



THE PROMISE OF ADOLESCENCE:

Realizing Opportunity for All Youth

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACHIEVING EQUITY

Adolescents—young people ages 10 to 25—make up nearly one-fourth of the U.S. population. Drawing upon recent scientific advances, *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth* (2019), a report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, highlights the need for policies and practices that better leverage the developmental opportunities offered by adolescence. The changes in brain structure and function that happen at this age present adolescents with unique opportunities for positive, life-shaping development, and for addressing the harmful effects of negative early-life experiences, such as trauma, abuse, or economic hardship.

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WHAT IS ADOLESCENCE?

Adolescence is a developmental period rich with opportunity for youth to learn and grow. Throughout adolescence, the connections between brain regions become stronger and more efficient. This means that adolescents' brains can adapt, and they become more specialized in response to demands placed on them by their environments—by learning opportunities at school, for example, and by social interactions with their peers and families.

The adolescent brain also has an exceptional capacity for resilience, meaning adolescents can develop neurobiological adaptations and behaviors that leave them better equipped to handle adversities. By intervening during adolescence, we can improve young people's overall well-being and help them lead meaningful, healthy, and successful lives.

ACHIEVING EQUITY FOR ADOLESCENTS

Adolescents face inequities in access to opportunities and supports, which contribute to long-standing disparities by race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, LGBTQ status, and ability status. While these inequities are deeply rooted in society, there are examples of promising policies, programs, approaches, and tools that can positively impact and reduce disparities in adolescent health and well-being. Described below are policies and programs that reduce disparities in income, wealth, and neighborhood resources; trauma-informed approaches that can support adults working in youth-serving systems; and emerging tools that, when appropriately implemented, have the potential to counteract bias in decision making.

Policies and Programs to Reduce Disparities in Income, Wealth, and Neighborhood Resources

Living in poverty significantly limits economic opportunity for adolescents and youth of color. However, there are both existing and new, innovative programs that have shown promise in addressing child poverty.

- The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and its predecessor, the Food Stamp Program, for example, have been shown to improve child health in both the short- and long-term. In fact, expanding SNAP benefits, accounting for the needs of adolescents, and increasing benefits during the summer months could decrease child poverty rates by as much as 2.3 percent, depending on the size of the expansion..
- The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)—a refundable tax credit for low- and moderate-income workers—has also been shown to improve the longer-term health and human capital of children and youth in families who receive it.

- A new program that would provide a child allowance, or a monthly cash payment to families for each child under 18 in the household, also has the potential to reduce child poverty in the United States by as much as 40 percent, while also supporting adolescents who are parents.

Moreover, parity in public system funding is a first step but will not be sufficient to significantly reduce disparities. While increasing parity in funding in the educational sector did reduce disparities, it did not eliminate them. Rather, research shows that the lack of parity in family and neighborhood resources remains an important predictor of continued disparities in adolescent educational outcomes. To significantly reduce or eliminate disparities, disadvantaged youth will likely require disproportionate funding.

Approaches to Address Exposure to Violence and Trauma

Trauma can have a significant impact on an adolescent's development and functioning. Trauma-informed youth services require those working with youth to consider the history of past and current abuse in the life of youth receiving services. Because trauma's impact is manifested during adolescence in ways that cut across all aspects of development and behavior, a significant challenge in becoming trauma-informed is understanding how to recognize and identify trauma across the many varied settings that serve young people. Another challenge is engaging these young people in services that can help them. There are, however, examples of trauma-informed approaches that have been successfully implemented across youth-serving systems.

- In education, for example, the Sanctuary Model engages educational leaders and staff in developing a culture where educators model and students develop emotional management, self-control, and conflict-resolution skills. Another example is the Cognitive

Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools, an evidence-based intervention that can be delivered in group settings or individually and also includes psychoeducation for parents and training for teachers.

- In the juvenile justice system, Trauma Affect Regulation: Guide for Education and Therapy (TARGET) is an intervention that focuses on excessive fear, anxiety, anger, or sadness that may be associated with trauma, reframing these symptoms as adaptive responses. The Attachment, Regulation and Competency (ARC) framework, a trauma-informed treatment framework used with youth involved in the justice system, has also been shown to reduce post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms.
- Other efforts to reduce trauma for adolescents before, during, and after placement in foster care include more training and support for foster parents. Youth in the child welfare system are also in need of greater efforts to help them remain connected with their families, especially siblings.

Tools to Reduce Bias in Decision Making in Adolescent-Serving Systems

Adolescent-serving systems across the United States have begun integrating predictive analytics, the use of historical data to predict the likelihood of future events, to improve their decision making. These techniques have demonstrated potential for improving outcomes for youth, reducing discrimination as compared to human decision making, and addressing some of the disparate impacts produced by past reliance on biased data. However, the algorithms used must be thoughtfully designed to avoid duplicating common human preferences and biases, such as those favoring a particular race, ethnicity,

gender, or other group, and datasets must also be equally free of bias.

The child welfare system uses predictive analytic techniques to improve decision making around initial investigations and placement decisions for youth in its care. Similar tools could be used to help guide decisions related to the timing of when an adolescent may be ready to successfully exit the child welfare system or identifying youth in need of mental health services.

While these new tools have great potential for improving the lives of adolescents and their families and reducing disparities, to ensure that they realize their potential for positive social impact, regulatory systems and oversight are needed.

MOVING TOWARD EQUITY FOR ADOLESCENTS

Although progress may not be immediate, there is evidence supporting clear actions that can reduce disparities in adolescent outcomes. Effective strategies, including those described above, must address the main sources of these disparities: rising inequality in family income and wealth accumulation, neighborhood segregation by income and race that has direct and indirect effects on youth, and personal biases that subvert the systems that are supposed to ensure the equal treatment of all youth. Policy makers will need to take the necessary steps to assure a long-term commitment grounded in heightened awareness of the importance of investing in young people during this critical developmental period—an investment that will affect the life-course trajectory of future generations of adults.

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