



RESEARCH REPORT

Strategies to Meet the Needs of Young Parent Families

Highlights from Interviews with 14 Programs

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Strategies to Meet the Needs of Young Parent Families

In 2013, there were nearly 4.6 million young parents between ages 18 and 24 in the United States, with approximately 80 percent (3.6 million) living with at least one of their children (Sick, Spaulding, and Park 2018). Young parents in this age group face unique challenges and often need targeted support to help them succeed in school and in the labor market and to provide for their children economically and emotionally. At the same time, young parents are a diverse group with needs that can vary depending on who they are, where they live, and the extent of their support networks. Young parents are an important population to focus on because early pregnancy and childbearing are closely linked to a host of social issues that affect the well-being of parents and their children (Mather 2010). Improving the outcomes of these young parents can not only improve their own lives but those of their children as well. Policymakers and funders have tried for decades to address the needs of young parents in various ways, and programs around the country are providing education, employment, and parenting services to support them.

The purpose of this report is to highlight the diversity of approaches being used to meet the needs of young parent families. It is part of a broader effort to study and support the development of effective programs and policies being led by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Previous related Urban Institute research supported by the Foundation included a profile of young parents using Survey of Income and Program Participation data to understand who young parent families are and what challenges they face. In this report, we present findings from interviews with 14 programs assisting young parents, exploring programmatic issues related to our earlier data analysis.

While past research has looked at several different programs individually, we present an analysis of 14 programs to draw out common themes and approaches in meeting the needs of this population. We provide examples of how these providers design, implement, and finance these programs. We also present these programs' successes and challenges as well as their recommendations for improved policies to serve this population.¹ Our findings are relevant for local providers as well as government agencies seeking to improve outcomes for young parents and provide an overview of the types of efforts needed to support this population.

This report draws from interviews with representatives from 14 programs providing services to young parents. We selected these programs by searching research reports, information on federal

demonstrations, and other literature, categorizing each program based on the specific type of young parent population they served, their location, ages served, services provided, if they were still active, and any evaluation findings. Sites were selected to represent diversity in terms of geography, service provision, young parent populations, and program size. A team of Urban researchers conducted one-hour semistructured interviews with representatives from each program, focusing on program history, funding, service operation, goals, outcomes, and recommendations. The programs selected for interviews were not intended to be representative of all programs serving young parents but designed to explore programmatic approaches to meeting the needs of different populations of young parents and addressing specific challenges identified in the literature.

The report first provides context for our research findings by describing the demographics of the young parent population and young parent families. Next, it discusses policies and programmatic efforts from the past 50 years based on a review of the literature. The report then presents findings from our interviews with program staff and concludes with a set of key takeaways aimed at informing practitioners, policymakers, and funders on the support and implementation concerns of program staff.

Who Are Young Parent Families?

Young parents face unique challenges gaining the skills, education, and experience necessary to obtain good, family-sustaining jobs. Understanding the characteristics of young parents and their children, their life circumstances, and their challenges is important for developing effective strategies and policies to improve their outcomes and those of their children. In this section, we describe the characteristics of young parents from our analysis of Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) data conducted as a part of an earlier paper (Sick, Spaulding, and Park 2018). We then discuss some of the challenges young parents face. Lastly, we briefly highlight various efforts to address these issues and young parents' unique needs.

Characteristics of Young Parents

In 2013, approximately 4.6 million young parents ages 18 to 24 lived in the United States, with about 3.6 million living with at least one child and 900,000 noncustodial parents not living with any child (Sick, Spaulding, and Park 2018). Some key characteristics of this group include the following:

- More than three-quarters (77 percent) of custodial young parents were women, and nearly two-thirds (66 percent) of noncustodial parents were men.

- About 70 percent of young parents were white, 20 percent were black, and less than 2 percent were Asian.
- Thirty-one percent of young parents were of Hispanic or Latino origin. Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin constituted a higher percentage of young parents than nonparents of the same age range (19 percent).
- Most young parents reported having just one child.

Young parents typically had low educational attainment and had barriers to engaging in school:

- Nearly one-quarter (22 percent) had not graduated from high school. Although a substantial number (35 percent) had completed at least some college education, almost half (43 percent) had only a high school diploma or equivalent.
- Most young parents were simply not attending school, with lack of child care often a factor, which is discussed later. For example, 77 percent of custodial parents with a high school diploma said they were not enrolled in any form of education during the year.

Low educational attainment was also coupled with barriers to employment:

- Noncustodial parents (72 percent) were more likely to report any employment than custodial parents (63 percent). Yet, there were also high rates of joblessness, with about 60 percent of all young parents reporting at least one jobless spell during 2013.
- The wages and earnings of young parents were low. For example, the average hourly wage of young parents was \$10.19 per hour, and average total annual earnings were \$16,200.

