American (1 in 15) and Latino (1 in 36) men over the age of 18 were far more likely than all men (1 in 54) or white men (1 in 106) in that age group to be incarcerated.⁵ Research on youth in juvenile residential placements shows a similar trend, with African American youth five times more likely to be confined than white youth, and Latino youth two times more likely to be confined than white youth.⁶

Another startling feature of the criminal justice system is that the increase in the prison population over the past several decades cannot be explained by a corresponding increase in violent crime. Rather, the increase in the number of incarcerated individuals is an outcome of aggressive policing



practices such as New York City's "stop-and-frisk" and stricter sentencing guidelines, such as the "three strikes" laws and mandatory sentencing minimums for non-violent offenses. Policing practices of the "war on drugs" have resulted in an increase in arrests for non-violent crimes, particularly drug possession, which made up 80% of drug-related arrests between 1999 and 2007.⁷ African Americans are again disproportionately affected by these policing practices: although the rates of drug offenses for African Americans and whites are similar, African Americans are almost four times more likely than whites to be arrested for drug offenses.⁸ As a result, the number of individuals incarcerated for non-violent and drug-related crimes has increased from 10% to 38% between 1980 and 2008.⁹

COSTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF INCARCERATION

Mass incarceration is associated with high costs to federal, state, and local governments and with far-reaching consequences for the incarcerated individuals, their families, and their communities. Total corrections spending in 2008 was approximately \$75 billion, with the state and local governments bearing the majority of the costs (about 60% and 30% respectively).¹⁰ In 2007, correctional agencies on average made up for about 6.8% of state general fund spending.¹¹ As state budgets shrunk during the economic downturn, the funds spent on corrections were funds that were not available for other priorities.

However, the high spending on corrections is failing to improve public safety outcomes or reduce recidivism rates, which have remained consistent between 1994 and 2007.¹² Research estimates that almost 70% of formerly incarcerated individuals will re-offend and approximately 50% will return to prison within three years of release.¹³ The high costs of corrections are likely linked to the reduction in incarceration rates, as fiscally conservative advocates and policymakers such as the Right on Crime think tank have been able to successfully make the argument that high incarceration rates are having a detrimental effect on state budgets without improving public safety outcomes.¹⁴

As state corrections spending grew, federal funds for delinquency prevention programs have decreased by 50% from FY 2002 to FY 2011, when juvenile justice programs were cut again by 17%.¹⁵ Yet, it is estimated that juvenile justice and community-based programs that work to reduce recidivism and divert youth from moving into the adult criminal justice system can save taxpayers \$8 in correctional costs for every \$1 invested.¹⁶

In addition to budgetary impacts on states, incarceration results in far-reaching consequences for individuals and communities, including disruption of families and community relationships, loss of educational opportunities, and loss of economic mobility. It is estimated that 93% of those incarcerated will be eventually released and will return to their communities.¹⁷ Those who return face multiple systemic barriers to successful reentry, including homelessness¹⁸ and chronic health concerns that are often co-occurring with mental health and substance use issues.¹⁹ Additional impacts include difficulties securing employment because of lack of skills and experience or inability to pass employment background checks, as well as loss of SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), access to public housing, and federal educational benefits²⁰ for some categories of offenders. These factors combine to deepen the poverty experienced by many ex-offenders while reducing the number of resources available to them and their families.

The relationship between incarceration, race, and poverty creates what researchers call "high incarceration neighborhoods,"²¹ typically communities of color and low-income communities that are characterized by high incarceration rates among residents. Incarceration disrupts community relationships, social networks and institutions; destabilizes family relationships; creates instability when individuals move between prison and home or decide to move away after a period of incarceration to escape negative influences or lack of economic opportunities; and impacts families financially because of the loss of the incarcerated individuals' incomes. Formerly incarcerated individuals are impacted by the stigma associated with incarceration, resulting in

alienation from the community and an absence of opportunities to make positive impacts through civic and community participation. As a result, ex-offenders can often find themselves lacking the social capital and supportive networks that are needed to facilitate their reentry efforts.²²

Incarceration results in a loss of employment opportunities during the prime working years. For youth who are incarcerated between the ages of 16-24, incarceration disrupts the critical period of gaining important workplace skills through entry-level positions, education, and training. Youth who have been incarcerated experience difficulties reintegrating into the workforce and training, with only about 30% of youth exiting residential facilities working or in school within 12 months of release.²³

Research shows that incarceration is associated with an 11% reduction in hourly wages and a 40% drop in annual earnings.²⁴ The racial disparities are again significant: while the total lifetime earnings for formerly incarcerated white men are estimated to decrease by 2%, for Latino men, they decrease by 6% and for African American men by 9%.²⁵ Incarceration also impacts long-term economic mobility. Research shows that 67% of male ex-offenders with incomes in the lowest fifth of the earning distribution in 1986 remained in that income bracket in 2006, compared to 33% of men who have not been incarcerated.²⁶

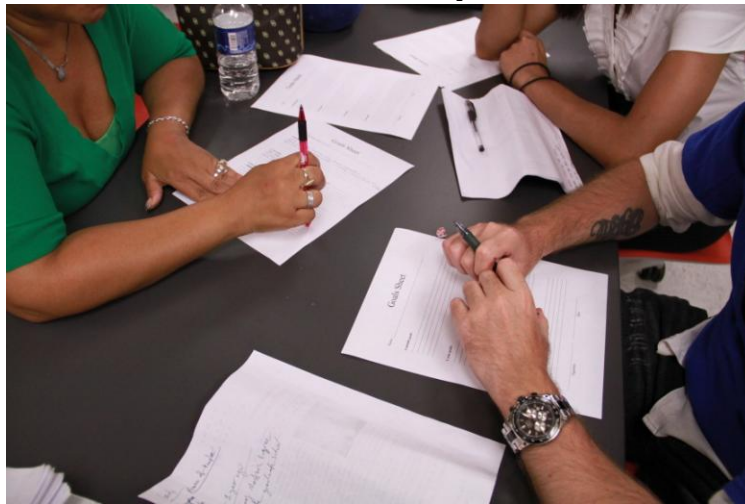
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Incarceration is prevalent in young adults with low educational levels, particularly high school dropouts, with research indicating that individuals without secondary credentials are more likely to be incarcerated than others. In 2008, for men ages 20-34, the rate of incarceration for all white men

was one in 57, but for white men without high school diplomas or GEDs the rate was one in eight. African American men are even more profoundly affected, with more than one in three of African American male dropouts in that age group incarcerated.²⁷

Incarceration and dropping out of high school are often linked via “the school-to-prison pipeline,” the process by which harsh school disciplinary policies such as suspensions, expulsions, and referrals of students who violate school disciplinary codes to law enforcement push students out of schools and into the criminal justice system.²⁸ Youth of color are again disproportionately affected by these policies, with African American students over three

times more likely to be expelled than white students.²⁹ A statewide study of almost one million public school students in Texas found that 23% of students who were subject to school disciplinary actions became involved with the juvenile justice system, compared to 2% of students who were not subject to school disciplinary actions.³⁰



