



BOOSTING THE LIFE CHANCES OF YOUNG MEN OF COLOR

Evidence from Promising Programs

mdrc
BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
TO IMPROVE SOCIAL POLICY

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June 2014

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OVERVIEW

Despite progress on many fronts, young men of color still face many obstacles to success in American society and suffer disproportionately from economic and social disadvantage. In recent years, foundations and state and local governments have launched major initiatives to address this pressing issue. For example, in 2011, the City of New York created the Young Men’s Initiative, a \$42-million annual program, supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Open Society Foundation, to invest in the success of the city’s young men of color. In February of this year, the Obama Administration announced “My Brother’s Keeper,” a multimillion-dollar push by the government, foundations, and businesses to “build ladders of opportunity and unlock the full potential of boys and young men of color.”

In light of the momentum building to improve the fortunes of young men of color, this review takes a look at what is known about this population and highlights programs that are shown by rigorous research to be making a difference. It first examines the special challenges and struggles of these young men in the labor market, including problems related to their disproportionate involvement in the criminal justice system and their experiences in the educational system. A growing number of young men of color have become disconnected from the positive systems, institutions, and pathways designed to help people achieve success — high school diplomas, enrollment in and completion of postsecondary education or training, and ultimately career ladders leading to well-paying jobs.

Given these facts, the natural next question is: What can be done? Does this group of young men constitute, as some have labeled them, a “lost generation”? Or are there interventions that can provide real hope and real results? Can the nation’s institutions do a better job of increasing educational and labor market opportunity? Is there, in fact, a way to move away from deficit-focused characterizations of young men of color to ones that recognize and build on their resilience and strengths?

The second section of the paper reviews the results from high-quality, randomized controlled trials involving young men of color, some conducted by MDRC and some by other groups. It highlights a number of promising interventions, casting doubt on the conventional wisdom that nothing can be done. Interventions are divided into two broad categories: (a) *Proactive Approaches*: preventive interventions aimed at youth who are still connected to positive systems (like schools or community colleges) that seek to enhance their success in moving through those systems and on to productive careers in the labor market and (b) *Reconnection Approaches*: interventions targeting those who have disconnected from positive systems, who have dropped out of school or the labor market, or who have been sent to jail or prison and are relying upon the second-chance system to help reintegrate into their communities. The final section of the review discusses some promising ideas and interventions that could provide new models for improving outcomes for young men of color.

Policy interest in assisting young men of color has waxed and waned over the years, and not enough has been learned from past efforts to build better policies and programs. It is hoped that current efforts will include a robust documentation and learning agenda to ensure that the knowledge base of successful strategies grows larger. It is critical to harness the current interest to build on what is known — and learn more about what is still not understood — to finally make a lasting difference in the lives and future prospects of this group.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite progress on many fronts, young men of color still face many obstacles to success in American society and suffer disproportionately from economic and social disadvantage.¹ In recent years, foundations and state and local governments have launched major initiatives to address this pressing issue. For example, in 2011, the City of New York created the Young Men’s Initiative, a \$42-million annual program, supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Open Society Foundation, to invest in the success of the city’s young men of color. In February of this year, the Obama Administration announced “My Brother’s Keeper,” a multimillion-dollar push by the government, foundations, and businesses to “build ladders of opportunity and unlock the full potential of boys and young men of color.”

In light of the momentum building to improve the fortunes of young men of color, this review takes a look at what is known about this population and highlights programs that are shown by rigorous research to be making a difference. It first examines the special challenges and struggles of young men of color in the labor market, including problems related to their disproportionate involvement in the criminal justice system and their experiences in the educational system. Young men of color have become increasingly disconnected from the positive systems, institutions, and pathways designed to help people achieve success — high school diplomas, enrollment in and completion of postsecondary education or training, and ultimately career ladders leading to well-paying jobs.

Given these facts, the natural next question is: What can be done? Does this group of young men constitute, as some have labeled them, a “lost generation”?² Or are there interventions that can provide real hope and real results? Is there, in fact, a way to move away from deficit-focused characterizations of young men of color to ones that recognize and build on their resilience and strengths?³

Policy interest in assisting young men of color has waxed and waned over the years, and not enough has been learned from past efforts to build better policies and programs. For instance, in the late 1970s, the Department of Labor funded the Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilot Projects (YIEPP), which guaranteed part-time and summer jobs to all young people in particular neighborhoods or cities as long as they stayed in or returned to school. The results were very encouraging: YIEPP virtually erased the large gap in unemployment rates between white and black youth.⁴ But the program was cut short in the early 1980s, when policy interest in this topic receded, and there was little follow-up. It is hoped that current efforts to improve outcomes for young men of color will include a robust documentation and learning agenda to ensure that the knowledge base of successful strategies grows larger.

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1. Young men from several different racial or ethnic groups may be defined as “young men of color.” For the most part, the data presented in this paper refer to African-American and Latino males, the focus of particular policy interest.
 2. Ramsey (2007).
 3. Harper and Associates (2014).
 4. Farkas et al. (1984); Gueron (1984).

The second section of the paper reviews the results from high-quality, randomized controlled trials (RCTs) involving young men of color, some conducted by MDRC and some by other groups. It highlights a number of promising interventions, casting doubt on the conventional wisdom that nothing can be done. It is critical to harness the current interest to build on what is known — and learn more about what is still not understood — to finally make a lasting difference in the lives and future prospects of this group. The final section of the review discusses some promising new ideas and interventions that could provide new models for improving outcomes for young men of color.

