



Exploring Approaches to Increase Economic Opportunity for Young Men of Color

Highlights from a 10-Year Review

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February 2020

The past decade has ushered in significant developments in the scope and scale of efforts to increase economic opportunity for young men of color—talented and culturally rich populations whose potential has not yet been fully realized.

Yet additional progress must be made.

This brief, a summary of our research report *Exploring Approaches to Increase Economic Opportunity for Young Men of Color: A 10-Year Review*, aims to advance the conversation on increasing economic opportunity for young men of color. Our goals are to track progress, share important lessons, lift up promising programmatic and structural approaches, and spotlight opportunities for action for various stakeholders working to improve the lives of young men of color.

We focus on Black, Latinx, Native American, and Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) young men between the ages of 16 and 24, an important time for development and skill-building. We recognize that subgroups of young men of color do not have homogenous histories or life experiences, and that the varying strengths they possess and challenges they face proscribe different program and policy approaches. We address those issues whenever possible throughout the report.

Our findings are based on four data sources: an extensive review of relevant literature and current programs, analysis of data from the American Community Survey, interviews with 18 experts, and focus groups with young men of color in New York City, New York, and Austin, Texas. We highlight the voices of these young men, as well as specific examples of promising programs, initiatives, and public policies, in the full report.

Understanding the Issues

We define economic opportunity as having three key components:

- the *existence of chances* to achieve positive economic outcomes, including having access to high-quality education and training programs and good jobs;
- the *ability to act on those chances*, including having access to the resources, social supports, and equitable treatment needed to take advantage of opportunities; and
- the *possibility that acting on economic opportunities will yield the intended economic outcomes*, such as getting a degree, earning a sustainable income, and advancing in a career.

Key factors that determine economic opportunity exist across four contexts: systems and institutions, society and culture, community and neighborhood, and household. **But structural racism across all four contexts facilitates the upward mobility of white Americans and allows them to maintain their advantages while creating barriers to mobility for people of color, making it more difficult for young men of color to access, capitalize on, and realize the benefits of economic opportunity.**

The intergenerational effects of centuries of discriminatory policies and practices propagated against people of color have produced persistent racial disparities in outcomes. Government-sanctioned labor exploitation and occupational segregation of workers of color have disproportionately concentrated young men of color in low-wage occupations (Solomon, Maxwell, and Castro 2019). Additionally, federal government policies have fueled mass incarceration and disproportionately isolated people of color in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, depressing economic opportunity and outcomes for young men of color and their communities (Alexander 2010; Rothstein 2017).

How Do Young Men of Color Fare Today?

Despite important gains in racial equity over the past half-century, disparities stemming from structural racism remain along various indicators of economic opportunity. For example, Native American, Black, and Latinx young men are more likely to live in low-income households, not be enrolled in school, and be unemployed than their white peers. Although these disparities give cause for concern, they are not insurmountable, as many approaches show promise for combating inequities in economic opportunity and changing the systems and institutions that created the disparities in the first place.

Recent and Promising Approaches

We identify seven promising approaches for increasing economic opportunity for young men of color. These approaches represent a comprehensive way of thinking about improving economic opportunity that builds on the assets of young men of color and works to alleviate the barriers they often face. Effectively implementing and refining these strategies will require collaboration among actors in various sectors and systems.

1. Changing Narratives

Narratives about who young men of color are—told and repeated in history books, the media, pop culture, and political rhetoric—affect the way that young men of color are perceived and treated by individuals and systems. Dominant narratives have been driven by white Americans and have perpetuated racial inequities by portraying young men of color in negative and deficit-based ways.

To directly counter such thinking, there has been a major push in recent years to promote narratives that highlight the successes and potential of young men of color. These asset-based narratives emphasize the strengths and achievements of these young men, rather than the challenges they face. Narrative change work is occurring at national and local levels and includes trainings and workshops for community leaders and elected officials, building toolkits with suggestions for language and framing, and implementing campaigns aimed at changing how communities see young men of color.

2. Intervening Early

By the time boys of color reach young adulthood, their lives have already been shaped by a wide range of experiences and circumstances in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods. Black, Latinx, and Native American boys disproportionately grow up in low-income households, in which resource constraints can inhibit healthy child development (Francesconi and Heckman 2016). Early intervention holds particular promise for combating inequities produced by structural racism, as high-quality early childhood education programs have demonstrated large positive effects on the economic and noneconomic outcomes of participants (Elango et al. 2015).

The past decade has seen a proliferation of policies and programs working to improve access and quality in early childhood programs. This proliferation has been facilitated by an increase in federal resources for states and an expansion of public preschool at the state and city level. Local initiatives focused on closing socioeconomic and racial gaps have also prioritized early childhood interventions.

3. Empowering Young Men of Color to Lead

Increasing the level of autonomy and self-determination young men of color have over their lives and communities is critical to ensuring that they can influence the quality, accessibility, and fairness of the systems and institutions that determine economic opportunity. Yet young men of color can face barriers to positions of power stemming from historical discrimination and negative stereotypes about their intelligence and decisionmaking capacity.

Recognizing the value of empowerment, communities and organizations have worked to foster the agency and leadership of young men of color in recent years. At the center of these efforts is a recognition that young men of color are experts on their own needs and must be leaders in creating and implementing solutions. Many empowerment efforts are grounded in trainings, programs, and curricula that are culturally relevant and seek to build young men of color's confidence, sense of self-worth, and leadership skills.