College Initiative, Student Goal-Setting Session

Research indicates low rates of postsecondary attainment among the correctional population, with people of color again disproportionately affected: only 27% of white inmates have not completed high school or GED, while the same was true for 53% of Latino and 44% of African American inmates.³¹ Additional research points towards significant disparities between the educational attainment of the prison population and Americans overall, although that gap has been shrinking somewhat: in 2004, 82% of the population had a secondary credential, compared to 65% of incarcerated individuals, up from 61% in 1997.³² However, a significant gap remains in postsecondary attainment of incarcerated individuals, with only 17% having completed some postsecondary education in 2004,

compared to 51% of Americans overall.³³ Only 8% each of Latino and African American inmates had some postsecondary education, compared to 11% of white inmates.³⁴

National advocacy networks have been drawing policymakers' attention to the fact that educational attainment and ability to gain employment at a living wage can reduce recidivism and, therefore, need to be included in national strategies of addressing the impacts of mass incarceration on individuals and communities.³⁵ Although research on the impact of postsecondary education on recidivism and public safety is not extensive, it does indicate that investment in higher education can lead to positive public safety outcomes, as well as that in-prison postsecondary education can result in reduced recidivism rates and positive socioeconomic outcomes in formerly incarcerated individuals.

Research shows that supporting secondary and postsecondary education results in positive public safety outcomes. It is estimated that a 5% increase in high school graduation rates of men could result in up to \$5 billion annual reduction in crime-related spending.³⁶ College enrollment and higher education spending are also associated with a reduction in crime. The average violent crime rate in ten states with the highest national college enrollment rate was 40% lower than the national average. Additionally, eight of the ten states that had the biggest increases in higher education spending between 2000 and 2005 witnessed a higher than national average reduction in violent crime rates. By contrast, the ten states with the lowest college enrollment and the five states with the smallest increases in higher education spending saw violent crime rates stay around the national average.³⁷

Research on in-prison postsecondary correctional education (PSCE) that includes any postsecondary or vocational courses that can be applied towards a certificate or a two-year, four-year, or a graduate degree indicates improved outcomes, including higher educational attainment, increased employment, and decreased recidivism rates.³⁸ Although the true impact of in-prison education is hard to estimate, research indicates that

correctional education can improve employment outcomes and reduce recidivism anywhere from 7% to 46%.³⁹ A 2003 study found that participation in any type of in-prison education correlated with lower rates of re-arrest for participants compared to those who did not participate (48% vs. 57%), as well as lower rates of re-conviction (27% vs. 35%) and re-incarceration (21% vs. 31%).⁴⁰

Despite research that points towards the positive impact of postsecondary educational attainment among incarcerated individuals, the reach of PSCE is modest. It is estimated that only 35-42% of correctional facilities offer PSCE. In 2009-2010 academic year, only 6% of inmates in 43 surveyed states were enrolled in PSCE, mostly participating in certificate programs.⁴¹ Elimination of Pell Grant eligibility for currently incarcerated individuals by the Violent Crime Control Act of 1994 limits participation in PSCE. The Workforce and Community Transition Training for Incarcerated Youth Offenders Program (IYO) provides the main source of funding for PSCE, but it limits eligibility to youth 25 years and younger who hold a secondary credential and are within five years of release.⁴²

EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC MOBILITY

While there is a lack of research on the impact of postsecondary education on economic mobility of court-involved youth, we can look to work on "opportunity youth" to infer the impact of continuing disconnection of court-involved youth from education and the workforce. "Opportunity youth" is the term that describes youth who are under-attached or disconnected from education and work and who are also likely to experience other barriers to success, such as court-involvement. It is estimated that among the youth ages 16-24, 6.7 million can be classified as opportunity youth.⁴³

Youth who are most impacted by mass incarceration – low-income youth and youth of color – are also most likely to be disconnected from school and work. Research shows that low-income youth (family income below \$20,000) are more likely to be disconnected than youth in families



with income in the highest bracket (\$100,000 and above). Twenty-one percent of low-income youth between the ages of 16-19 and 30% of low income youth between the ages of 20-24 are not working or in school, compared to 8% of 16-19 year olds and 10% of 20-24 year olds from high income families.⁴⁴ African American and Latino youth in the 16-19 age group experience the highest rates of disconnection (16% each) compared to white youth (11%) and the national average (13%).⁴⁵ The same is true for the 20-24 age group, with 29% of African American youth and 23% of Latino youth not working or in school, compared to 17% of white youth and 20% of all youth.⁴⁶

Only 1% of opportunity youth will earn an associate's degree by age 28, compared to 36% for the rest of the population.⁴⁷ At the same time, the U.S. economy is projected to create almost 47 million job openings by 2018, with 63% of these jobs requiring at least some postsecondary education (33% of these jobs will require a bachelor degree).⁴⁸ A college degree is a key requirement for economic mobility, with high school dropouts increasingly finding themselves in lower income brackets than individuals with postsecondary education: 59% of dropouts were in the three lowest income brackets, compared to 29% of those with some postsecondary education and only 14% of those with a Bachelor's degree.⁴⁹ Additionally, there is a dramatic difference between estimated average lifetime earnings for high school dropouts (\$1,198,447) and those with Bachelor's degrees (\$3,380,060).⁵⁰ Without access to quality postsecondary education and training, opportunity youth, including those involved with the criminal justice system, will find themselves facing diminishing job prospects, falling wages, and a lack of opportunities to move out of poverty.

THE IMPACT OF COURT INVOLVEMENT ON PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH

Research indicates that adolescent brain development is not complete until about 25 years of age⁵¹ and that successful transition to adulthood requires acquisition of critical skills, including practical independent living skills (such as finding work) and social skills (such as developing healthy relationships and understanding and acting within

social norms).⁵² On the road to successful adulthood, youth need a variety of supports, including family and peer support, stable environment and housing, opportunity to engage in education and training to learn critical 21st century work skills, employment opportunities, mentoring relationships with positive adults, health care, and opportunities to experience educational, workplace, and social success.⁵³ Yet, court-involved youth often reside in high-incarceration, low-income, and under-resourced communities and experience challenges that can complicate their transition to independence and adulthood, including health and mental health concerns, substance use, and homelessness.⁵⁴

Court-involvement that leads to incarceration or confinement in juvenile residential facilities can cause dramatic disruptions to the process of psychosocial development, resulting in a lack of psychosocial maturity and leading to poor adult outcomes in attainment of education, employment, and social success.⁵⁵ Additionally, research on court-involved youth found that the stigma of being labeled as "delinquent" or "criminal" can lead youth to develop negative perceptions of themselves and anxieties about their futures. As a result, court-involved youth might turn away from positive activities and peers and turn to criminal activities and negative peers in order to experience validation, respect, and a sense of accomplishment.⁵⁶

Court-involved youth need programs that provide comprehensive, wrap-around services that address their educational and workforce readiness needs, provide social supports and resources that can mitigate barriers to successful transition to independence and adulthood, and create opportunities for connections with positive peers, adults, and activities that promote healthy psychosocial development and divert youth from further engagement with the criminal justice system. NYEC has been among the advocates calling for the application of the youth development framework to wrap-around, community-based program models that provide psychosocial development, education and vocational training that is connected to career pathways that lead to economic self-sufficiency.⁵⁷



The sites profiled in this report serve as promising examples of such approaches as they provide comprehensive services that address educational,

workforce readiness, and psychosocial needs of court-involved youth.