THE PROBLEM

There have been enormous changes in the labor market and in the nature of work in the past 40 years, with the main growth areas occurring in high-wage, high-skill sectors of the economy and on the other end in low-wage, low-skill sectors.⁵ The number of jobs that once provided middle-class wages to young men without any postsecondary education (or even without a high school diploma) has sharply declined. The consequences are particularly severe for young men of color, who are less likely than young white men or older men to enroll in and complete postsecondary education. Even when compared with similarly less-educated young white men (or similarly situated young women of color), young men of color often do worse on a variety of important outcomes, such as finishing school or finding a good job.⁶

The struggles of young, less-educated men, especially those of color, are hard to overstate.⁷ The situation has been documented much more extensively elsewhere, and this review is not meant to be exhaustive. But a few illustrative statistics help set the context for today's increasing attention to finding common-sense solutions. The employment rate of male teens aged 16 to 19, for example, has plummeted over the past 35 years. In 1978, the employment rate for this group stood at 51.8 percent. In 2009, it was 28.1 percent, falling by nearly half. For teenage males of color, these rates are even lower. Hispanic male teens had an employment rate of 24 percent in 2009, and the rate for black male teens was even lower at just 14 percent. While teens constitute a special group, the labor market woes of young men of color extend into their 20s and 30s. Employment rates among 20- to 24-year-olds and 25- to 34-year-olds in 2009 also stood at their lowest levels in over 60 years. Earnings for employed young men of color have also declined in recent decades.⁸ Some of these losses are, of course, due to the Great Recession, which disproportionately hit young men, especially young men of color.⁹ But the magnitude of the declines for young men of color has been especially troubling.

The problems faced by young men of color in the labor market are compounded by their disproportionate level of involvement with the criminal justice system. In 2010, black men were more than six times as likely as white men to be incarcerated in prison or jail, while Hispanic men were more

5. Kalleberg (2011); Autor and Dorn (2013).

6. Edelman, Holzer, and Offner (2006).

7. Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, and Palma (2011); William T. Grant Foundation (1988); Edelman, Holzer, and Offner (2006); Holzer and Hlavac (2012).

8. Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, and Palma (2011).

9. Hout, Levanon, and Cumberworth (2011).

than two-and-a-half times more likely to be incarcerated.¹⁰ The experience of incarceration can subsequently serve as a marker for employers, who are reluctant to hire those with a criminal record.¹¹ Indeed, in a now famous experiment, Pager found that the probability of receiving a callback from an employer fell by nearly two-thirds among young black men with a criminal record relative to young black men without a criminal record. More distressing yet, young white men *with* criminal records received a higher rate of callback from employers than both groups of black men, which illustrates the difficulties faced by young men of color in gaining a foothold in the contemporary American labor market.¹² Incarceration can be damaging in other ways, too. It derails educational progress or the accumulation of relevant work experience, and it separates young men from their families and other support systems.

The life chances of young men of color are also often compromised by their experiences in the educational system — a system that can sometimes exacerbate inequality when it serves minority students less well than their more advantaged peers. Because minority children are more likely to enter school already behind, they often struggle in the educational system before entering the labor market. Though racial and ethnic achievement gaps, at least between black and white children, have been declining over time, black and Hispanic children continue to lag behind their peers on a wide variety of academic achievement measures and other metrics related to academic success.¹³ These problems may be especially acute for young boys of color.¹⁴ Despite some recent progress, only 52 percent of African-American males and 58 percent of Latino males graduate from high school in four years, compared with a rate of 78 percent for white males.¹⁵ Furthermore, young females from all racial and ethnic groups have steadily been outpacing their young male counterparts in successfully completing college in recent years.¹⁶

While school enrollment of young men of color has been increasing, far fewer enroll in and graduate from postsecondary education than their more advantaged peers. Though socio-economic background and prior academic performance play a role in students' postsecondary success, the literature suggests that institutional factors are also important.¹⁷ Additionally, students' perceptions of institutional support can also positively or negatively affect aspects of college success for students of color.¹⁸

In today's economy, the best bet for success for a young person is to graduate from high school and complete some postsecondary education or job training and then enter the labor market with the skills necessary to thrive. To accomplish these goals, young people must keep moving along a posi-

10. Drake (2013).

11. Pager (2007).

12. Pager (2003).

13. Duncan and Magnuson (2011); Farkas (2011).

14. Davis (2003).

15. Schott Foundation for Public Education (2012).

16. Bailey and Dynarski (2011).

17. Cuyjet and Associates (2006).

18. Bush and Bush (2010); Gardenhire, Collado, Martin, and Castro (2010).

tive path, and society must keep them connected to educational systems and job training programs. As the statistics above illustrate, there are many places where young men, especially young men of color, can go off track: by dropping out of high school, by becoming disconnected from school or work, or by failing to earn a college degree or certificate.

What can be done about the seemingly grim prospects for less-educated young men of color? Are there programs or policies that can be pursued both to keep young people connected to positive systems that promote upward mobility and to reconnect young men who have become disconnected from those systems over time? Fortunately, a growing body of evidence is beginning to show the way. The next section discusses what has been learned about how to provide effective assistance to young men of color.

INTERVENTIONS THAT WORK

Young men of color are, of course, a diverse group. Many are doing just fine, despite the disparities noted above. Others need only a small amount of help to succeed — modest connections to concrete opportunities and supports that will help them thrive. Still others need more extensive supports. Different solutions are necessary for these latter two groups, a point returned to in the concluding section.

Only a small fraction of interventions aimed at improving the fortunes of young men of color have been tested using RCTs. Among those that have, not all work as program designers intended, and some do not work at all. This review is not meant to offer a synthesis of everything that has been tried. Instead, it focuses on specific programs that have improved outcomes for young men of color as demonstrated by evidence from RCTs. It also highlights some models that, if not entirely proven yet, seem quite promising given initial evidence. Interventions are divided into two broad categories: (a) *Proactive Approaches*: preventive interventions aimed at youth who are still connected to positive systems (like schools or community colleges) that seek to enhance their success in moving through those systems and on to productive careers in the labor market and (b) *Reconnection Approaches*: interventions targeting young men who have disconnected from positive systems, who have dropped out of school or the labor market, or who have been sent to jail or prison and are relying upon the second-chance system to help reintegrate into their communities. It is important to note that, while some of the interventions discussed below focus exclusively or predominantly on young men of color, others are more broadly focused but have either consistently or especially positive outcomes for this group. (The table in Appendix A summarizes the programs described below, highlighting the target populations and programs' effects.)