Lower access to education and employment also led to young parents being more reliant on public support:

- Custodial parents were more likely to receive public assistance than nonparents, especially the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (42 percent versus 23 percent). About 23 percent of custodial parents also reported receiving the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).
- Noncustodial parents were less likely to receive these benefits (18 percent received SNAP and 1 percent received WIC), owing primarily to their lack of guardianship over their children.

These characteristics of young parents, including relatively low levels of educational attainment, poor access to employment, and high receipt of public benefits, create substantial challenges and needs for this population.

Challenges and Support Needs for Young Parents

Young parent families face multiple challenges in navigating child rearing, education, and the labor market. A key factor can be the age at which young parents have children. Adolescents who have children while in high school or college face unique obstacles to continuing and completing their education, balancing their complex needs as a student with the needs of their children (Mather 2010). Only about half of mothers who have children in their teens finish high school, and just over one-quarter of single student-parents attain a degree or certificate within six years of postsecondary enrollment. Young parents who do not complete high school or college may not build the skills or qualifications needed for further education (Mather 2010). That, coupled with their parenting responsibilities, can limit their employment opportunities beyond low-wage jobs (Maynard 1995).

Access to reliable child care can be an issue for many parents, including young parents. Young parents in particular commonly struggle to find stable, affordable, high-quality child care that meets their scheduling needs (Molborn and Blalock 2012). This is especially true for parents who are low-income, live in rural areas, have young children, or are parenting children with special needs (Adams, Zaslow, and Tout 2007). Evidence demonstrates that a lack of affordable and reliable care is a key barrier to young families' socioeconomic success (Teitler, Reichman, and Neponmyaschy 2004). Access to child care can be affected by issues such as a lack of reliable transportation, which can in turn affect whether young parents can get to school or work. As a result of these issues, many low-income parents rely on family and neighbor care to meet their child care needs (Henly and Adams, forthcoming).

Family support can be particularly critical for young parents, not only in contributing to the care of children but also providing advice and guidance. Research has shown the importance of caring adults in the outcomes of young parents (Kershaw et al. 2014). Adults not only serve as role models but also provide support and guidance in the pursuit of education and employment opportunities.

A lack of support can make it harder for young parents to access education and employment opportunities and navigate higher education and the job market. Barriers to success in the labor market can affect the well-being of parents and their children. Research has demonstrated that parents' educational attainment is the best predictor of economic mobility for their children, and only about three-quarters of children of teen parents graduate from high school (Mosle and Patel 2012; Sick,

Spaulding, and Park 2018). These long-term outcomes can be attributed to young parents having fewer economic, social, and cultural resources to share with their children compared to older parents (Berzin and De Marco 2010).

Policies and Programs that Address the Needs of Young Parent Families

The aforementioned challenges and needs of young parents have led to a greater focus on this population, with different efforts undertaken to alleviate their problems. Policies and programmatic efforts focused on this population have changed in the past few decades, addressing different populations and targeting interventions to different challenges that young parents face.

A key population of interest to federal policymakers and researchers has been young mothers, and programs have focused on issues such as preventing additional pregnancies for teen parents, reducing welfare dependency, improving employment outcomes through job training, and supporting student persistence and success. Demonstrations were implemented by federal policymakers in reaction to evidence on negative outcomes for parents and children born out of wedlock. This coincided with efforts to reform public assistance programs and reduce dependence on federal cash assistance among low-income families. For example, the New Chance program was a national demonstration, initiated by the Family Support Act of 1988 and operated by MDRC, that operated from 1989 to 1992 and targeted mothers ages 16 to 22 who did not have a high school diploma or GED and received cash welfare assistance through the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program. In the first phase of the program, mothers received employment preparation services; the second phase added occupational skills training, work internships, and job placement assistance. The program had positive educational impacts but negative employment impacts (Quint, Bos, and Polit 1997).

Additional efforts include the Teenage Parent Demonstration, which operated from 1987 through 1991 and offered informational and skill workshops, case management, employment-related services, and various support services for 3,500 young mothers receiving welfare. While an evaluation found the program showed short-term employment and educational impacts, after five years, most program effects were null, including children's educational and developmental outcomes (Kisker et al. 1998). Similarly, the Young Parents Demonstration, which operated from 2010 to 2014 and served more than 3,500 young parents throughout the country, offered mentoring and employment and training services to young parents ages 16 to 24. An analysis of the program conducted by the Urban Institute found positive impacts six months after program entry, though the data is not substantial enough to demonstrate long-term positive impacts of the program (Vericker et al. 2015).