PROMOTING POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS OF COURT-INVOLVED YOUTH: THE PSI FRAMEWORK

Programs that promote postsecondary access and success can have a particularly powerful impact on the most disconnected and vulnerable youth, who are disproportionately and systemically affected by educational attainment gaps, the school-to-prison pipeline, and disconnection from education and the workforce.

According to the sites who were interviewed for this report, postsecondary education has the potential to reduce the individual and societal consequences of court involvement by providing youth with expanded future career options and by facilitating connections to the positive social institution of college rather than to negative peers and networks. Additionally, postsecondary education can have positive impacts on psychosocial development of youth, by providing youth with opportunities to develop positive identities as students, build social capital and resource networks, and expand community engagement. Thus, in addition to viewing education as a tool for gaining academic and employment skills, these providers emphasize the transformative impact of postsecondary success, as it can support the potential, talents, and aspirations of court-involved youth. In this framework, access to postsecondary education provides an overarching strategy for transformation, while specific practices, strategies, and interventions are implemented in order to increase the number of positive adult and peer

networks and resources that can support college success, increase resilience, and serve as protective factors against further engagement in the criminal justice system.

The PSI sites that were interviewed for this report support youth onto the pathways to and through postsecondary education by partnering with local community colleges and providing comprehensive, wrap-around social and academic supports with a

focus on facilitating successful college transition, persistence, and completion. Supports are aligned with the Back on Track three-phase model that was developed by Jobs for the Future, a PSI partner, based on their work with PSI sites and other PSI partners and practitioners to identify effective

practices that support college transition.

The Back on Track model provides a framework for college transition support, including *enriched preparation* that delivers college-ready academic instruction; *postsecondary bridging* that provides college transition counseling and supports development of college-ready skills; and *first-year support* that provides counseling and emergency supports to ensure persistence.⁵⁸ The PSI sites deliver a variety of services, including GED instruction and testing; academic college readiness instruction; college bridge programs; transition counseling and case management; connection to



Mural at Our Piece of the Pie (OPP) Offices Created by OPP Junior Art Maker Program Participants

resources on campus and in the community such as health services and housing; and emergency resources such as transportation and tuition support.

In selecting the sites to be profiled in this report, our goal was to include programs that work with youth at different points of involvement in the criminal justice system, including youth who are reentering their communities after a period of incarceration, youth who are participating in diversion programs, youth who are on probation or parole, and youth who have completed their supervision requirements and are in the process of sealing and/or expunging their criminal records. One of the strengths of NYEC's cohort of PSI sites is that the variety of approaches allows us to examine multiple intervention frameworks and practices that promote postsecondary success of this population of students. Two of the sites, College Initiative, and the Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES), serve court-involved youth and young adults exclusively, while the other sites work with court-involved youth as a subset of a larger population of PSI participants.

BARRIERS TO THE EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS OF PSI STUDENTS

The sites identified a variety of social, economic, and psychosocial challenges experienced by their court-involved students that are consistent with those identified in research. One of the key barriers identified was social stigmatization arising from court involvement, which prevents court-involved youth from forming attachments to positive individuals and institutions within the community and can result in youth turning to familiar, negative activities and peer networks. Several sites reported that, as a result of stigma, many formerly incarcerated youth develop negative identities and self-perceptions.

Sites observed that youth who develop negative identities related to their court status can have difficulties envisioning a future that involves educational, career, and personal achievement. As a result, one of the central difficulties in working with court-involved students in this context is that

most of these youth have never considered the possibility of going to college and do not expect to be successful in college. Instead of positive expectations associated with going to college, they experience a high level of anxiety about the classroom settings, as well as fears that their history of involvement with the criminal justice system will be revealed to their classmates and faculty. Additional psychosocial barriers identified by the sites include typical adolescent struggles with decision-making, impulsiveness, and inability to think through the consequences of one's actions.

One of the key barriers identified by College Initiative was the "vicious cycle" that is created when the "lack of access to education and work leads to incarceration and incarceration leads to additional barriers and recidivism." A major issue affecting court-involved youth is a lack of access to resources, such as mental health providers, healthcare, substance use treatment, childcare, family support, stable housing, education, and employment. Often even those youth who are eligible for a variety of services lack information about available resources and assistance with applying for services. As a result, they can turn to negative peers and criminal networks for support and resources.

The sites identified the shortage of employment opportunities as a major barrier. In addition to the lack of work experience and skills, court-involved youth are unable to pass background checks that are increasingly required by employers. The extent of information that can be revealed on a background check can differ from state to state. For example, Massachusetts has recently passed a "ban the box" law that prevents employers from asking questions about criminal history on initial written employment applications. Yet, Massachusetts also maintains a Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) system that can reveal extensive details about individuals' history of involvement with the criminal justice system⁵⁹ to any employer that performs background checks before extending employment offers. While juvenile records can often be expunged or sealed, most youth lack resources and information on this process.

Additional barriers include parole, probation and Alternatives to Incarceration (sentencing options that do not include prison or jail time, but can lead to harsher punishments if ATI requirements are violated) requirements that are not always supportive of educational goals. For example, PSI students often enroll in evening classes in order to be able to work, but many have curfew requirements that can conflict with their schedules. Some probation and parole officers are unsupportive of long-term educational goals, requiring youth to secure full-time employment instead of attending college.

Court-involved PSI participants also experience barriers specifically to educational access and success, including lack of secondary credentials, gaps in college-ready academic skills that require remedial education, and gaps in college knowledge such as filling out financial aid forms and navigating college support offices. Many, particularly those who have been absorbed by the school-to-prison pipeline, have developed negative perceptions of the educational environment. All of these barriers can cause these students to become frustrated with perceived lack of academic success and with college bureaucracy, causing them to drop out. Additionally, because individuals with

some felony convictions can be prohibited by law from working in some industries, many court-involved PSI students are aware that they will not be able to enter their first-choice careers. Although PSI programs work with these students to develop alternative education and career pathways, the students might feel a lesser degree of attachment to their new education plans, leading them to drop out.

Financial aid eligibility presents another barrier to college access. Some categories of offenders, such as individuals who were convicted of drug possession or distribution while receiving federal financial aid can lose their financial aid eligibility for at least one year from the date of conviction and up to an indefinite period, depending on the number of convictions. Youth often lack knowledge about financial aid eligibility rules for ex-offenders, wrongly believing that any felony conviction will prevent them from receiving financial aid. Financial aid counselors can also lack knowledge about eligibility of this population to receive financial aid. For example, students can restore eligibility by complying with substance use treatment, but financial aid counselors are often unaware of this option.

PROMISING PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES

In response to the challenges experienced by court-involved PSI students, the sites have developed a variety of interventions that are based in positive youth development approaches, support healthy psychosocial development and community engagement, and connect postsecondary educational goals to career pathways. These interventions include providing education-focused case management, facilitating the development of students' social capital and networks, sealing juvenile records, providing street outreach, and connecting students to social supports and resources. This section will highlight specific practices and interventions that were implemented by each site while also providing the broader context of the scope of work and approaches developed by each site.