Proactive Approaches

This section considers two different types of proactive interventions for young men of color. First are those that are focused on high school-age youth, seeking to prepare them for postsecondary education or give them skills that will be useful in their early careers in the labor market. The second set involves programs that are targeted at youth and young adults who are already in postsecondary or job training settings and that are designed to help them to achieve better outcomes in the labor market. Not included in this review are a host of interventions aimed at younger boys, such as youth

development programs like Big Brothers Big Sisters that offer important supports to many disadvantaged youth and seek to boost their life chances as they progress toward adulthood.¹⁹

High School-Focused Programs

Young men of color are less likely than their peers to graduate from high school and go on to enroll in postsecondary education or find a job. One of the biggest success stories among interventions that improve outcomes for high school-aged young men of color is Career Academies. Implemented as a high school reform to help low-income youth stay engaged in school and navigate the transition to either college or employment, Career Academies provide instruction in small learning communities and offer youth both academics and exposure to a particular occupation or sector. Importantly, Career Academies partner with local employers to provide concrete work-based learning opportunities.

About 85 percent of the participants in MDRC’s random assignment study of Career Academies were Hispanic or African-American, and while both young men and women participate in Career Academies, the results have been particularly impressive for young men.²⁰ For example, in comparison with a control group, earnings for young men participating in Career Academies were nearly \$30,000 higher over the eight years following scheduled graduation from high school. This includes positive impacts on the number of months employed over the follow-up period, hours worked per week, and hourly wages. To put the magnitude of these impacts in some perspective, they are larger than other researchers’ estimates of the earnings return on two full years of community college. The impacts even extended beyond the purely economic. Participants were more likely to live independently of their parents and to live with either a spouse or partner and their children. For young men, Career Academies also improved the likelihood that they would marry and that they would live with their biological children. This suggests that the improvements in men’s material circumstances may have made them more attractive as husbands and fathers to their romantic partners. Spurred in part by the results of MDRC’s study, the Career Academies approach has taken root in an estimated 8,000 high schools across the country, creating an impressive national infrastructure — although many academies today are struggling to provide work-based learning and career exploration experiences to their students in an era of high-stakes academic testing.

Another strong intervention targeting at-risk high school students, including many young men of color, is New York City’s Small Schools of Choice (SSCs). These schools resulted from a series of high school reforms in New York City that included a new districtwide high school choice process for rising ninth-graders, closure of more than 30 large, failing high schools, and the opening of more than 200 small, nonselective high schools designed to provide realistic choices for students with widely varying academic backgrounds. Relying on randomized lotteries created by the New York City school admissions process, MDRC developed a study that found that these schools raised graduation rates, on average, by nearly 10 percentage points, nearly all of which is accounted for by an increase in

19. Grossman, Resch, and Tierney (2000) found that mentoring programs for 10- to 16-year-olds by Big Brothers Big Sisters reduced first-time drug use by almost half and first-time alcohol use by a third, cut school absenteeism by half, improved parental and peer relationships, and gave the youth confidence in doing their schoolwork (60 percent of the study sample was male, and half was African-American).

20. Kemple (2008).

Regents Diplomas, the higher-level credential that requires students to pass five subject tests.²¹ The schools also boosted participants' college readiness as measured by increased passing rates for the English Regents Examination, which is used by the City University of New York to exempt incoming students from remedial English courses. Importantly for the current review, students at SSCs are predominantly of color, and the effects on graduation held true for all subgroups, including young black men and young Hispanic men.

For many young people who have grown up in poverty and had distressed early childhood experiences, a sole focus on academics often is not sufficient. More focused approaches for young men of color, some including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), have shown promise. For instance, in a recent evaluation of the Becoming a Man program for young men in grades 7 to 10, researchers at the University of Chicago found that a program combining regular interaction with positive adult role models, after-school programming, and CBT reduced violent and nonviolent arrests by approximately 40 percent and also seemed to boost positive schooling outcomes that should lead to higher graduation rates.²² The authors argue that CBT is the crucial ingredient here, with its focus on helping people “recognize and reduce unhelpful automatic behaviors and biased beliefs — to promote ‘thinking about thinking’ (meta-cognition).” Another small study tested Becoming a Man in combination with intensive tutoring and also found positive results.²³ Other studies have examined school-based social and emotional learning programs, some of which have shown positive effects on academic performance.²⁴

Postsecondary Programs

Another set of proactive programs aims to help young men of color connect to and progress through postsecondary education and training, with the goal of enhancing their long-term job prospects. These interventions address common barriers that low-income and first-generation college students often face, such as financial pressure, poor academic preparation, or inadequate advising and counseling. One such intervention aimed at young men of color is a performance-based scholarship program offered at Pima Community College in Tucson, Arizona. In essence, the program offered up to \$4,500 in scholarships to (mostly) Latino men, contingent on their meeting a variety of academic benchmarks, such as maintaining a 2.0 grade point average and participating in an array of support services, including advising or tutoring. Interim findings from MDRC's random assignment study of the program found promising results.²⁵ Participants had a net increase in financial aid, including less reliance on loans than students in the control group, and were more likely to stay in college for a second semester, to enroll full-time, and to earn more college credits over the first year of the program. A larger evaluation of performance-based scholarships across five states found similarly promising results, with participants demonstrating reduced student debt, improved performance, and more college credits completed.²⁶