4. Promoting Mental Health and Well-Being

Positive mental health and well-being are important preconditions to taking advantage of economic opportunity. However, young men of color are more likely to face mental health stressors than their white peers due to historical and ongoing racial trauma, trauma associated with conditions of poverty, and toxic masculine norms (APA 2018; Comas-Diaz 2016; Sotero 2006; Wadsworth and Achenbach 2005). Accessing mental health services is particularly difficult for many young men of color, who face heightened stigma around mental health and a dearth of focused services in their communities.

As part of greater nationwide awareness of mental health issues, direct service providers have been shifting toward culturally responsive models of care to address the trauma that young men of color have been exposed to. Trauma-informed approaches have been implemented at scale by school districts, child welfare systems, and juvenile justice systems. Healing-centered approaches, which promote well-being through a collective, asset-based lens, are increasingly being adopted by national initiatives and nonprofit organizations.

5. Preparing for Higher Education and Careers

Increasing economic opportunity requires that young men of color have access to and are prepared for careers—jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage with meaningful work and the potential for economic and personal growth. However, many young men of color, particularly those who live in low-income neighborhoods, lack access to quality education, jobs, and professional connections that would help them gain the skills required to reach their potential in the labor market.

Recent education and training models bring innovative approaches for increasing participation, retention, and success by tailoring programs to fit the specific circumstances of young men of color and by providing individualized guidance and mentorship around career planning. Three noteworthy approaches are allowing participants to combine education and training with paid work, promoting program retention by integrating culturally appropriate supports, and providing support through mentors and career navigators.

6. Building Wealth

Wealth is not only an indicator of economic well-being; it is also a key driver of economic opportunity, as it affects families' ability to make investments in their children's futures. Yet the enduring effects of government policies that have protected white wealth and prevented wealth accumulation in families of color have distributed wealth far more unequally than income (Brown, Montes, and Hassani 2019).

Over the past several years, bold approaches have emerged for narrowing the racial wealth gap. Locally, community development financial institutions (often referred to as CDFIs) are making capital more available to communities of color, and initiatives are focusing on entrepreneurship as an explicit way to address wealth inequity. One potential federal policy gaining attention is baby bonds, which would provide an endowment at birth, with additional income-based endowment payments each year.

7. Tailoring Interventions to the Local Context

Place-based interventions recognize that localities have different needs and dynamics that preclude one-size-fits-all solutions. Because young men of color are more likely than their white peers to live in areas of concentrated poverty that limit economic opportunity, targeted local efforts to increase economic opportunity are critical to improving individual and communitywide outcomes.

Place-based approaches targeting young men of color have largely adopted a collective impact framework, which recognizes that people's needs are multifaceted, simultaneous, and compounded, and rest on the idea that such needs are best addressed through cross-sector collaboration and resource- and knowledge sharing. Place-based approaches are working to close local equity gaps through innovative interventions and policy reforms, and are being implemented by national networks, municipal leadership, and action-oriented commissions and roundtables.

Dismantling Structural Racism through Policy Change

Significant and sustained progress requires the intentional deconstruction of racist policies and practices that depress economic opportunity for young men of color.

Recent federal, state, and local policy reforms show promise for increasing economic opportunity for young men of color. They address discriminatory policies and practices in the criminal legal system, racial and gender disparities in school discipline, employment discrimination against people with criminal records, inequitable access to high-quality health care, and the distribution of opportunity across neighborhoods.

Considerations for Moving Forward

Here, we highlight six considerations for all those interested in continuing this work, based on the research and analysis we conducted for our report.

- **Dismantle structural inequities.** Significant and sustained progress requires policy change that recognizes and addresses the role of past and current racist systems in shaping disparate outcomes.
- **Take a holistic approach.** Design services that comprehensively address the needs and experiences of young men of color by taking into account the range of factors that affect economic opportunity.
- **Share results and best practices.** Advocates, practitioners, and funders can learn from each other and implement cross-cutting approaches.
- **Invest in approaches to increase economic opportunity and monitor progress.** Although efforts to support young men of color have increased, funding is still insufficient, and more evaluation is needed to identify and scale effective approaches.

- **Recognize young men of color as experts on the issues they face and as leaders in driving solutions.** Doing so is critical to rebalancing race- and class-based power structures and giving communities of color agency in the decisions that affect their lives.

The past decade has equipped us with greater knowledge of what works, what is promising, and a broader and deeper coalition of groups working toward a shared goal. We must continue to build on progress made to ensure that young men of color can thrive and prosper.

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Acknowledgments

This brief was funded by a grant from JPMorgan Chase. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute’s funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.

We would also like to thank the experts who gave their time to be interviewed for this study: Kilolo Kijakazi, Margaret Simms, K. Steven Brown, LesLeigh Ford, Shawn Dove, Erik Stegman, Rhonda Tsoi-A-Fatt Bryant, Stephanie Kripa Cooper-Lewter, Marc Philpart, Victor Saenz, Michelle Morrison, Kent Wong, Betty Hung, Caryn York, Kerry Owings, and Shannon Reed. We thank K. Steven Brown, David Blount, Shayne Spaulding, Kisha Bird, Kilolo Kijakazi, Erica Greenberg, Jesse Janetta, Laura Skopec, Courtney Jones, Veronica Gaitan, and Oriya Cohen for their review and comments. Finally, we would like to thank Lynette A. Rawlings, who was the first researcher at the Urban Institute to write about the need to recognize structural racism and its impact on boys and men of color.



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