CASES: EDUCATION-FOCUSED CASE MANAGEMENT

Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES) operates Alternatives to Incarceration (ATI) programs for court-involved youth in New York City, New York. CASES programs provide courts with alternative sentencing options that lead to better outcomes for youth and communities and cost less than incarceration. CASES has developed an approach to assisting participants in its ATI programs in transitioning to college that combines structured, *education-focused case management* and a strong *college-going culture*. This approach addresses some of the major barriers to success for CASES students, including lack of services that support educational success, negative identities and self-perceptions, and gaps in college readiness and attachment to education.

Students typically enter CASES PSI program after fulfilling their ATI requirements, which often include participating in on-site GED instruction and obtaining their GED credential. Unlike these GED services, participation in CASES PSI is not mandated by the court. In order to facilitate the dual process of transitioning both from mandated to voluntary services and from secondary to postsecondary education, CASES implemented structured, intensive education-focused case management.

CASES staff believes that in order to be successful in college, youth need to understand the voluntary nature of participation in the program so as to develop a sense of agency and personal accountability for successes and setbacks, as well as an attachment to college. In order to facilitate this process, staff makes explicit distinctions between education-focused case management in PSI and court-mandated case management in ATI. Thus, while ATI program case managers focus on court advocacy and successful completion of probation requirements, the educational case manager's role involves providing transition support from GED to college. This includes teaching the in-house College Prep course; coordinating college visits; assessing barriers to college success and providing resources such as gap tuition funding, food vouchers, and debt relief; assisting with college registration and financial aid application processes; providing students with incentives for meeting college goals such as completing credits and developmental courses; and connecting students to on-campus services provided by CUNY Black Male Initiative (BMI) and other CUNY support programs. A case manager who has extensive experience in CASES ATI programs, having started as a court advocate, fills this role. This individual's extensive knowledge of New York's court system allows her to understand and support the process of transition from ATI to college while focusing on the postsecondary success of students.

CASES' staff views this population of youth as especially vulnerable and in need of significant and consistent positive contact with supportive adults and peers. In addition to answering this need through case management, CASES staff engaged in

an organizational cultural shift towards creating an agency-wide college-going culture in order to support students' college goals and promote the belief that all CASES students can achieve academically. Some of the specific activities include celebrating student successes, providing in-house scholarships, partnering with CUNY BMI for a series of presentations on leadership development, coordinating college visits, and providing cohort-building activities such as monthly cohort meetings and outings that allow the students to develop strong social support networks with their peers.

Finally, CASES staff notes that not all CASES youth transition directly from GED programs to college. Many of the youth who enter the PSI program have not had previous experience with educational success and so do not envision themselves as students. To increase the students' comfort level with the classroom environment and to provide experiences of academic success that students can build on, CASES staff developed an 8-week College Prep course that provides students with an opportunity to increase math and English and writing skills, prepare for the CUNY Assessment Test (CAT) that determines placement in developmental or credit-bearing courses, and develop college knowledge such as understanding of the college application and the financial aid processes.

CASES has seen positive results with this approach, with 34 students currently enrolled on 8 CUNY campuses and 20 additional students expected to enroll in January 2013. Two students are on track to graduate with their associate's degrees in May 2013.

COLLEGE INITIATIVE: SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

College Initiative is a reentry education organization serving students in New York City, New York. College Initiative was founded in 2002 with the mission that higher education, as a proven reentry strategy, should serve as a primary response to the practice of mass incarceration. All of the participants in the program are court-involved, and the majority has been incarcerated and is now reentering the community.



College Initiative has identified two critical barriers to the reentry success of their participants. One is insufficient *social capital*, defined as community-based resources, assets, opportunities, and networks of relationships that program participants can draw upon as they reenter their communities after incarceration. Another is negative identities that arise from the experience of stigma of criminal justice involvement. In order to support their participants as they negotiate these barriers, College Initiative works to develop their social capital and to facilitate *identity shifts*, whereby program participants abandon negative identities such as “ex-con” and develop new, positive identities such as “student”. College Initiative contends that participation in postsecondary education can facilitate identity shifts and increase participants’ social capital by providing opportunities for developing support networks, internal assets, and external resources.

While College Initiative works to address academic readiness and psychosocial needs of students through in-house college preparation courses and readiness workshops and referrals to service providers, it sees its role outside of the traditional model of providing services such as case management. Instead, College Initiative’s goal is to serve as a catalyst for community engagement for their participants, including the College Initiative student community and the campus community at the postsecondary institution.

To this end, College Initiative has developed a deliberate pathway for the students in their program that emphasizes community engagement and provides opportunities for student leadership, with a peer mentoring program as the centerpiece of this pathway. This approach to social capital and identity development is dependent on an organization-wide commitment to student leadership at all levels of the organization, including program design.

This process starts with orientation, which takes place after students are referred to College Initiative by other organizations or correctional facilities. At the orientation, College Initiative counselors (many of whom are College Initiative



OPP, Art by Junior Art Maker Program Participant

alumni) and mentors discuss their own experiences of incarceration, what it meant to them to go to college, and myths and misconceptions about college access for formerly incarcerated individuals. Students then take an assessment of college readiness and barriers to success and, if needed, take the in-house college preparatory course and participate in college readiness workshops. At this stage, they are connected with other reentry agencies and resources and are matched with peer mentors. The “general congress” of students takes place at the beginning of each semester, with the College Initiative community coming together to celebrate the start of the semester.

The CI Mentors program was developed by the students with support from College Initiative staff. Current mentors meet annually to refine the program and mentor training materials. The goal of the program is two-fold: to bring students into the community of peers who share their experiences of incarceration and can serve as models of educational and community success and to increase the social capital of mentees by providing connections to on- and off-campus resources, as well as peer and community networks. College Initiative peer mentors meet mentees on campus to provide peer support in the postsecondary setting and to connect mentees with

resources and supports in the community. The mentors have mapped out on- and off-campus resources that can support educational persistence and success, as well as mitigate barriers to successful reentry, including employment services, transitional housing, substance use, health services, and others. This resource map is updated annually with new services and providers in response to the needs of the mentees.

Mentors play central roles in other program offerings, including developing and leading college readiness workshops. For the mentors, the program provides an opportunity to further reinforce their own identity shift towards an identity as “student leaders.” Mentees are eligible to become mentors after one year of program participation and college enrollment, with about 50% returning as mentors annually.

The ultimate goal of this pathway is to minimize the social alienation that is often experienced by criminal justice-involved individuals by providing opportunities for community engagement. Throughout this process, participants increase their social capital by widening their networks and developing internal and external resources and develop positive identities as students, mentors, and leaders. Among the strategies implemented by College Initiative, mentoring shows the most promise, with retention rate among mentees over 80%, almost double that of students who do not have mentors.