21. Bloom and Unterman (2013).

22. Heller, Pollack, Ander, and Ludwig (2013).

23. Cook et al. (2014).

24. See, for instance, Durlak et al. (2011) for a meta-analysis.

25. Patel and Valenzuela (2013); full findings are due in 2014.

26. Patel, Richburg-Hayes, de la Campa, and Rudd (2013).

Another approach to helping young men of color complete postsecondary education is the unusually comprehensive Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) intervention at the City University of New York. Many low-income students who enter community college are required to take non-credit developmental (remedial) courses because they are deemed unprepared for college-level work. These courses cost money and cause many students to exhaust their Pell Grant aid; few students complete their developmental requirements, and only 15 percent earn a credential within six years.²⁷ Through a set of requirements and supports over three years, ASAP is intended to help low-income, predominantly minority students complete community college and complete it faster. The program includes a requirement to attend full time as well as special seminars and classes, advising and career services, tuition waivers to cover gaps in financial aid, free MetroCards for public transportation, and free textbooks. According to interim results from an RCT conducted by MDRC, which focused on students in need of developmental classes, the program increased retention each semester by 8 to 10 percentage points, the number of credits earned by 25 percent, and the proportion of students graduating in two-and-a-half years by as much as 15 percentage points.²⁸ Over one-third of the study sample was male, and the program worked equally well for men and women. Early indications are that these effects are likely to grow substantially by the end of three years.

Of course, not all youth want or are able to succeed in college. But these young people will still need marketable skills to successfully navigate the labor market. This means that job training programs are a critical pillar of support for many young men of color. One important study of job training is the randomized evaluation by Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) of so-called Sectoral Employment Training programs, which seek to tailor training to the needs of local industries and employers and then directly connect trainees to opportunities in those industries.²⁹ In this sense, the sectoral training strategy echoes a key component of Career Academies — connecting program services to businesses that will likely someday be hiring program graduates. In P/PV's study, the program demonstrated large effects, with participants earning 29 percent more than controls the year after the program ended. Participants were also more likely to work consistently, at higher wages, and in jobs that were more likely to offer benefits. While this study did not focus specifically on young men of color, about half the study sample was male, 81 percent were African-American or Latino, and about one-third were young adults aged 18 to 26. More importantly, the positive impacts were found across all subgroups, including those defined by race/ethnicity, gender, or age. It is important to note that the programs rigorously screened applicants and required a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) certificate and/or a minimum reading level, meaning that young men with lower initial skill levels might not qualify for this type of program.

Another promising training approach, Year Up, serves young people 18 to 24, almost all of whom have a high school diploma or GED certificate, and provides a year of intensive supports geared to helping them land jobs in better-paying industries, like information technology or investment operations. While the program serves both men and women, about 60 percent of the sample members in a recent study were men and about 85 percent were black or Latino. The program mixes intensive

27. Shapiro et al. (2012).

28. Scrivener and Weiss (2013).

29. Maguire et al. (2010).

instruction in technical skills in the fields above with instruction in communication and other professional skills, a paid stipend, and a six-month internship at a top company in their track. A small random assignment evaluation of the program by the Economic Mobility Corporation found that in the three years after exiting the program, participants earned about \$13,000 more than their control counterparts, primarily through higher-wage jobs in the types of industries targeted by the program.³⁰ This study reinforces the idea that intensive supports directed at connecting young men of color to concrete, well-paying employment opportunities may be a promising approach for improving this group's economic outlook. (Another, larger study of Year Up is under way, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.)

Reconnection Approaches

While the interventions discussed above generally targeted youth still in secondary or postsecondary school, in the hopes of keeping them on track and progressing toward either higher education or training or a decent job, a second set of programs targets disadvantaged young men, primarily young men of color, who are at risk of disconnecting or have disconnected from positive systems. This review focuses on two types of programs: those aimed at reconnecting young men to education and training and those aimed at reconnecting them to the labor market directly.

Back to School

The most visible of programs aimed at reconnecting young people to education and training is the federal Job Corps program, which provides intensive, (mostly) residential academic and job training services to disadvantaged youth aged 16 to 24. In the 1990s and 2000s, Mathematica Policy Research conducted a large-scale randomized study of the program, finding some promising results.³¹ Participants showed large increases in the rate of completion of educational credentials like GED and vocational certificates. And commensurate with this increase in education, participants earned approximately 12 percent more than controls in the short term. Though these increased earnings did not persist years after the program ended for the overall sample, the earnings gains did persist 5 to 10 years later for older youth aged 20 to 24. There were also reductions in criminal activity among participants.³² Though the program appeared to cost more than the demonstrated benefits — a result that has led some critics to question Job Corps' funding level — the program did post some qualified successes. This suggests that there may be opportunities to experiment with new approaches to make the program's performance more consistent and enduring.

Another program aimed at reconnecting disconnected youth is the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program. This program targets young (mostly male) high school dropouts and provides an intensive 17-month intervention — the first four or five months of which is residential, usually on a military base. It consists of three phases. First is a Pre-ChalleNGe phase, in which participants begin physical fitness training; learn the program's rules, expectations, and military concepts of bearing, discipline, and teamwork; and engage in other assessment and orientation activities. In the second

30. Roder and Elliott (2014).

31. Schochet, Burghardt, and McConnell (2008).

32. Schochet, Burghardt, and McConnell (2006).

phase, participants formally become “cadets,” engaging in 20 weeks of structured education and activities promoting positive youth development, including leadership, responsible citizenship, life-coping skills, physical fitness, job skills, and academic excellence. This phase also offers help for participants in preparing for the GED test. The last phase of the program involves a postresidential structured mentoring component — in which ChalleNge staff and mentors work with the youth to help them solve problems and make progress back in the real world. A randomized evaluation of the program by MDRC found impressive results: Three years after enrollment, 72 percent of ChalleNge participants had earned a GED certificate or a high school diploma, compared with only 56 percent of control group nonparticipants.³³ Participants were also almost twice as likely to report earning some college credits. Finally, ChalleNge participants earned about 20 percent more in the labor market than control youth. Nearly 90 percent of the study participants were male, and more than half were either African-American or Latino. Though participants continued to struggle to make ends meet following their participation, a rigorous cost-benefit analysis by the RAND Corporation found that “those and other program effects yield \$25,549...in social benefits per individual admitted to the program, or \$2.66 in social benefits for every dollar expended for a return on investment of 166 percent.”³⁴ While absent a long-term follow-up there is no way to know whether the positive effects will persist for the young men of color that ChalleNge served, the interim effects are surely encouraging.

