

What's Inside

PAGE 2 INTRODUCTION

GCYF introduces the concept of “youth” and “vulnerabilities” and sets the stage for our contributing authors’ insights and recommendations for renewing a commitment to and focus on older youth.

PAGE 6 GRANTMAKER PERSPECTIVES

6 A Safe Passage for America's Most Vulnerable Youth

Lisa D. McGill, Director, Youth Transition Funders Group and Chris Sturgis, Strategic Advisor, Youth Transition Funders Group

15 Are “Go Across” Strategies the Future Direction for the Youth Development Field?

Ted H. Chen, Program Director, Youth and Education, New Options Initiative, W.K. Kellogg Foundation and GCYF Board Member

20 Building on Youth Assets in the District of Columbia

Carol Sills Strickland, EdD, Director of Research and Evaluation, DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation

28 Targeted Youth Development: A Closer Look at Immigrant Youth

Wendy Cervantes, Annie E. Casey Foundation, with input from: Karen Pittman, Nicole Yohalem, and Nalini Ravindranath, Forum for Youth Investment; and Roberto Gonzales, University of California, Irvine.

Acknowledgements This publication was compiled by Rena Large, GCYF Senior Program Manager, with assistance from Jennifer Skillicorn, GCYF Program Manager, and support from The Annie E. Casey Foundation and W.K. Kellogg Foundation. GCYF would like to express special thanks to Irene Lee, Senior Program Associate, and Wendy Cervantes, Program Assistant, at the Annie E. Casey Foundation for their contributions in developing the concepts for this publication. GCYF also would like to acknowledge our editors and reviewers: Pamela Roper Wagner, University Park, MD; and Kristin Teipel, BSN, MPH, Project Director, State Adolescent Health Resource Center/Konopka Institute to Best Practices in Adolescent Health, Department of Pediatrics University of Minnesota.

Introduction

In every field and discipline, we assign labels to populations that interest us. Labeling our client populations helps us relate to them and connect them to a program or solution. As children, youth, and family funders, we hear and use terms such as *vulnerable*, *disadvantaged*, and *at-risk*, sometimes using these words interchangeably, often without clearly defining our meaning. When applied to the populations we serve, the term *youth* is a fluid concept, encompassing various age groups and developmental stages. In surveying the field of youth services, we find that different programs define *youth* differently.

In this issue of *Insight*, contributing authors consider the complexities that youth face; strategies for ensuring that we meet the needs of youth; and ways we might better support youth living in sub-optimal environments that make them vulnerable. What do we mean by the words youth and vulnerable? Defining these terms can help us discover ways to really know our youth audience and better articulate their needs.

Defining “Youth”

In common usage, the word *youth* describes individuals in an age range that encompasses the transition into adolescence, the experience of adolescence, and the transition from adolescence into adulthood. The public sector defines the youth or adolescent population as an age range during which an individual is eligible, under the law, for

certain services or privileges. For example, the law may define youth as the age during which a person:

- is legally entitled to the free K-12 public education provided for all school-age children;
- is legally entitled to the free public education provided for disabled youth, as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Act;
- is legally eligible for foster care and related public services for foster children;
- first becomes legally eligible to obtain a learner’s permit or provisional drivers license; or
- first becomes legally eligible to enter into a legal contract.

Private philanthropists typically define the age range of youth in a similar fashion, most often honoring or adapting the age categories and definitions used by the programs and services they fund. Funders and service providers tend to define the age of the population they serve within the context of some larger social system. For example, they may serve youth who are aging out of foster care or who are in after-school or out-of-school settings.

GCYF recognizes the youth population as those persons who fall within the commonly accepted definition of adolescence: ages nine to twenty-four.^{1,2,3} Within this age range, GCYF recognizes four distinct sub-groups of youth:

1. Preteens—ages nine to twelve (*see graph on page 3*)
2. Early teens—ages thirteen to sixteen

¹ In October 2006, GCYF conducted interviews with key stakeholders in philanthropic and nonprofit sectors and found significant variation in the way each entity defines the age range of youth. Age ranges considered as youth include: 1) Fourth grade or middle school (age nine years old through age twenty-one); 2) Ages twelve to eighteen; 3) Ages fourteen to twenty-four; 4) Ages sixteen to twenty-four (also known as the “out-of-school” population); 5) Middle school and above; 6) Up to age eighteen (sometimes up to age twenty-one or twenty-four in the foster care population).

² Based on an analysis of age ranges used by multiple private and public services and systems, the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs and the National Network of State Adolescent Health define adolescence as ages ten to twenty-four. See Conceptual Framework for Adolescent Health (Washington, DC: Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs, May 2005), www.amchp.org/aboutamchp.