ISUS: SEALING JUVENILE RECORDS

Improved Solutions for Urban Systems (ISUS), Inc., based in Dayton, Ohio, is dedicated to improving education and workforce outcomes for court-involved, dropout and underachieving youth. The ISUS “high school plus” model seeks to provide students in its dropout recovery charter schools with industry-recognized certifications, college credits, apprenticeships, and work experience. Although ISUS does not exclusively serve court-involved youth, about seven out of ten ISUS students are known to juvenile courts. ISUS positions these students for educational and employment success by combining academic coursework with *hands-on training and work experience* in healthcare, construction, and

manufacturing and by removing barriers to employment by assisting students with *sealing juvenile records*.

The ISUS service continuum includes a verbal contract between ISUS staff and students that emphasizes modeling personal responsibility, promoting an organization-wide culture of achievement, and demanding high performance from staff and students. For court-involved students, this verbal contract also involves a promise not to re-offend. In terms of adolescent psychosocial development, ISUS staff provides students with a safe, positive environment; fosters a culture of mutual accountability that emphasizes educational achievement rather than court-involvement; and assists students in developing a sense of belonging at ISUS in order to replace negative peer influences with positive adults and peers.

Once the students prove their ability to hold to the verbal contract not to re-offend and demonstrate educational or employment success, ISUS advocates for students with the juvenile courts and works to seal their juvenile records. ISUS has developed relationships with local reentry taskforces, county commissioners, public defenders, probation officers, and the courts in order to increase its ability to advocate for the students in juvenile courts.

ISUS estimates that that the process of developing these relationships took about six years. At the start of the process, about 27 different parole and probation officers were working with ISUS students. The Administrative Judge reduced that number to one with partial salary support provided by ISUS through one of its grants. This reduced the number of points of contact between the juvenile justice system and ISUS, allowing a better understanding of how to support students in meeting their supervision requirements. After the assigned probation officer retired, he continued to serve in a similar capacity at ISUS as a volunteer, with permission from the court. He conducts searches on incoming students’ juvenile records and works with the courts to seal records.

Within this framework, ISUS students transition to postsecondary industry training, college, and

employment opportunities leading to careers at living wages. Strong relationships with the local business community allow ISUS to place students in internships that can lead to permanent employment in industries that support postsecondary training and credential attainment. In order to facilitate employment, ISUS trains students on how to discuss court involvement with employers and how to utilize certificates they have earned and letters of recommendation from ISUS staff to demonstrate lasting, positive changes in their lives to employers.

To date, ISUS PSI students have earned a total of 190 industry-recognized credentials in the fields of construction, manufacturing, and health care, with seventeen of the 44 students dually enrolled at ISUS and Sinclair Community College and earning college credits while still in high school. ISUS students have built 57 homes in Dayton neighborhoods, gaining valuable construction skills and experience while improving their communities.

LOS ANGELES CONSERVATION CORPS: INTENSIVE CASE MANAGEMENT

Los Angeles Conservation Corps (LACC) is the largest urban conservation corps in the nation, serving over 17,000 youth each year through on-the-job training, paid work experience, after school enrichment and tutoring services, and two full-time charter school sites. While LACC does not serve court-involved youth exclusively, staff estimates that about 50% of Corpsmembers have had some type of contact with the courts. Of the 379 incoming Corpsmembers in 2010-2011, 22% were on probation or parole.

LACC has significant experience working with court-involved youth, both through informal collaborations with California State Parole and Los Angeles County Probation and through a prior U.S. Department of Justice-funded program in collaboration with local YouthBuild sites that focused on probation and parole support. Through these experiences, LACC staff has learned that court-involved youth need more intensive and frequent case management support than other youth in their programs. In working with these

students, LACC focuses on education and employment as tools of promoting community reintegration, personal mastery and confidence, and financial stability, while providing *intensive case management* and partnering with other agencies to secure referrals to services and social supports.

Corpsmembers begin to work immediately after joining LACC by participating in the work training program. This is particularly important for court-involved youth who have difficulties securing employment because of history of involvement with the criminal justice system. Because LACC's work programs focus on community-based environmental and conservation projects, the nature of the work helps to build the youths' sense of community engagement and pride while providing opportunities to build workforce skills. Like the other CBOs featured in this report, LACC works with youth who do not have a history of educational success and so do not typically consider college to be an option or view themselves as college material. LACC staff build upon the sense of accomplishment that youth experience in the work program to support the development of confidence and a sense of mastery that they believe are needed to facilitate the transition into postsecondary education.

To keep students engaged in the program, staff provides intensive case management that consists of weekly one-on-one meetings and monthly group meetings to provide youth with a safe space to share their challenges with peers and build a peer support network. Staff observed that providing more intensive support correlated with longer retention in the program (by contrast, before case management was implemented, youth often dropped out of the program in just a few weeks). LACC attributes this increase in retention to the fact that intensive case management allows the youth to receive consistent support from the same staff member, thus building stable relationships with supportive adults that can be rare in these students' lives. Whenever possible, case management starts while youth are still in detention facilities in order to facilitate the transition to entering LACC programs upon release.

Providing intensive case management requires significant staff resources, which can be difficult to sustain in the current fiscal climate for CBOs. To mitigate this challenge, LACC has utilized field internship programs at local MSW and BSW programs in the California State University and University of California systems, as well as the University of Southern California in order to increase the number of contacts students have with staff. MSW interns can provide case management, counseling, and tutoring and BSW interns can provide filing support and work on researching resources and services for students. One MSW intern is assigned to the PSI program. In addition, LACC staff, including tutors, teachers, and supervisors on work sites also provide counseling and support to students, thus maximizing the number of supportive adults in students' lives.

Additionally, LACC partners, on a formal and informal basis, with a number of local CBOs, faith-based organizations, and agencies to provide students with referrals to resources that can assist them with their legal and other needs. Thus, LACC works with an employee of Legal Aid in Los Angeles who can provide students with information on expunging records. Additionally, a board member has developed a relationship with the Los Angeles County Superior Court that allows students to perform community service hours instead of paying court fines. Staff also refers youth to legal services that fit their needs given the nature of their court involvement and works with probation and parole officers to ensure that youth successfully complete their supervision requirements. Additionally, LACC refers youth to local clinics for health care needs, childcare agencies, the Department of Public Social Services, a local housing development in Watts for transitional housing, and mental health services providers for additional case management and mental health services.

LACC reports a 92% retention rate of participants in the PSI program, with 71% of participants demonstrating positive academic progress during the Spring 2012 semester (i.e. earning credits during the semester).

MY TURN, INC.: INTENSIVE CASE MANAGEMENT AND OUTREACH

My Turn, Inc. is a dropout prevention and intervention program for off-track youth in Brockton and other cities in Massachusetts that are characterized by high poverty, high unemployment, and poor educational outcomes that combines GED preparation with college and workforce transition support.

My Turn does not serve court-involved youth exclusively, but in the mid-2000s, My Turn has participated in the gang prevention collaborative funded by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety and Security that served 500 gang-involved youth over three years. My Turn provided the education component, preparing students for the GED exam. As a result of this initiative, My Turn has established positive trust-based relationships with this population, with staff estimating that 60-70% of current My Turn participants are court-involved youth. In response to the challenge of keeping this population engaged with programs, My Turn provides *intensive case management* and *outreach* to maximize contacts with trusted adults and to prevent students from dropping out.