High school dropouts are also the population targeted by the GED Bridge to Health and Business program at New York City’s LaGuardia Community College. Although GED certification is the key gateway to postsecondary education for high school dropouts, in reality very few GED-certificate recipients go on to college, and many still flounder in the labor market. Given these facts, GED Bridge aims to ground GED training in a curriculum built around either health or business, two fields in which participants could have opportunities in the future. The program also offers intensive advising to participants. Though MDRC’s random assignment evaluation of the program followed sample members for only one year, the results are highly encouraging. Relative to students in a traditional GED prep course, GED Bridge students were over 20 percentage points more likely to complete the course. More impressively, 53 percent passed the GED test, compared with only 22 percent in the traditional course. And 24 percent went on to enroll in a community college, as opposed to only 7 percent of students in the traditional prep course.³⁵ While the GED Bridge study sample was only about one-third male, there was no evidence that effectiveness varied by gender. MDRC is seeking to replicate the model elsewhere and will test whether the program works as well for young men as for young women.

Back to Work

Some young men of color need less help reconnecting to the educational system than reconnecting to the labor market. Ultimately, well-paying jobs are what enable young men to achieve economic stability and to thrive as partners, husbands, and fathers. There is a long line of interventions aimed at reconnecting young men of color to better jobs. For example, in the mid-1990s, MDRC evaluated

33. Millenky, Bloom, Muller-Ravett, and Broadus (2011).

34. Perez-Arce, Constant, Loughran, and Karoly (2012).

35. Martin and Broadus (2013).

a program called Parents' Fair Share, which attempted to help noncustodial fathers, primarily men of color, find jobs in order to better help them comply with child support orders and assist their families and children. The evaluation found that the program succeeded in improving employment outcomes for the least employable men in the study sample and increasing the child support payments they made.³⁶

One subpopulation of disconnected men of color is nonworking men in households receiving public housing subsidies. This population was partially targeted by Jobs-Plus, an employment program based in housing developments, which was evaluated by MDRC.³⁷ Jobs-Plus combines employment/training services, “neighbor-to-neighbor outreach centering on work,” and rent rules to make work pay (by decreasing the marginal tax on employment income that comes with public housing rent rules). The program, which operated in five cities, was found to have significant and large effects on earnings that persisted for seven years (three years after the intervention ended). The average gain was \$1,300 per year over the full seven years. The rent incentives seemed to be especially important — the two sites that never properly implemented the rent incentives showed no effects on earnings. Notably, effects were found to have grown over the study period. Particularly impressive from the point of view of this review, earnings increases were particularly large for Latino immigrant men in Los Angeles. For these men, average annual earnings over the first four years increased by \$3,248. Jobs-Plus is currently being replicated in San Antonio and in New York City as part of its Young Men's Initiative.

Another important area of reconnection strategies emerges from a set of studies on ex-inmate populations. Young men of color have disproportionate rates of incarceration, and having a criminal record makes it more difficult to find work in the formal labor market. Identifying successful programs that assist former prisoners in making the transition back to their communities, therefore, is particularly important.

Mark W. Lipsey and colleagues have conducted a number of reviews of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy approaches to preventing recidivism among youth and adults in the justice system. In general, meta-analyses of these programs show promising results in reducing recidivism, often between 25 and 30 percent.³⁸ While simply reducing recidivism is not the same as ensuring successful integration into the formal labor market, it is clearly a necessary first step. Some of the most promising approaches identified by Lipsey and colleagues are those that include a focus on anger control and interpersonal problem-solving components. The approach also may hold promise for individuals before they have any experience of incarceration. That is, the approach may also be effective in a more preventive setting, as the earlier discussion of the *Becoming a Man* program illustrates.

Another approach to helping former inmates transition into the labor market is the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) transitional jobs program. This program, which was tested in New York City, offers former inmates, who are predominantly men of color, temporary, paid work

36. Miller and Knox (2001).

37. Riccio (2010); Bloom, Riccio, and Verma (2005).

38. Lipsey, Landenberger, and Wilson (2007).

in addition to other services (for instance, fatherhood or parenting skills classes) to help them avoid recidivism and a return to incarceration. Participants work seven hours a day, four days a week in transitional jobs, learning soft skills necessary to holding down steady employment. On the fifth day, they work with CEO staff to plan for postprogram employment opportunities. Outcomes from MDRC's random assignment evaluation of the program were positive: Participants were about 11 percent less likely to be reincarcerated in the three years after the program and about 8 percent less likely to be arrested, convicted, or incarcerated.³⁹ Participants also had some employment and earnings gains, though these were a direct result of the temporary jobs offered by the program, and the gains faded after those jobs ended.

While not every program works, and no program provides a magic bullet for solving all the problems encountered by disadvantaged young men of color, the set of programs highlighted above prove that some things *do* make a difference. But more work clearly remains to be done to understand what works and why, and how early gains can be translated into long-term and meaningful change. There are also other interventions that remain to be explored and understood. The next section highlights some of these potential new directions.

WHERE SHOULD WE GO FROM HERE?

This section outlines a set of paths forward that will build on what works — and that will help reveal what still needs to be learned about how to help young men of color succeed. Of course, it is critical that efforts go beyond isolated interventions and that real reforms of the systems serving young men of color take root.