Young fathers have also been a focus of federal policy, in conjunction with welfare reform and the goal of increasing financial support by noncustodial parents. Programs have worked to improve employment outcomes so that fathers can meet their child support responsibilities, develop parenting skills, and move toward family reunification. For example, the Partners for Fragile Families demonstration program, sponsored by the Office of Child Support Enforcement and the Ford Foundation, targeted young noncustodial fathers ages 16 to 24 who had not established paternity for their children or engaged with the child support system. In 2006, New York enacted the Strengthening Families Through Stronger Fathers Initiative, which offered a refundable tax credit to noncustodial fathers who worked, paid their full child support, and met other eligibility requirements. This program was found to have positive impacts on the number of young fathers who were working and paying their child support (Sorensen and Lippold 2012). Additional programs focused on changing the systems that interact with fathers while also meeting their needs for employment and parenting support and helping strengthen family ties (Martinson et al. 2007).

Federal policymakers have also funded efforts for “disconnected” or “opportunity” youth, young adults who are not enrolled in school or working. Parents in this group have been the focus of federal demonstrations such as the Young Parents Demonstration. Disconnected youth are also a priority under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which was passed in 2014 and increases the amount of funding states are required to spend serving disconnected youth, although young parents as a group are not a specific focus of this policy (Eyster and Nightingale 2017).

Some young parent subgroups have not received as much focus from federal policymakers. These include those living in rural areas and parents with mental health issues. This paper includes a closer look at ways some programs have been serving these subgroups.

All of these programmatic efforts targeted education, employment, or family support/parenting outcomes, and many initiatives had goals related to all three as well as improved educational outcomes for children. The programs we surveyed reflected a similar diversity in approaches and even greater diversity in populations served.

Findings from the Program Scan

With a goal of understanding the characteristics facing young parents, their challenges and needs, and efforts to improve their outcomes, the team undertook efforts to speak to current providers of services to this population. In November 2017, the Urban team began developing a list of young parent

providers to speak with to discuss their program operations. Providers were delineated by which specific type of young parent population they served (disconnected, in school, working, foster youth, immigrant, etc.), their geographic location, ages of young parents served, type of services they provided, if they were still active, and any evaluation findings. These programs were identified through a review of the literature and our work with the Annie E. Casey Foundation. It is of note that some of these programs did not serve young parents exclusively but served a high number of individuals in this population.

Using information gleaned from the literature and key informants and with input from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, we developed a matrix of programs that we used to select sites for one-hour telephone interviews. The goal was to include a wide mix of programs representing various young parent populations, geographic locations, types of service provision, and program sizes. Below, we discuss findings from these interviews in detail.

Who the Programs Served

As shown in table 1, the team spoke with representatives from 14 programs targeting several different populations in different geographic settings. While most are located in urban settings, several programs (Brighton Center, Climb Wyoming, and Project SMART) serve more rural populations.

TABLE 1

Young Parent Programs Interviewed

	Population served	Region	Services	Approximate number served annually
MOMS Partnership	Young mothers	New Haven, CT (urban)	Mental health outreach, soft skills	500
Latin American Youth Center	Young parents in college	Washington, DC (urban)	College assistance, prenatal and parenting education and case management	40
Generation Hope	Young parents in college or training	Washington, DC (urban)	Sponsors for teen parents attending postsecondary education	35
Project SMART	Single mothers and young parents in college or training	Ohio (rural)	College success course, peer cohort model	20–25
Chicago Young Parents Program	Young mothers	Chicago, IL (urban)	Intensive employment and education	60
CUNY Fatherhood Academy	Young men	New York, NY (urban)	Parenting skills development, effective coparenting with the child's guardian, employment/education, child support, child visitation/placement	100
Brighton Center	Disconnected young parents	Northern Kentucky (rural)	Support services, education, employment, leadership	40,000
Center for Urban Families	Disconnected young parents	Baltimore, MD (urban)	Skills building, parental development, coparenting, couples support	1,100–500
The Door	Disconnected young parents	New York, NY (urban)	High school equivalency training, college bridge and college access training, intensive college retention support services	500
Climb Wyoming	Single mothers	Wyoming (rural)	Research on job and industry trends, industry-based job training and placement, life and parenting skills training and counseling	150
UTEC	Young men	Lowell, MA (urban)	Child care, substance abuse counseling, transitional help	150
Self-Sufficiency Program	Young parents on public assistance and rural parents	Wisconsin (rural)	College access program providing college preparation and financial assistance	30
Philadelphia Anti-Drug/Anti-Violence Network	Young men	Philadelphia, PA (urban)	Parenting program, violence reduction	30
Advocates for Adolescent Mothers	Young mothers	Chicago, IL (urban)	Scholarships, parenting support	13

Our interviews with these 14 providers yielded additional information about the characteristics of and challenges faced by young parents:

- **Parents faced significant barriers.** Programs tended to serve populations with high levels of poverty and reliance on public benefits, such as TANF, SNAP, housing assistance, and Medicaid,

to make ends meet. Trauma and mental health issues were significant barriers for many program participants and were compounded with the difficulty of raising a young child, which often added to the stress many of these parents faced.