³ GCYF members and colleagues report that, for the purpose of qualification for child-related programs, service providers and funders define childhood as the age range up to eight years old. As such, GCYF acknowledges a definition of youth beginning at age nine. Only by agreeing on a common definition of these two stages of life, will we be able to coordinate a continuum of programs and efforts serving all children and youth, from birth to adulthood.

3. Late teens—ages seventeen to nineteen
4. Young adults—ages twenty to twenty-four

Moreover, GCYF accepts a definition of youth encompassing both chronological age and the developmental tasks and emotional benchmarks characterizing the progression from childhood through adolescence into adulthood. GCYF's definition of youth requires flexibility and careful consideration in developing programs and policies that serve youth. Our methods must address the needs of youth according to their physical and chronological age in tandem with their developmental and emotional needs.

GCYF's definition of youth also reminds us that, at either end of the age continuum, when young people move from one support system to the next, the network of social systems may fail them. Pediatric and early education systems serving children do not always do a good job of focusing on the needs and developmental tasks associated with the transition to the preteen and teenage years. Similarly, systems serving adults typically do not meet the unique developmental needs of older youth and young adults. These systems sometimes even lose track of young people as they struggle to make a successful transition to the adult workforce and other social systems. If we focus on youth as a unique population in the lifespan of individuals and families, we can provide opportunities for all children, youth, and families to succeed.

An Ecological Approach To Youth

While a focus on improving outcomes for *all* youth is critical, GCYF recognizes that some populations of youth require special attention so that they have equal opportunities to make a successful transition to adulthood. When we consider the situations and characteristics that contribute to disparities among youth, increasing their vulnerability to

failure, an ecological approach to the environment of youth may help us.⁴ In the ecological approach, we consider four environments that shape youth: *immediate environments* that directly effect youth (such as family, school, and neighborhoods), *connections between immediate environments* (such as the connection between parents and school), *external environments* which indirectly affect youth development (such as the parent's workplace), and the *larger cultural context* that effects all other environments (such as political, national economy).⁵

An ecological view of youth acknowledges:

- the continuity of a child's development, beginning at birth, progressing through childhood into adolescence, and finally navigating the transition to adulthood, when many begin families of their own; coupled with
- the multi-faceted interactions youth have with their environments—their families, schools, and communities—and how these environments continue to influence a person beyond the stage of youth, throughout his or her life.

An ecological approach to youth allows us to examine the many factors interacting with youth, both directly and indirectly, to affect their development and transition to adulthood. Factors that make youth vulnerable to failure include

- exposure to family or community violence;
- attendance at a school without the resources to adequately address needs of students;
- a chronic disease or disability;
- a poor or low-income family;
- lack of access to affordable health care; or
- living in a resource-poor area, such as a rural area with limited resources or an urban area with resources stretched to capacity.

⁴Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979). Bronfenbrenner describes these four environments as microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. He later added a fifth system, chronosystem, which refers to the pattern of environmental events and transitions over the course of a person's life; the concept of chronosystem provides a starting point for discussion on many other issues, such as the role of poverty, race, or events in the positive development of youth.

⁵Certainly this is not the only framework for considering vulnerabilities or situations that influence youth, but is a useful framework that emerges throughout GCYF's programming, from early childhood through adulthood.

Even life changes that we do not typically regard as negative may create pressure points in the lives of young people, causing them to be vulnerable to negative influences such as moving to a new neighborhood; changing schools; or living in a family with an adult experiencing a recent job change.

An ecological approach to youth calls our attention to the cultural and political context in which youth live, such as:

- rapidly increasing immigrant populations in some pockets of the country;
- the shift of so-called minority populations to the majority population in certain states⁶; and,
- the dramatic relocation of families and entire communities resulting from the disastrous 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes.

As if these challenges and changes are not enough, some young people face additional struggles of identity. Traditionally, young people of color, lesbian and gay youth, and young people with limited English proficiency experience prejudice and social marginalization. Special characteristics such as these contribute to the complex situations that make youth vulnerable to unhappy outcomes in adulthood.

Simply stated, being *vulnerable* means being *susceptible to physical or emotional injury*.⁷ Recognition of the susceptibility of youth sheds new light on the work we do as youth advocates. We become aware that any young person, at any point in time and in any environment, may face challenges that make him or her vulnerable. We awake to the fact that it is not enough to treat our youth only after they have

been wounded. We realize that it is only common sense to arm our youth with the skills and tools they need to prevent physical and emotional injury.

Positive Youth Development

In response to this need to prevent, rather than simply to treat injury, GCYF members and colleagues weigh in on what youth need to succeed.⁸ The most critical issue that has emerged in GCYF's ongoing exploration of the challenges facing youth and those who serve them is the need for strength-based, asset-based approaches—a positive youth development approach—to youth programming. Such an approach takes a holistic view of youth; builds on the strengths and assets that have carried the young person through childhood; harnesses these strengths to better prepare that child for the challenges of adolescence; and builds the foundation for a successful transition into adulthood.