Efforts are already under way in some states to reorient systems that have traditionally worked to the detriment of young men of color. The criminal justice system, for example, is increasingly experimenting with reforms like alternative sentencing and diversion programs to halt the ballooning incarceration rates of recent decades (and, in fact, the prison population has fallen slightly in the past couple of years).⁴⁰ Likewise, the child support system, which often operates in a fashion so punitive as to discourage young men from working in the formal economy, is in many places being reformed to ensure that more child support money goes to families and children instead of to the government and to ease some of the most punitive collection of arrears payments.⁴¹ There has also been much policy interest in establishing fatherhood programs both within and outside existing systems to help young men become more engaged with their children and be more positive influences on them.

This last section highlights some exciting work that will provide more evidence of what works best to achieve lasting success for young men of color: (1) evaluations of interventions that are under way with results expected soon; (2) ideas for scaling up and targeting existing interventions that have already been shown to make a difference; and (3) new ideas that have yet to be tested.

39. Redcross, Millenky, Rudd, and Levshin (2012).

40. Carson and Golinelli (2013).

41. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Support Enforcement (2012, 2013).

Research Under Way with Results Expected Soon

MDRC is currently studying a number of interventions with potential to benefit young men of color:

- **Diplomas Now:** Diplomas Now is a school reform intervention aimed at high-poverty schools serving youth in grades 6 to 12. MDRC's evaluation is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Investing in Innovation (i3) program. The intervention combines three promising secondary school interventions: Talent Development (which a previous MDRC study found to increase attendance, the number of credits earned, and rates of promotion to subsequent grades), City Year, and Communities in Schools, and will continue rigorously testing their impacts in a host of schools over the coming years. Participating schools in the study serve student populations that are more than 90 percent African-American and Latino. An implementation report will be published in 2014; early impact results will come in 2015.
- **Youth Villages:** Youth Villages runs a transitional living program for youth aging out of the foster care and juvenile justice systems. Research shows that this group is particularly vulnerable to falling into poverty and engaging in criminal activity and may have other difficulties in making a successful transition to adulthood. The program provides social and mental health support systems, mentoring, and crisis intervention services. MDRC's random assignment evaluation focuses on the Transitional Living Program in Youth Villages' home state of Tennessee. Over half of the study participants are male, and almost half are African-American or Latino. A recent report found that the program is well-implemented with high youth participation rates.⁴² Early impact results are expected in 2015.
- **YouthBuild:** YouthBuild is a second-chance program primarily for high school dropouts aged 16 to 24 that serves more than 10,000 youth per year across the United States. The program provides training in the construction industry, along with educational services, counseling, leadership development training, and other services with the aim of improving participants' life prospects in a range of domains. While previous studies of the program have found promising results, MDRC is currently conducting the most rigorous and large-scale randomized study of the program to date. The first impact results are scheduled for 2016.
- **Adolescent Behavioral Learning Experience (ABLE):** Financed by the nation's first Social Impact Bond, MDRC is leading the implementation of a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy program for 16- to 18-year-olds detained at New York City's Rikers Island jail, with the goal of reducing the high recidivism rate for this population. Nearly all participants are African-American or Latino young men. The Vera Institute of Justice is conducting the evaluation of ABLE.
- **Paycheck Plus:** Paycheck Plus is a pilot program launched in 2013 in New York City by its Center for Economic Opportunity. The program builds on the success of the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) in bolstering the incomes and employment outcomes of low-income families with children. The key innovation of Paycheck Plus is, for the first time, to provide substantial support to low-wage workers without dependent children (including men who are noncustodial parents).

42. Manno, Valentine, Alson, and Skemer (2014).

MDRC is conducting the demonstration's evaluation. The study sample is about 60 percent male, mostly men of color. MDRC is currently looking to develop a second site, perhaps in a low-wage southern city, to test the enhanced EITC for singles.

- **Subsidized Employment:** Subsidized employment has attracted increasing attention in recent years, particularly after states created subsidized jobs for a quarter-million people in 2009 under provisions of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.⁴³ MDRC is rigorously testing about a dozen subsidized employment models through two closely coordinated projects, one sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor and the other sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Most of the programs target men of color — either low-income noncustodial parents recruited through the child support system or individuals returning to the community from prison. The first results are expected in 2015.
- **WorkAdvance:** WorkAdvance, a demonstration program in New York City, Tulsa, and northeast Ohio, is designed to help low-income adults prepare for, enter, and succeed in quality jobs, in high-demand fields with opportunities for career growth. WorkAdvance uses strategies found in sector-based employment programs that have operated for years, combined with career coaching after participants are placed into jobs. Participants are predominantly male in the programs for IT, environmental remediation, transportation, and manufacturing, and sites focusing on the manufacturing and transportation industries include larger proportions of ex-offenders (49 percent and 39 percent, respectively). MDRC will publish an implementation report in 2014, followed by an impact report in 2015.

Several other important evaluations of programs serving young men of color are also under way, including:

- The Expanded Success Initiative, part of New York City's Young Men's Initiative, aims to improve college and career readiness among African-American and Latino male students. The initiative focuses on 40 city high schools, with an emphasis on enhancing academics, youth development, and school culture. The evaluation is led by the Research Alliance for New York City Schools.
- The Aspen Institute's Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund has provided grants to 21 communities across the United States to support cross-sector collaboration to bring disconnected young people back into education and the workforce. An evaluation of the initiative is planned.
- The Parents and Children Together (PACT) Evaluation, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, includes random assignment evaluations of four Responsible Fatherhood programs in Missouri and Minnesota. All of the programs provide a mix of employment services, along with parenting classes, counseling, and other supports.
- The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement is sponsoring the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration to rigorously test child support-led employment programs for

43. Farrell, Elkin, Broadus, and Bloom (2011).

unemployed noncustodial parents. Eight states have received about \$2.3 million each (including both grants and matching funds) over five years to enroll 1,500 parents. The programs are offering employment services, parenting, domestic violence services, and enhanced child support enforcement (for example, expedited review and, if appropriate, modification of child support orders). Enrollment into the study began in late 2013 and will continue until 2016.