Justice system involvement was another key barrier for many parents, especially fathers. Interviewees discussed how justice system involvement can also be linked to other risky behaviors, including alcohol and drug abuse and gang activity.

- **Most programs served mothers with one child.** Programs reported primarily serving young mothers, although a few programs target young fathers. Participants tended to have only one child, shaping some of the services these programs offer. For example, several focused on a two-generational approach, which will be discussed in greater detail later in the report.
- **Minorities were heavily represented.** Programs reported serving large numbers of minority parents, with a few serving entirely minority populations (typically Hispanic or African American). Even in more rural and largely white areas, larger percentages of minorities received program services relative to their representation in the overall population. As a result, issues of equity and inclusion were more acute for some of these programs.
- **Some served older parents.** Programs serving students in college tended to serve older parents, in part because younger parents were often still completing their high school diplomas or equivalency. Project SMART and the CUNY Fatherhood Academy, all of which provided access to higher education, served more older parents than we anticipated, with some in their late twenties, thirties, and even their forties.

As designed, the size and scale of programs varied. Most providers were smaller and served fewer than 100 people. Advocates for Adolescent Mothers, for example, reported serving only 13 mothers, whereas the largest program, the Brighton Center, served 40,000 people annually. However, the vast majority of its service population was not young parents. Program size seemed to be related to factors such as the length of the program, the funding available, how long programs had been in existence, and the service area, which will be described in later sections of the report.

Overall, the programs that were interviewed represented a wide breadth of young parent populations, baseline demographic characteristics, geographic regions, program size, and age ranges. They do not represent every young parent population or every geographic region of the country but provide a diverse picture of what is being done to serve this population. These differences manifested in several ways, especially in service provision, which will be discussed in the next section.

Young Parent Programs and Services

The organizations focus their efforts on three overarching areas: education and credential attainment, employment, and parenting. Secondary goals for some programs include reducing recidivism in young parents who have been involved with the criminal justice system, preventing additional pregnancies before marriage, improving outcomes for the children of these young parents, and improving the mental health and overall well-being of participants. To achieve these goals, programs provide critical connections to support services for housing, health care, and child care, with most relying on partnerships to provide these services. Below, we describe the various services and supports provided to young parents..

EDUCATION AND CREDENTIAL ATTAINMENT

Almost all the programs incorporate education and credential attainment into their program models, though with varying levels of support for young parent participants. Many interviewees said that young parents in their programs often lack high school diplomas or equivalency or undergraduate degrees, which aligns with the national profile of young parents. Thus, improving educational outcomes was imperative for almost every program, and the following strategies were most commonly reported:

- **Getting participants high school equivalency credentials.** Several programs help young parents obtain their high school equivalency credentials, often pairing these efforts with some form of college access training and ongoing tutoring. The CUNY Fatherhood Academy invites young fathers back to the program if they do not obtain their GED and offers tutoring until they pass the exam.
- **Assisting in the transition to college.** Many programs complement ongoing academic instruction with weekly classes or workshops covering the college application process, time management skills, and self-confidence. Among the programs we interviewed, some of this assistance is offered to cohorts of young parents, one lasting the entire academic year while others are held over 10–16 weeks, with the average course lasting a few months. The Chicago Young Parents Program provides college tours for their young parents, which they believe boosts their self-confidence “because if we didn’t provide the exposure to these different entities, moms wouldn’t even know if they were capable of going to college.”
- **Working with community colleges.** A few programs also leverage partnerships with community colleges to provide additional support to students who are already enrolled. Climb Wyoming has partnerships with local community colleges to develop condensed program trainings that lead to certifications. Generation Hope invites staff from a local community

college to speak in its workshops and seminars about the skills and information needed to navigate the school system. At The Door, an emergency medical technician and IT bridge program allows participants to enter Hostos Community College and eventually receive certifications in these fields. Several interviewees also mentioned partnering with community colleges and local universities by borrowing classrooms and space on campus for their workshops and scheduled program activities.

- **Working toward four-year degrees.** A few programs only support young parents who are already enrolled in accredited four-year institutions pursuing an undergraduate degree. These programs offer a consistent source of tuition assistance for young parents who continue to meet the eligibility requirements (e.g., minimum 2.0 GPA, full-time enrollment, weekly attendance at workshops). Note that these programs are smaller in scale and do not have student populations exceeding 50.

Programs focused on improving the educational attainment of participants established different metrics of success. For Generation Hope and the CUNY Fatherhood Academy, the short-term focus is keeping parents in college, with longer-term goals including completing a degree and attaining credentials. The CUNY Fatherhood Academy noted that enrolling parents in college as a short-term goal is intended to imbue them with a sense of accomplishment and a feeling that they are among a group of peers not much different from them, spurring longer-term success.