An asset-based approach is the foundation of *positive youth development*, which provides a philosophy and a framework for policies and programs that serve young people. Proponents of this philosophy may rely on one or more of several conceptual frameworks, based on the key principles of positive youth development. However, each of these frameworks has in common the view of youth as a valued and respected asset to society. With this fundamental respect for youth as a foundation, families, schools, and communities develop opportunities for youth to gain a sense of competence, usefulness, belonging, and power within their communities.^{9 10 11 12 13}

⁶ Based on 2004 census estimates, so-called minority (non-Caucasian) populations now make up the majority population in four states: Hawaii—77 percent; New Mexico—57 percent; California—56 percent; and Texas—50.2 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, www.census.gov).

⁷ The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/vulnerability> (accessed May 17, 2007).

⁸ GCYF Leadership Summit, unpublished comments, December 2007.

⁹ National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth, www.ncfy.com/youthdevlp.htm (accessed June 2007).

¹⁰ Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth, Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, eds. Jacquelyne Eccles and Jennifer Appleton Gootman (Washington, National Academy Press, 2002); National Youth Development, www.nydic.org (accessed June 2007).

¹¹ Michele D. Kipke, ed., *Risks and Opportunities: Synthesis of Studies on Adolescence* (Washington DC: National Academy Press, 1999).

¹² Karen Johnson Pittman and others, *Preventing Problems, Promoting Development, Encouraging Engagement: Competing Priorities or Inseparable Goals?* (Washington, DC: The Forum of Youth Investment, September 2003), www.forumfyi.org/Files/PPE.pdf.

¹³ Robert W. Blum, "Healthy Youth Development as a Model for Youth Health Promotion: A Review," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 22 (1998): 368-375.

Despite research demonstrating the benefit of asset-based approaches to youth programming, many systems, agencies, and organizations serving youth have not yet adopted this method. Typically, systems serving youth focus on deficit-based services and tertiary treatment of problems, as opposed to strengthening the assets that contribute to young people's resiliency, enabling them to make a successful transition to adulthood. Most traditional systems of education and social services originally developed as deficit-based approaches, providing services for students troubled in school or entering the juvenile justice system.

Some of these traditional systems have well-intentioned champions who understand the premise of an asset-based approach; however, shifting gears is costly and time consuming. Traditional systems must expend resources to redesign services and programs in keeping with this approach. On the other hand, smaller community agencies, organizations, and even foundations may not understand the concepts of positive youth development and the asset-based approach. Even those who appreciate these concepts may not have the capacity to explore them or to apply them in their own community-based efforts.

Insight Into Strengthening Youth Assets

This issue of *Insight* presents four articles that explore the vulnerabilities of youth and the strategies grantmakers are developing to support youth by building on their strengths and assets.

- Tough problems facing older youth often disconnect them from three important systems in their lives: family, school, and community. Greater system-wide accountability and coordination among agencies is necessary to achieve wholesale reforms. The article "A Safe Passage for America's Most Vulnerable Youth" explores key grantmaking strategies recommended by the Youth Transition Funders Group to lay the groundwork for a new approach to policies, interventions, and investments promoting coordination among systems serving youth.
- One-size-fits-all approaches of traditional educational systems are ineffective for many young people. The article

"Are 'Go Across' Strategies the Future Direction for the Youth Development Field?" discusses the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's New Options for Youth Initiative's ambitious project to create a new credentialing system. Through unusual collaborations of atypical stakeholders, the New Options Initiative hopes to create new pathways for youth.

- Out-of-school time programming embodies the youth development philosophy of investing today in the assets and strengths of our youth, to prevent problems later. The article "Building on Youth Assets in the District of Columbia" describes the efforts of the DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation to develop standards for high quality out-of-school time and to establish a trained adult workforce knowledgeable in the language and principles of youth development.
- Significant increases in immigration over the past decade have dramatically changed the landscape of our communities and schools. Today, one in five of all school-age children in the United States come from immigrant families, with the greatest growth occurring in secondary schools. The article "Targeted Youth Development: A Closer Look at Immigrant Youth" describes the efforts of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Forum for Youth Investment to address the diverse situations of immigrant young people.

These articles provide a snapshot of the challenges that youth-service providers face and the successes some have had in addressing the unique needs of youth. Furthermore, contributors offer their insights, along with concrete recommendations on how grantmakers can renew their commitment to and focus on older youth. GCYF hopes this issue of *Insight* will help build the growing body of knowledge about and enthusiasm for strength-based approaches that improve outcomes for youth.