Scaling Up and Targeting Interventions

Many of the programs described in the second section of this paper established that well-targeted and well-implemented programs *can* make a difference in the lives of young men of color. But this is only the first step. To make a lasting difference, successful interventions must be taken to scale — that is, replicated and expanded successfully in new places and settings. For instance, the small high schools of choice model that has shown such good results for New York City’s disadvantaged young men of color should be tried in other school districts around the country. Similarly, Chicago’s Becoming a Man, the Year Up program, and Pima Community College’s performance-based scholarship program for Latino men should be expanded to more communities.

In addition, some of the interventions that have had positive effects on subgroups of young men of color might be replicated in communities in which young men of color predominate. For example, one could imagine developing contextualized GED transition programs in more traditionally male-dominated professions like advanced manufacturing. The Jobs-Plus employment program in public housing, which showed positive effects for immigrant Latino men, could be replicated in other public housing developments that serve Latino families and other populations of color. (President Obama’s 2015 budget request includes funding for an expansion of Jobs-Plus.) And the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) at the City University of New York (CUNY), which is boosting graduation rates for developmental education students, could be brought to community colleges that serve large proportions of minority students.

Taking promising or proven programs to scale can often be a difficult and time-intensive process. Models that work in one locality with a particular population may not travel well to other contexts. Balancing the desire to maintain fidelity to the original program model with the need to allow for adaptation to local contexts is always a challenge. There is much to learn about how and whether successful interventions like those described above can work effectively when they are replicated and expanded. Investing in efforts to scale up these programs — and to study their implementation and effects — could yield enormous insight into these interventions’ broader promise.

New Ideas for Testing

While this review highlights a number of promising and proven interventions geared toward helping young men of color succeed, it is by no means an exhaustive list of approaches that might be tried. Indeed, there is much still to be imagined and then tested. While new approaches should draw on the combined creativity and expertise of policymakers, practitioners, funders, researchers, and potential participants, four potential new ideas worthy of exploration are mentioned here as examples.

Tackling the Problem of “Undermatching” in Higher Education

Many of the interventions described in the second section of this paper pertain to young men of color who are at risk — that is, who otherwise might not get to college, or who have already disconnected from positive systems by the time they become involved in an intervention. By no means, however, are all young men of color vulnerable or struggling. Indeed, many are quite high-achieving, doing well in middle and high school, and on the path to college without any assistance at all. But research increasingly shows that many high-achieving low- to moderate-income young men of color will “undermatch” when it comes to applying to and enrolling in their ultimate postsecondary institution.⁴⁴ That is, they apply and choose less-selective schools, when they are just as capable of getting into and enrolling in more-selective schools with higher graduation rates that could lead to better jobs and higher pay down the road.

Randomized studies have found both that: (a) more selective colleges are often just as affordable as less-selective colleges for low-income students, and (b) often simple solutions — like assistance with financial aid forms or databases that suggest more competitive options, provide information on affordability, and waive application fees — can make dramatic differences in low-income students’ college selection decisions, particularly for the highest-achieving students.⁴⁵ However, “B-level” students often need more focused advising to navigate the college application process and make their best match. MDRC has been piloting just such an intervention in Chicago and New York City — the College Match Program — which places advisers in low-income high schools in an attempt to replicate the advising experienced by more privileged youth in higher-income schools. Further experimentation with such interventions could make measurable progress in understanding how to enable many more promising young men of color to meet their aspirations.

Supporting College Success for Young Men of Color Through Institutional Initiatives

Getting into the most appropriate postsecondary institution, however, is only half the battle. Across all types of postsecondary institutions, including community colleges, four-year institutions, and Minority-Serving Institutions, there is a heightened awareness of the need to provide men of color with specialized supports to help them thrive as college students and reach the goal of graduation. The types of support services that were offered in the Pima performance-based scholarship program for Latino male students and ASAP at CUNY (such as intrusive advising, specialized workshops, mandatory tutoring, financial supports, and career counseling) are representative of the services offered through many “Minority Male Initiatives” on campuses. In addition, research by scholars in higher education emphasizes the importance of mentoring relationships for men of color, both peer-to-peer and student-to-professional relationships.⁴⁶ The literature on underachievement among men of color stresses the importance of institutions creating a supportive environment where men of color are welcomed and offered what they need to stay engaged and perform well academically.⁴⁷

44. Hoxby and Turner (2012); Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, and Sanbonmatsu (2009).

45. Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, and Sanbonmatsu (2009); Hoxby and Turner (2012).

46. LaVant, Anderson, and Tiggs (1997); Sutton (2006).

47. Cuyjet (1997); Cuyjet and Associates (2006); Dawson-Threat (1997); Strayhorn (2008).

Although many colleges are trying variations of targeted services for male students of color, there have been few rigorous evaluations of these programs. As a result, little is known about how programs are implemented, whether they adhere closely to the conceived model, whether they actually work to improve academic outcomes, what the effect of the context is (for instance, majority-white institutions compared with Minority-Serving Institutions), and what configuration of components yields the best outcomes from students at lowest cost. This is problematic given the depth of this issue and the changing demographics of the United States, which suggests that solutions to increase success should be of higher priority. A demonstration project that tested some of these ideas would shed light on what institutional practices are effective in supporting men of color.