EMPLOYMENT

Obtaining employment for participants was a critical goal for several programs that we interviewed. As the SIPP data highlight, economic instability was a particularly important issue for young parent households. While many participants received some form of public assistance or could rely on financial help from family members, it was often insufficient to support their families. Additionally, the need for longer-term employment to provide the economic support these young parents and their families needed was seen as critical. Many of the programs seek to provide employment assistance for young parents ranging from internships to training and placing participants in stable jobs by the end of the program, with the following among the most commonly reported strategies:

- **Partnerships with industry.** Several programs have developed partnerships with various local industries to provide employment support to participants. Climb Wyoming does not start a program until its research shows that there is enough employer need to create job opportunities for participants. The program tailors its trainings based on the needs of local employers, stating that trainings “change because the demands all change, and directors are

free to create trainings to meet the demands.” Other programs have partners in specific industries (e.g., health care, welding, warehouse inventory) to build their training efforts, and those partners supply additional training specific to their industry. These programs operate with the expectation that young parents will successfully exit the program with a stable job. Climb Wyoming offers additional motivation to employers who may feel it is a risk to hire program graduates through an optional eight weeks of wage reimbursement. They also engage with the employer during job placement to address issues and concerns and create an open, supportive environment for communication to help transition the graduate into her new job. The CUNY Fatherhood Academy has a designated staff member supporting job placement with employers.

- **Connections with workforce agencies.** Although major federal programs such as WIOA do not focus specifically on young parents, two providers described connections with local workforce agencies as integral for supporting employment efforts. The CUNY Fatherhood Academy, in addition to providing training services through the program, works with a one-stop center at each campus to refer fathers for additional employment services. Similarly, the Brighton Center works with Kentucky’s WIOA partners to provide job readiness, training, and career development services and internships to participants.
- **Job readiness workshops.** Several programs also provide job readiness workshops focused on the soft skills necessary to succeed in the workforce, such as communication and time management. The Philadelphia Anti-Drug/Anti-Violence Network incorporates hands-on training during its workshops. Many interviewees said these workshops and classes are provided weekly, sometimes in addition to a full day of job-specific training. The Chicago Young Parents Program has also developed a career pathways workshop to prepare participants for external apprenticeship programs. Programs that offer weekly job readiness classes often have young parents complete the classes and training in cohorts.

Employment programs were varied in nature and often successful in linking participants to jobs, as we will discuss in later sections. And while the need for long-term skills building and employment was seen as critical for young parents, these programs often focused on short-term employment and training largely because of resource constraints and the fact that many young parents simply do not have the time to fully engage in intensive programs because of competing demands for their time, especially their children. These employment programs were often linked with other supports provided to young parents.

HELP BECOMING BETTER PARENTS

Several providers noted the importance of helping participants become better parents and develop deeper connections with their children. This manifested in several ways:

- **Offering lessons for positive parenting.** Programs approached this goal by offering family meals and establishing positive bedtime routines for families. Young fathers at the CUNY Fatherhood Academy participate in parenting sessions offered twice a week where they have ongoing conversations focused on parenting topics as well as topics meant to create dialogue around their experiences as young men and how that influences them as parents. Those we interviewed said this has resulted in improved parenting, and one staff member noted, “Another huge milestone is how they improved as men and parents and how that positively impacts their relationships with mothers and families, and that shifts as a result of them participating in the program.”
- **Integrating parenting with other programs.** Programs combine parenting support into programs in different ways depending on the populations they serve. For example, the Chicago Young Parents Program has invited different speakers to talk to young mothers about subjects such as providing for their young children. Additionally, the program uses these young speakers to demonstrate to participants how attaining economic empowerment and independence will often lead to improved outcomes for their children. As another example, the Philadelphia Anti-Drug/Anti-Violence Network combines its job readiness program with its parenting program to provide job readiness training one day and then parenting training the next. Staff said that melding the two programs has been like “medicine” for these young men.

For programs, improving the parenting skills of their participants was often a service with two main goals. The initial goal, as delineated by providers, was to improve the relationships and connections between parents and their children and improve their home life. The secondary and more long-term goal was to ensure that children would be better cared for and not face the same issues their parents faced. Assessing the success of organizations in realizing these goals was outside the scope of this study, leaving opportunities for future research, particularly with respect to strategies for improving parenting skills. Despite this limitation, through our interviews, we were able to learn how program staff perceived the value of supports provided to young parent families.