My Turn staff has found that postsecondary education can help engage students onto pathways to living wage careers, transform their choices and options for the future, allow them to form positive peer relationships in the classroom environment, and form positive identities connected to educational success. Similarly to the other sites featured in the report, My Turn staff believes that in order to accomplish these goals, this population of youth requires consistent contact with trusted, dedicated adults. My Turn case managers can assist students in accessing their CORI (Massachusetts Criminal Offender Record Information) to determine what education and career pathways may be closed to them because of their criminal justice history, work with probation and parole officers to ensure that youth understand and comply with supervision requirements, provide support and referrals to address personal issues such as child care or substance use, and assist with college-related tasks



such as filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and registering for courses.

In addition to case management support, My Turn initiates intensive re-engagement efforts with youth who drop out of the program. My Turn employs a street outreach worker who works evening hours, is available to youth on the phone on the on-call basis, and visits youth at their homes and in areas where youth socialize. This proactive approach allows the outreach worker to address issues and barriers soon after, or even before they cause a student to drop out of the program. The outreach worker can connect students with a variety of supports and resources, including substance use counseling, domestic violence prevention, mental health services, etc.

In addition to these key practices, My Turn has developed a GED Plus model that provides students with industry-focused training, opportunities to earn certificates, and internships while earning their GEDs. This model leverages collaborations with local workforce development agencies, employers, and other CBOs to provide students with opportunities to develop career pathways in growing industries that require postsecondary training.

OUR PIECE OF THE PIE, INC.: PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS

Our Piece of the Pie, Inc. (OPP) is a youth development agency in Hartford, Connecticut that supports over-aged and under-credited youth in completing high school credentials and postsecondary degrees or credentials with value in the labor market, developing workforce readiness skills, and entering internships and careers.

Court-involved youth comprise a small, but notable percentage of OPP participants, with about 90-120 youth (or 16%) served annually with support from the Tow Foundation, a local foundation that focuses on juvenile justice services and reform. Through this grant, OPP is able to provide services to court-involved youth, some of whom have entered the PSI, by partnering with the Connecticut Department of Children and Families and the juvenile branch of the Connecticut Court Support Services Division. The youth are referred to

services at OPP, where they are provided a variety of supports within the framework of OPP's *Pathways to Success* model.

The Pathways model offers a “*relationship-centered*” youth development approach to providing youth with necessary academic supports, including enrolling at OPP's Opportunity High School or at an online high school, tutoring, and college transition services; Career Competency Development Training, including career assessment and planning, job readiness training, Youth Businesses that offer entrepreneurial training in the arts, and subsidized internships; and connection to services and resources provided by OPP's partners in the community. The Pathways to Success Model engages the students onto one of the four pathways based on need: *Pathway 1*, for students who are out of traditional school without a secondary credential; *Pathway 2*, for students who are in high school, but two to three grades behind; *Pathway 3*, for students who are on track academically; and *Pathways 4A* for students who are on a postsecondary track, *4B* for youth who are on employment track, and *4T* for youth who are in transition to either postsecondary or employment track.

At the heart of the Pathways model is a Youth Development Specialist (YDS), an individual who serves as a caring consistent adult in these students' lives and works with the students to assess goals and needs to determine placement into an appropriate pathway; develop an educational and employment plan based on students' goals; and address barriers to success through case management and internal and external resources. A YDS is assigned to each pathway and develops a deep understanding of the needs and barriers, as well as appropriate supports and resources for youth at that stage of their educational and career development. A youth will stay with the same YDS throughout his/her time at OPP in order to provide her/him with consistent adult presence and support, but this YDS will work with the YDS staff who coordinate other pathways, as well as with the Workforce Development Specialist (WDS) to draw on appropriate supports as the youth progresses through the program towards postsecondary completion and





CASES, Bronx Community College Tour

employment. YDS working with court-involved youth will provide additional supports based on their court status, such as visits to court and advocacy with the juvenile justice system. In order to mediate barriers to employment faced by court-involved youth, these youth are also provided with internship opportunities and training on how to address court involvement in employment applications and during interviews.

OPP's internal data analysis of outcomes for court-involved Pathways participants indicates that 80% of youth do not recidivate over six years, the average length of involvement with OPP services.

X-CEL, INC.: PEER NETWORKS AND SOCIAL SUPPORTS

X-Cel, Inc., based in Boston, Massachusetts, serves disconnected youth and young adults by providing pre-GED, GED, and college readiness classes and supporting transition from GED to college. Court-involved youth make up for about 15% of the PSI cohort at X-Cel. Overall, staff estimates that 10-15% of all X-Cel participants, and about 25% of GED participants and 35% of college prep participants have been involved with the criminal justice system. X-Cel has designed a wrap-around strategy that involves building cohort strength to *facilitate the creation of positive peer networks*, mitigating educational attainment gaps through

instruction, and *providing key social supports in partnership key community partners.*

A central aspect of X-Cel's strategy for working with court-involved youth involves building cohort strength to surround students with a supportive peer network. X-Cel deliberately hires its graduates to provide them with leadership development and work experiences. For the rest of the cohort, this provides an opportunity to build informal mentoring relationships with these peers who can serve as examples of success. X-Cel also deliberately cultivates a college-going culture that fosters the belief that all of the graduates of X-Cel's GED programs have the capacity to go to college. Staff begins college planning discussions with GED students even before they obtain their secondary credentials. X-Cel has encouraged the PSI students to register for the same classes together in order to build the strength of the cohort and to maximize opportunities for peer learning and support. Additionally, X-Cel has established an office on the campus of its college partner, Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) and has strategically and deliberately positioned it as a safe space for the PSI cohort to come together to share college experiences and challenges and receive support from each other and the staff.

These strategies all contribute to facilitating positive group dynamics between the students and to increasing cohort strength and capacity to provide peer support. Staff report that court-involved students say that they feel encouraged by the fact that they can "see themselves reflected" in others in their cohort who are also going to college and are experiencing similar challenges and successes. This creates the environment of "rising up together" that facilitates the identity shift from "ex-offender" to "student" and contributes to postsecondary success.

In order to mitigate gaps in educational attainment and college readiness, students also receive intensive academic support, particularly in math, which can often present a serious challenge to youth who have been disconnected from education, resulting in students languishing in developmental education and eventually dropping out.

X-Cel partners with other agencies to draw on their strengths in providing social supports to court-involved youth, with a focus on supports that remove barriers to employment and career development. The key partnership in this work is with STRIVE (Support and Training Result in Valuable Employees) Boston, a program for ex-offenders that provides an intensive five-week workforce readiness course in a simulated business environment that requires participants to follow office dress and behavior codes. While STRIVE focuses exclusively on employment and teaching employability “soft” skills, X-Cel provides the education component (either GED or college prep) two times per week. STRIVE serves as a “feeder” program into X-Cel’s GED, college prep, and PSI programs. Students recruited from STRIVE are often offered employment at X-Cel at the end of a 10-12 week trial period. Thus, this collaboration is effective in responding to employment and secondary education needs of youth and supporting long-term postsecondary education and career goals.