Combining Cognitive-Based Therapy with Employment Assistance for Youth and Adults in the Justice System

MDRC's research on transitional jobs, combined with evidence from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) interventions, suggests ways of bridging the divide between psychology-based CBT interventions and economic interventions that are focused on employment for individuals involved in the justice system. MDRC is currently working with experts to design a CBT intervention that can be delivered and integrated within a subsidized transitional jobs program. A paid transitional job would provide a ready-made environment for people to apply and practice the skills they learn in CBT. CBT programs that operate in the community have a difficult time getting people to show up and participate. Low attendance rates clearly weaken the ability of postrelease CBT programs to be effective. Embedding CBT in a transitional job setting addresses the attendance problem because the transitional job (and associated pay) provides a strong incentive for people to show up and participate in the CBT. Combining the strengths of both approaches could yield results that are greater than the sum of their parts.

New Approaches to Summer Jobs and Internships

The precipitous decline in the size of the youth labor market means that a large proportion of low-income men of color will not have worked by the time they finish (or drop out of) high school. The findings from projects like Youth Entitlement, Career Academies, and Year Up suggest that work experience and internships have a payoff in longer term employment and earnings. Despite the elimination of the federally funded summer jobs program in 1998, mayors of some major cities have created their own summer jobs programs, and the demand has been so great that lotteries are used to determine who gets selected. This creates the condition for a natural experiment to be able to measure the effects of summer jobs on both schooling and employment. Civic leaders can also partner with chambers of commerce and business associations to create internship opportunities across sectors during both the summer and the school year. These internships could be targeted, for example, at students who are in career and technical programs and aligned with the course of study, or they could be modeled on the original Youth Entitlement program and conditioned on school attendance and performance. The purpose of the internships would be to provide 21st-century work readiness skills that employers value, job shadowing, and the opportunity to build a résumé and references. The intent would not be to provide specific skills training. Sponsoring employers would be expected to provide the wages, which could be supplemented with public funding, if available.

CONCLUSION

This review, while not intended to be comprehensive, has illustrated a number of promising approaches and proven interventions that have demonstrated positive results for young men of color. While more is known about what works for this population than many might suspect, undoubtedly there is more to learn. Given the problems that young men of color have increasingly faced over the years in gaining a foothold on the American Dream, there is little time to waste in both learning and doing more.

APPENDIX
A

**Two Approaches to Interventions for
Men of Color: A Summary Table**

Two Approaches to Interventions for Men of Color

PROACTIVE APPROACHES		
INTERVENTION	TARGET POPULATION	ESTIMATED IMPACTS
Career Academies	High school youth, grades 9-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased young men's earnings by 17 percent (\$3,731 per year for a total of almost \$30,000 over 8 years) Increased rate of independent living with children and a spouse or partner Positively impacted marriage and custodial parenting
Small Schools of Choice	High school youth, grades 9-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raised graduation rate by nearly 10 percentage points Improved college readiness through increased passing rate of the English Regents Examination
Becoming a Man	Youth, grades 7-10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced arrests by approximately 40 percent Improved schooling outcomes (attendance, grade point average, and persistence)
Performance-Based Scholarship Demonstration, Pima Community College, Arizona	Low-income Latino men enrolled in community college	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased college retention rate by 4.6 percent Increased full-time enrollment rate by 13.2 percentage points Increased number of credits earned Increased net financial aid and reduced dependence on loans
Performance-Based Scholarship Demonstration	Varies by site, but generally young adults enrolled in community college	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased achievement rate of academic benchmarks (interim finding) Increased number of credits earned (interim finding) Increased graduation rate at one site with available data Full results expected in 2015

(continued)

PROACTIVE APPROACHES (continued)		
INTERVENTION	TARGET POPULATION	ESTIMATED IMPACTS
City University of New York (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP)	Community college students in need of remedial education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased retention rate by 8-10 percentage points • Increased number of credits earned by 25 percent • Increased 2 ½-year graduation rate by nearly 15 percentage points • 3-year graduation rate results expected in fall 2014
Sectoral Employment Training	Over one-third young adults aged 18-26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased earnings by 18 percent (about \$4,500 total over 24 months) • Increased probability of working all year long by 11 percentage points • Increased rate of employment in higher-wage jobs by about 13-14 percentage points • Increased rate of employment in jobs with benefits by about 10 percentage points
Year Up	Young adults aged 18-24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased earnings by 32 percent (about \$13,000 over the three years after program participation) • Increased wages by \$2.51 per hour

(continued)

RECONNECTION APPROACHES		
INTERVENTION	TARGET POPULATION	ESTIMATED IMPACTS
Job Corps	Youth aged 16-24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased General Educational Development (GED) and vocational certificates completion rate Increased short-term earnings by 12 percent, though this did not persist Provided persistent earnings gains for older youth aged 20-24 Reduced criminal activity
National Guard Youth Challenge	High school dropouts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased high school/GED completion rate by 16 percentage points Increased number of college credits earned Increased short-term earnings by 20 percent
GED Bridge	High school dropouts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased GED test passing rate by 30 percentage points Increased college enrollment rate by 17 percentage points
Parents' Fair Share	Unemployed noncustodial parents with children receiving public assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased employment rate and earnings for the least employable men Increased child support payments
Jobs-Plus	Public housing residents (Latino immigrant men in Los Angeles site)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased earnings by an average of \$1,300 per year overall Increased earnings of Latino men in Los Angeles by over \$3,000 per year
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy	Youth and adults with a history in the justice system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced recidivism rate by between 25 and 30 percent
Center for Employment Opportunities Transitional Jobs Program	Former inmates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced reincarceration rate in the three years after enrollment by 11 percent Reduced the probability of arrest, conviction, or incarceration by 8 percent Temporarily increased employment rate, though this did not persist over time

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ABOUT MDRC

MDRC IS A NONPROFIT, NONPARTISAN SOCIAL POLICY research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Child Development
- Improving Public Education
- Promoting Successful Transitions to Adulthood
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.