SUPPORTS OFFERED TO YOUNG PARENTS

Young parents aiming to complete their high school equivalency and obtain a postsecondary degree to obtain steady employment face unique barriers. All of the programs surveyed provide supports specific to young parents, which include the following:

- **Referrals and links to government support.** Most programs offer referrals to food, shelter, housing, and clothing providers in their community. A few also ensure that young parents are connected with government benefits, such as Medicaid, TANF, and SNAP, that may be difficult to understand and access. There was widespread agreement among the programs that the supports offered by these providers were critical for participants and that working with partners to access these services was generally easy.
- **Support for mental health and counseling.** Many programs serving young mothers provide mental health services, particularly around postpartum depression and managing family stressors. A few programs, including those for young fathers, such as the Philadelphia Anti-Drug/Anti-Violence Network, provide counseling for the duration of the program. Home visiting services work with young mothers and surrounding family members to help them understand child development.
- **Additional supports.** Other supports include transportation benefits (e.g., free daily metro passes, transportation subsidies) and child care offered on-site or through referrals. Financial services for young parents, including support and information on budgeting, credit counseling, repairing credit, and overall financial wellness, was also noted. The CUNY Fatherhood Academy offers participants a student ID, which gives them access to free services such as the library. A few programs also have an emergency fund available to assist young parents in special circumstances. Some programs host events that provide free school supplies, toiletries, toys, and home supplies.

Overall, the support provided to young parents was extensive, although much was provided outside these organizations themselves. Interviewees still mentioned gaps in supports for young people, especially in the areas of child care, transportation, and housing—all of which are critical for young parents. Many of these providers would have liked to offer more of these services, but funding and staffing constraints limited them.

How Young Parent Programs Are Structured

PROGRAM STAFFING, VOLUNTEERS, PARTNERSHIPS

Organizations approach service delivery with different organizational structures. The size of each program as well as its service type helped define not only the number of staff but also the number and reach of the partnerships formed and the imprint made in the community through volunteers and mentors. Differences in organizational size and service provision have also led to different sources of funding.

- **Program size can create multiple roles for staff.** In smaller organizations, some staff members, especially case managers, have to take on multiple roles, such as program intake and recruitment, whereas larger programs give staff more singular and well-defined positions. Additionally, programs with close relationships with outside partners, especially government organizations, have a more clearly delineated process for providing referrals to supports. Staff in smaller organizations that serve as a navigator or mentor for participants are often more heavily involved in linking participants to wraparound services or directly bringing them to organizations that provide these supports.
- **Mentors and volunteers are critical.** Mentors and volunteers often meet with participants on a weekly or even more frequent basis and help them achieve certain educational milestones. Perhaps the most extensive commitment can be seen in Generation Hope, which uses volunteer mentors to not only support students as they go to college but also to help fund their mentees' education.

Partnerships and referrals are key. Although many participants are recruited by staff or through word of mouth, external partners are critical to recruitment efforts as well, providing space for recruitment events, referring participants to programs, and advertising the programs. For programs that work with participants entering college or those still connected to the school system, they tend to reach out to schools, colleges, and other educational partners. Project SMART offers a college readiness workshop at a local high school as well a series of three workshops at other local service providers, which in turn builds a base of future participants to recruit from. Partners are also critical to the provision of supports, especially when participants have mental health care needs that are beyond the expertise of program staff.

PROGRAM FUNDING

From our discussions, we found that funding came from a variety of sources:

- **Federal and state funding.** For programs offering job placement or skills training, such as the CUNY Fatherhood Academy, the Chicago Young Parents Program, and Climb Wyoming, federal money from WIOA, TANF, and SNAP provide a good deal of the funding, often passed through state and local entities, who often amplify these funds with additional money. Other programs offering health services, especially to young mothers, like the MOMS Partnership, receive funds through Medicaid, Title X, or other Department of Health and Human Services grants. Programs that provide additional housing or child care support to participants often receive federal funding as well, generally through state or local pass-throughs. In general, the federal government provides most of the funding for many of the programs we spoke to, particularly the larger providers, highlighting its importance in providing services to young parents.

Of note is that a few organizations, including Advocates for Adolescent Mothers and the Self-Sufficiency Program, both of which provide college access support, did not receive funds from the federal government. Both programs are quite small and do not have as many dedicated links to the workforce system that would enable them to access federal funds.

- **Foundations.** Support from foundations makes up a minor portion of funding for most programs but is a fairly substantial source for UTEC, Generation Hope, and the Center for Urban Families, with Generation Hope noting that foundations contribute between 30 and 40 percent of its funds. Funding comes from a wide variety of foundations, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kellogg Foundation, and Kresge Foundation. Although most of these grants are relatively small, they are generally seen as a critical asset to a program's service model. However, staff reported challenges around the short time frame of private foundation grants and expectations related to outcomes. As one interviewee told us, "So, people donating have to understand that it's an investment, and it can take a few years before the biggest outcome is actually accomplished."
- **Individual donors.** For a number of providers, especially those that are small or nonprofit programs, reliance on individual donors and fundraising events in the community are required. Generation Hope has a gala each year that raises a substantial amount of its funds, and other programs, such as the Self-Sufficiency Program, also rely heavily on fundraising.