An additional key collaboration involves a relationship with the Union of Minority Neighborhoods (UMN), a membership organization that works to empower communities of color to lead on policy and social justice issues that affect Boston, including CORI reform. One of X-Cel employees works with UMN’s CORI reform project

and is able to obtain copies of CORI, check them for accuracy, and seal some records. This allows X-Cel to have informed conversations with their students about what CORI could mean for their education and employment pathways and redirect court-involved students into pathways that remain open to them in light of the nature of their criminal record. This staff member also holds CORI workshops at STRIVE and helps recruit STRIVE participants for X-Cel programs. This work typifies an overarching X-Cel strategy in providing supports to court-involved students: it is important, in the words of X-Cel staff, to “not reinvent the wheel” but to either employ individuals who have an understanding of the criminal justice system or to partner with other CBOs that work in this field.

As an outcome of participation in the PSI, X-Cel is undergoing a cultural shift towards emphasizing the importance of continuing education beyond the GED for all participants, which includes deliberately implementing a college-going culture in all of its programs. During the course of the grant, 36 of X-Cel PSI participants without a postsecondary credential have earned a GED, 49 participants with a postsecondary credential completed college readiness bridge program, and 46 participants in three cohorts have enrolled in college, with a 73% college retention rate over two semesters.

RECOMMENDATIONS

NYEC supports the creation of long-term, comprehensive programs that focus on engaging court-involved youth onto pathways to postsecondary education and living wage careers while providing comprehensive wrap-around social supports. The CBOs profiled in this report have developed such frameworks in working with court-involved youth with significant similarities across their programs, including creating stable and safe environments, adopting a college-going culture, providing intensive case management, maximizing contacts with caring adults, facilitating peer support networks, and providing academic and career planning support. Based on our observations of what works for these CBOs and their students, we recommend that practitioners

that work with court-involved youth consider adopting the following elements of program design.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAM DESIGN:

- **Build Social Capital and Foster Community Engagement:** stigmatization and alienation from positive community institutions can result in some of the most negative psychosocial impacts of court-involvement, particularly when it happens during the key adolescent development stages. Programs for court-involved youth should focus on building the social capital of their participants, including increasing positive peer and other social networks, maximizing

contacts with supportive adults, and supporting access to services, community resources, and other providers. Community engagement goes hand-in-hand with social capital development and is critical to healthy psychosocial development. Community engagement increases the sense of mastery, competency, and accomplishment, leading to stable community integration. Postsecondary institutions provide rich environments for building social capital and increasing community engagement because of the variety of resources and student networks that can be accessed on campus.

- **Facilitate Identity Shift:** programming rooted in positive youth development approaches that focuses on facilitating the identity shift from negative (“court-involved”) to positive self-concepts (“student,” “scholar,” “mentor,” “leader”) can lead to development of internal assets and an increased sense of community engagement. Negative identities lead to attachment to negative peers and activities, resulting in limited opportunities for positive engagement, a lack of attachment to educational and civic institutions and the workforce, and a narrow view of future possibilities and options. Identity shift can lead to an expanded world-view and a sense of mastery and accomplishment that is critical to ensuring that youth stay engaged with programs and persevere through setbacks.
- **Integrate Postsecondary Education and Workforce Development:** providers should take a long-term view that includes postsecondary education and career planning as a strategy for integrating court-involved youth into communities, providing positive experiences of success, planning for future living wage careers, and preventing further engagement with the criminal justice system. Because postsecondary education does not provide an immediate pay-off in terms of higher wages, it needs to happen in tandem with employment that can support youth financially through college. Thus, most of the CBOs profiled in this report support youth with employment opportunities,

including internships, apprenticeships, paid work experiences, and on-site employment.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

We recommend that CBOs consider the following *implementation strategies* that can support long-term success and maximize the use of community resources in supporting court-involved youth.

- **Develop Partnerships with Multiple Service Providers:** not every CBO has organizational capacity to address the spectrum of needs of this population, but partnering with other CBOs and agencies can create opportunities to draw on partners’ strengths in order to provide comprehensive supports. Partnerships between short-term workforce readiness training programs and programs focused on postsecondary attainment can be successful, as demonstrated by X-Cel and STRIVE. Yet it is important that agencies that focus on short-term employment understand the centrality of postsecondary education to the long-term stability of their participants, so that CBOs can work in tandem to support youth towards long-term success. Similarly, partnerships with social services agencies, healthcare providers, legal aid organizations, and the juvenile and criminal justice systems, among others, can allow CBOs to maximize the resources available to court-involved youth.
- **Align Resources and Services:** some practitioners have identified a lack of resource alignment on a state and local level as a major barrier to providing effective services to this population. In some states, such as Connecticut, significant funding streams support programs working with court-involved youth, yet the perception is that the necessary resources are sometimes not reaching youth because of lack of coordination and alignment. Promoting alignment of resources and a stronger relationship between funding and outcomes can result in streamlining of services and improving effectiveness of interventions.

- **Create the Right Mix of Staff:** in order to accomplish program goals, CBOs need to have a right mix of staff, as well as provide training opportunities to support staff in developing critical knowledge and skills. These skills should include knowledge of the criminal justice system and legal aid resources, understanding of how court involvement can impact individuals' ability to enter certain careers, familiarity with the labor market data and career pathways, ability to provide effective case management, and capacity to develop and deliver academic and college readiness curriculum. While resources do not always allow for creating a perfect mix of staff and providing extensive professional development, community collaborations can play a critical role in filling any gaps in capacity.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

In addition to program design elements and implementation strategies, we recommend that practitioners consider adopting the following practices in order to facilitate postsecondary access, retention, and completion of court-involved youth.

- **Support Academic and College Readiness:** court-involved youth are often profoundly disconnected from education and may have significant gaps in academic and college readiness. Thus, even youth who hold secondary credentials may require significant academic and college readiness instruction and support, whether delivered in-house or in collaboration with other agencies and postsecondary institutions. Academic supports should include math and English instruction delivered in the context of college bridge programming that focuses on college readiness, including workshops on adapting to college culture, navigating college bureaucracy, and developing effective time management and study skills. Implementing bridge programs on college campuses could allow court-involved students to acclimate to college culture and

environment and mediate their anxieties about college.

- **Support Career Planning:** court-involved youth often lack critical knowledge of their rights in the workplace and of the consequences of having a record to their long-term education and career plans. Services should involve training youth on how to communicate about this issue with employers, as well as providing youth with information about career pathways and assisting them in creating educational and training pathways towards careers that are not impacted by felony records. Youth should also be provided with legal aid to check criminal records for accuracy and to expunge and seal records in order to remove barriers to employment and career planning.
- **Promote Peer Mentoring:** providing students with opportunities for interacting with positive peers in a safe environment can facilitate creation of peer networks and mentoring relationships. Whether through X-Cel's strategy of "rising up together" as a cohort or College Initiative's strategy of connecting students with peer models of success, we have witnessed peer mentoring become a powerful tool for supporting postsecondary success, community engagement, and identity shift, both for new students who can build relationships with successful peers, and for peer mentors who can reinforce their sense of accomplishment by providing support to others.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE

NYEC has identified several recommendations for policy and systems change that can support the work of service providers and facilitate a shift towards developing comprehensive approaches that focus on long-term personal and economic stability and success of court-involved youth, as well as diverting youth from further engagement in the criminal justice system.