The individuals we interviewed generally did not view staffing and partnerships as challenges, although staff from smaller and newer programs discussed the challenges of accurately delineating roles for staff and identifying partners.

Program Reflections and Recommendations

Program staff reflected on their successes and challenges providing services to young parents.

SUCSESSES

Although verifying outcomes was outside the scope of this paper, reflections on program successes provide valuable insights to policymakers, funders, and the programs themselves on the design and assessment of programmatic models. Some of the key reflections on successful elements of programs include the following:

- **Strong program retention despite low barriers to entry.** Although staff indicated that participants only had to meet basic entry requirements, such as demonstrating interest in the program during an intake interview, and programs generally had high levels of applicant acceptance, they also reported high retention rates in the 70–80 percent range. This is despite a lack of stringent intake requirements that could have eliminated potential participants who might not have succeeded in the program. The high retention rates may be because of the robust supports programs offer or the fact that programs fill unmet needs for participants, whether those are emotional needs or needs related to education or employment services.
- **Providing comprehensive and continuous services.** Many providers saw that offering more modest services to participants, such as short-term training or mentoring that only lasted a few hours a week for a few months, does not fully address the compendium of issues facing young parents and does not appear to have much impact on this population. Additionally, siloed services that focus solely on a participant’s education or training and are distinct from other supports were also reported to have a reduced impact on young parents. Programs that look at all the issues young parents face (e.g., child care, housing, transportation, mental health, etc.) and integrate their services to tackle these issues were noted to create more positive outcomes for young parents along a wide range of indicators. This suggests that programs need to offer or at least provide links to comprehensive supports to ensure positive outcomes for participants.
- **Increased confidence among participants.** Several interviewees noted that participants grew more confident in their education and parenting skills. Because being a young parent can be very stigmatized, especially in educational settings, self-confidence is crucial. Many interviewees said young parents initially felt alone and unable to manage their stress but eventually grew more confident and saw their potential as good parents.

- **Greater connection to peers and empowerment.** Several programs, such as the Center for Urban Families, Climb Wyoming, and the CUNY Fatherhood Academy, provide services to their participants in cohorts, which can build a network of support among participants. Interviewees observed the growth of positive communities within cohorts. With time, participants began forming connections, motivating each other to succeed and holding each other accountable.
- **Improved parenting.** Programs use workshops, classes, increased access to child care, and family nights to improve the relationships between parents and their children. A few interviewees highlighted that parents became closer to their children because of this work. Additionally, some providers are also developing initiatives for the children of young parents. Climb Wyoming, which has been in existence for more than 30 years, has emphasized parenting as a part of the program to help ensure that both mom and children are successful as the participant starts a new career.

Overall, the programs were very happy with how they had offered services to participants and the positive outcomes in education, employment, and parenting many had achieved. But the challenge of working with a population that has several issues to contend with coupled with the relatively short time frame and limited resources of these organizations led to many challenges.

CHALLENGES TO SERVING YOUNG PARENTS

While programs have been successful in improving outcomes for young parents, it has not been without notable challenges:

- **Accessing and entering data.** Regular reporting of data required by many grants is sometimes seen as too burdensome for some providers, especially programs with multiple funders, such as the Brighton Center, which must enter data for 30 different providers. Brighton Center staff noted they needed to spend additional money to pay for clerical entry time, which was money that could have been spent on providing services. Interviewees from the MOMS Partnership mentioned the difficulty of accessing administrative data and described the process as time consuming and a hindrance to better understanding the needs of participants. A few providers, including Climb Wyoming and the Center for Urban Families, said they get assistance from external partners on data-related work.
- **Mental health and substance abuse barriers.** Interviewees also frequently mentioned mental health stressors as a challenge. Many shared that they frequently observe trauma and mental health challenges among their young parents, and one said that many of the young parents in their program are suicidal. Part of the challenge is that these programs recognize that there are

clear mental health stressors but lack the infrastructure and counseling staff to meet those needs. The Door staff described having support staff for mental health but not having enough funding to hire for a full-time position. These interviewees and staff from the CUNY Fatherhood Academy also described substance abuse and addiction as a challenge among their young parents, with similar staff and infrastructure gaps.

- **Overcoming ingrained obstacles.** The obstacles facing young parents, especially demographic inequities stemming from the generations of poverty many of their families have seen as well as involvement with the criminal justice system, are very difficult to overcome. For programs serving young women, stigmatization from various sources hurts not only recruitment but also retention, as young mothers are seen as being irresponsible. Staff at Advocates for Adolescent Mothers said recruiting participants is hard because young mothers do not “broadcast on campus that they have a child because there is this stigma to being a teen or a young mom, so it can be difficult for us to ID young moms on campus because they’re not telling anyone they’re a young mother.”

Criminal justice system involvement is also a major impediment for young parents despite attempts to get past such issues. The Center for Urban Families noted the link between racism and involvement in the criminal justice system and said that 52 percent of its participants have had involvement in the criminal justice system and are simply unable to connect with the labor force despite continuous programming.

These challenges, which were echoed by many of the providers, demonstrate many of the difficulties in serving this population. While these organizations provide a wide array of services, the difficulties many young people face are quite extensive. Changes to federal policies were seen as critical to alleviating these challenges.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Funders

Considering the challenges mentioned above, several key recommendations were developed for policymakers and program funders:

- **Greater flexibility and stability in funding combined with more opportunities for innovation.** A few programs called for flexibility with government funding and longer time frames to measure outcomes. For example, the WIOA program, a partner for the Brighton Center and the CUNY Fatherhood Academy, measures participants’ outcomes on a one-year interval, which

may be too short for this population to see real improvement, especially considering the challenges they face. A longer time frame both in terms of the grant cycles to fund services and measure improvements in participants' outcomes was seen as one way of better measuring programmatic success.

In addition to more flexible funding, several providers mentioned a need for a more stable source of funding. Recall that for many programs, grants are generally on a one- to two-year cycle, with considerable effort expended annually by these providers to simply get their contracts renewed, as detailed above. This uncertainty impacts how services are provided, and offering longer-term contracts could potentially ameliorate this situation.

Coupling their call for more stable and flexible funding, some interviewees recommended a longer period of time for successful programs to become innovative and creative with their practices and models. Others voiced similar concerns, calling for more innovative financing methods. A few also said that when decisionmakers designate areas and components of programs that require improvement, they should also consider whether programs have the capacity to make those changes. Another provider said that there needs to be more support from government to support cutting-edge work on the ground, including greater access to federal administrative data systems and outcomes research. This would in turn provide the type of knowledge base to help these providers deliver better services to participants.

- **Greater funding for education.** For programs that offer educational support to participants, interviewees highlighted the need for increased funding for college support services. In particular, Project SMART and Brighton Center staff members spoke about how important Pell grants were to the financing of their model, but they found that these grants still did not cover the full cost of education for many students. They would like policymakers to more fully support this funding.
- **Greater continuum of support.** A number of interviewees called for more adequate support for a continuum of services, specifically support services. Two programs, Climb Wyoming and The Door, both noted a need to deal with unexpected levels of trauma many participants faced, with staff at The Door noting that because of the high levels of mental health issues, “they have become, by default, a trauma response agency, which is not something they are trained to do.”

The need for high-quality and affordable child care is an especially acute problem that was quite apparent throughout our conversations. While the programs we surveyed have sought to link participants with affordable child care, additional government support was clearly desired.

Additionally, support for housing and transportation was a major issue for many participants, and one that if not met could have a significant deleterious impact on young parents.

- **Tailor approaches to meet the needs of specific populations.** It is clear from our data analysis and discussions with programs that it is not possible to develop a one-size-fits-all approach to meeting the needs of young parents. Each subgroup has unique needs that must be addressed. For example, disconnected young parents often have unique emotional, mental, and physical abuse issues. Minority parents have additional needs around racism and discrimination that white students do not. Rural parents may have greater transportation needs, and urban parents may face greater housing issues. Many other young parents are involved with the criminal justice system or foster care system and will have different needs and support networks than parents outside of these systems. Policymakers and funders should consider these diverse needs in their support for programmatic interventions and in the development of effective policies.

This paper builds on prior Urban Institute research to provide a picture of young parent families, the challenges they face, and the different strategies programs are using to meet their needs. While the nature of this research did not allow us to draw conclusions about what specific interventions are most effective, many of the people we interviewed offered key insights on how to best serve young parents. Although the team gathered a substantial amount of information about these programs, the services they provide, and the outcomes they have seen, these were not exhaustive analyses of each organization, and much more work remains to be done. Further analysis should look at what types of services are most effective for serving young parents, especially in areas where there remains little research, including on programs and strategies that help young people address issues of mental, emotional, and physical abuse. Additional insight is also needed to see what interventions can support parents as they age out of programs. Finally, there is more to be learned about strategies for addressing both the needs of young parents and the needs of their children to help both attain economic security and stability throughout their lives.

Notes

- ¹ While our analysis focused on the services provided to young parents, including parenting supports, the team did not closely delve into how these programs also support the children of these parents, and as a result, they are not a large focus of this paper.

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