- **Support Funding Options That Sustain Multiple Pathways:** there is a need for more programs that provide a continuum of

opportunities and services for youth in various stages of entry into the criminal justice system. In focusing the federal and state resources on services for youth who have been incarcerated, we are accepting incarceration as a fact of life, a stance that is especially damaging in light of the systemic inequalities of the mass incarceration system. While it is critically important to support youth who are reentering communities after a period of confinement or incarceration, it is equally crucial to develop and fund diversionary programs and strategies that can prevent youth from becoming involved in the criminal justice system.

- **Support Comprehensive Programs that Serve Court-Involved Youth But Do Not Exclusively Focus on This Population:** we have learned that programs that do not work exclusively with court-involved youth can be as effective in supporting this population as the programs that focus on it exclusively. Programs that serve court-involved youth as a subset of a larger population of participants have several unique opportunities, such as not signaling the court-involved status of their participants to community members and employers. By contrast, the status of participants in programs that focus on court-involved youth is revealed by virtue of their participation in the program. Other opportunities include providing court-involved youth with an environment where their court-involved status is not emphasized and where they can be treated as all other participants and creating opportunities for interaction with peers who are not court-



ISUS, Hands-on Construction Training

involved. However, many funding streams are tied to performance measures that might not be attainable in light of the pervasive barriers to success experienced by court-involved youth. This can create a disincentive for including this population in services. Funding entities should support models that include court-involved youth in comprehensive programs that have the capacity to support this population but do not focus on it exclusively.

- **Maintain and Increase Investment in Programs:** we need to ensure that providers have the support needed to sustain and scale this work, including multi-system and across-system funding approaches to support court-involved youth in transition to postsecondary education and the workforce. CBOs need technical assistance and capacity building support in order to learn how to identify, map, and secure funding from a variety of funding streams.
- **Facilitate Cross-System Communication:** all too often professionals working within

different systems that support court-involved youth find themselves working at cross-purposes and without understanding the requirements of each system. Thus, some of the providers we have interviewed for this report indicated that probation and parole requirements can conflict with postsecondary goals and classroom schedules of court-involved students. Clearly, there is a need to

facilitate deliberate communication across the CBOs, postsecondary institutions, the criminal justice system, and other systems that might touch court-involved youth in order to share information, establish expectations, and leverage the resources of each system in order to better support these youth.

- **Build Strategic Partnerships:** one of the key lessons of the PSI is the importance of building and maintaining strategic partnerships with postsecondary institutions. Postsecondary institutions have been traditionally reluctant to institutionalize partnerships with CBOs, yet CBOs are uniquely positioned to support postsecondary institutions' mission to increase retention and completion of students because of their understanding of this population of youth, the supports they need for successful postsecondary transition, and practices that can promote postsecondary success. Similarly, establishing strategic, formal partnerships with postsecondary institutions and state agencies and other providers can enable CBOs to increase their own social capital and networks. Partnerships can allow CBOs to provide expanded supports and resources to their participants, while at the same time increasing their ability to serve as effective advocates for youth and to promote local and national systems change by helping to establish funding priorities and service delivery guidelines and models in supporting this population of youth.
- **Expand Access to Federal Financial Aid:** limited educational funding opportunities can impact access to postsecondary education and training, with court-involved youth being ultimately condemned to a lifetime of restricted employment prospects, poverty, and recidivism. There is a need to reinstate Pell Grant funding for in-prison education, remove provisions that limit eligibility for federal financial aid for some categories of offenders, and expand federal financial aid support for low-income students.
- **Dismantle the School-to-Prison Pipeline:** in order to prevent the tracking of students, particularly students of color and students with disabilities, from schools into the juvenile justice system, schools need to move away from punitive disciplinary policies and develop new interventions for addressing in-school misbehavior. The focus should be on interventions that can minimize the

incidences of disciplinary violations, such as connecting students to social services, mental health supports, and positive community activities. Interventions that follow once misbehavior has occurred should involve de-escalation, mediation, and restorative justice rather than suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement. For example, Denver, Colorado, has implemented a district-wide policy to abandon the zero-tolerance approach, resulting in a 44% decrease in suspensions, 60% decrease in expulsions, and 50% decrease in referrals to police.⁶⁰ To further limit the number of students referred to the juvenile justice system, Denver Public Schools have signed an intergovernmental agreement with the Denver Police Department that will, among other provisions, require the city's 15 School Resource Officers (police officers assigned to public schools) and administrators to undergo trainings on subjects such as restorative justice, adolescent psychology, and cultural competence.⁶¹

- **Remove Criminal History Questions from Employment Applications:** most employment applications require applicants to disclose their history of criminal justice system involvement. For individuals with a history of involvement with the criminal justice system, this presents a significant barrier to obtaining employment, as they are often eliminated from consideration during the initial employment screening stage. With the exception of industries that cannot employ individuals with criminal histories because of federal or state laws, these questions should be removed from employment applications in order to provide applicants an opportunity to connect with employers. In order to open up pathways that can lead to careers that pay living wages, barring applicants with criminal histories from certain industries should be reexamined.
- **Build the Evidence Base:** there is very little research on the impacts of practices that promote postsecondary success in court-involved youth and few pilot programs and

evaluations of programs in this field. In order to identify and scale promising interventions that can increase educational success, economic potential, and stability of court-

involved youth, we need more evaluation and better quality data on the impact of these programs on long-term outcomes for court-involved youth.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, there exists a real need to develop and implement national- and state-level



ISUS, High School Graduation

need to ensure that quality education is accessible to all and that all youth have access to educational

strategies for funding, supporting, and evaluating postsecondary education-focused approaches that include and support court-involved youth ages 16-24. As postsecondary credentials increasingly become a requirement for access to living wage careers, we

pathways that can help them meet their potential and aspirations.

In recent years, we have seen a decrease in the number of youth who become court-involved and a new focus on promoting successful outcomes that include diversion from further involvement in the criminal justice system. As advocates and communities work to sustain this focus on diversion, we should also broaden our definition of successful outcomes for court-involved youth to include long-term economic and community stability. In order to accomplish this goal, we need to shift focus from short-term solutions such as temporary low-wage employment to long-term, comprehensive strategies that increase the ability of youth to succeed and thrive in their communities. Access to, and support for postsecondary education, including one-, two- and four-year degrees, and certificates with value in the labor market offers tremendous promise in ensuring that all youth have equal opportunity to succeed in the 21st century economy and become fully engaged, productive citizens.

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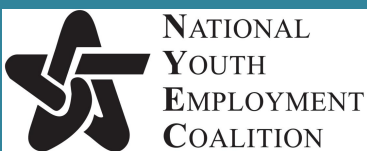
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VISION:

The National Youth Employment Coalition envisions a nation in which every young person is assured the full range of educational, developmental, vocational, economic and social opportunities, supports, and services s/he may need to become a productive and self-sufficient worker, taxpayer, parent, and citizen.

MISSION:

The National Youth Employment Coalition improves the effectiveness of organizations that seek to help youth become productive citizens.



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