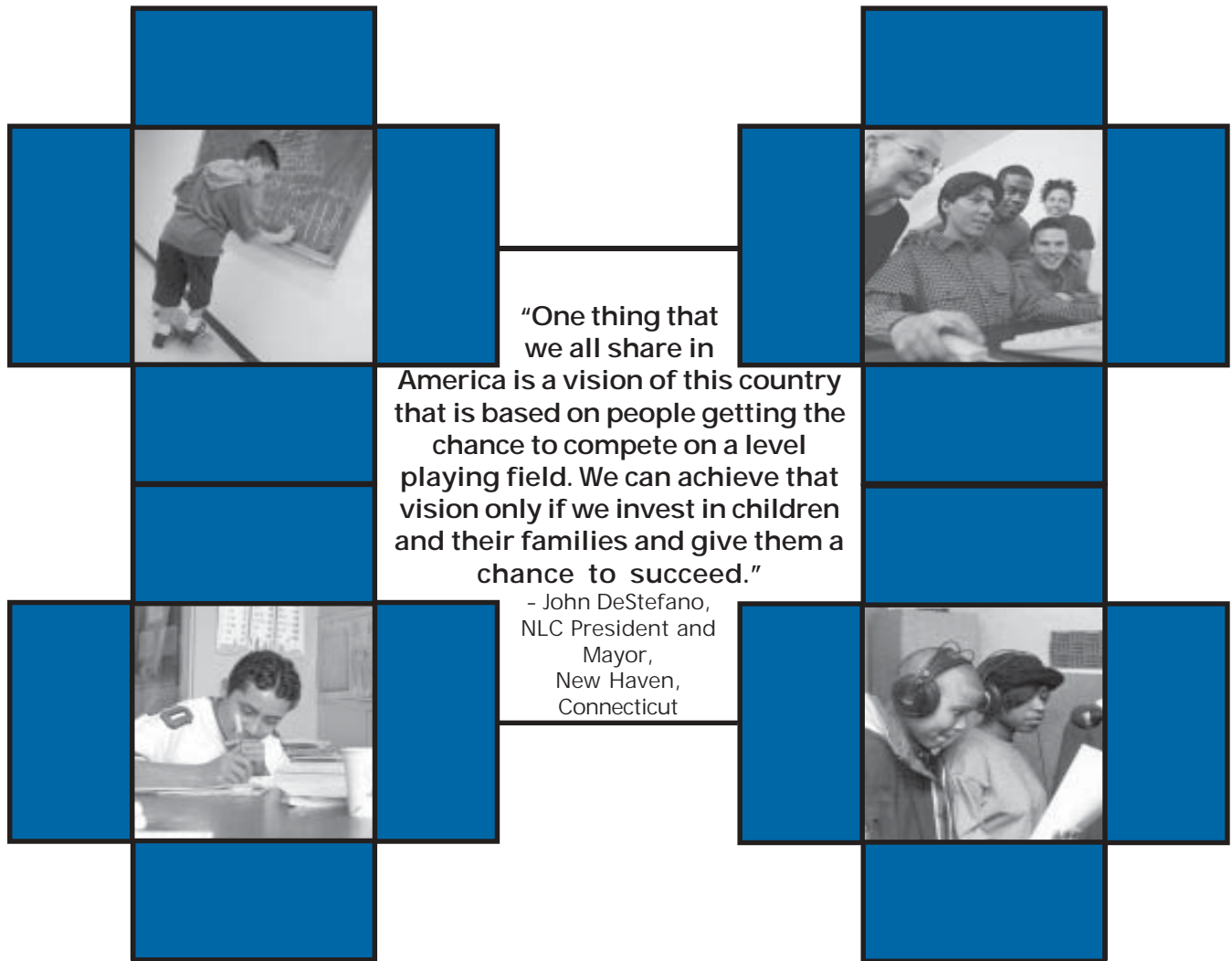


CONNECTING VULNERABLE YOUTH



“One thing that we all share in America is a vision of this country that is based on people getting the chance to compete on a level playing field. We can achieve that vision only if we invest in children and their families and give them a chance to succeed.”

- John DeStefano,
NLC President and
Mayor,
New Haven,
Connecticut

A MUNICIPAL LEADER'S GUIDE



Center for Youth Development
and Policy Research



National League of Cities
Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

INTRODUCTION: A PERSONAL STORY

Compared to most high school dropouts, Neil Stevens is pretty lucky. While he failed to earn his diploma the first time around – or more accurately, his high school failed him – Neil got a second chance, and he's made the most of it.

Before high school, Neil was doing well. "School was like my second family," he says. At his 7,000-student high school, Neil received no personal attention, although he was an excellent student. "No one knew my name," he recalls.

Eventually, he left school. "It wasn't that it was too much work," he asserts. "They didn't care if I was there, and I didn't want to be there." Upon leaving school, Neil began to get into serious trouble.

"It wasn't that it was too much work...they didn't care if I was there, and I didn't want to be there." – Neil, 18

Eventually, his former junior high school counselor referred him to the YouthBuild program. Its comprehensive services and caring environment helped him develop personal, academic, and leadership skills.

Unfortunately, most dropouts never receive such an opportunity:

- 1 in 4 high school students drops out before graduating; and
- Nationally, estimates suggest that education and training programs are sufficient to serve less than 10 percent of those who need them.

The labor market difficulties of young dropouts illustrate just how vulnerable they are in today's economy. In March 2001, more than half (57 percent) of all high school dropouts ages 16-24 endured one or more of the following problems: unemployed despite looking for work; forced to accept part-time work when full-time jobs were not available; stopped actively looking for work as a result of bleak job prospects; or employed but still unable to secure adequate earnings.

While leaving high school without a diploma is the most common way that youth become vulnerable or "disconnected" from the mainstream economy and society, other routes lead to this same destination.

Youth in foster care are often at great risk of joblessness and homelessness when they attempt to make the transition to independent living at age 18. Similarly, youth and young adults who have been involved in the juvenile or criminal justice systems are likely to be without work and often engage in illegal or dangerous activities in the absence of effective community supports.

This publication offers municipal officials and other local leaders a closer look at the defining characteristics, struggles, and needs of vulnerable youth and their capacity to rebound and succeed when given a second chance. It also provides a glimpse of how a few cities have risen to the challenge of connecting vulnerable youth, as well as advice on how other communities can chart a similar course.

Seven Questions for Municipal Officials

The questions below can assist you and other municipal officials with incorporating attention to vulnerable youth into your leadership agenda and your community's plan for success.

1. Who are the vulnerable youth in my community?
2. How can municipal government work with others to develop or enhance a shared vision and plan for the success of all youth, including vulnerable youth, in our community?
3. What individual and collaborative efforts are occurring through municipal departments and/or agencies to support and provide opportunities for vulnerable youth, not only through age 18, but also through age 24?
4. How are local, state, and federal funding sources being used to support opportunities for vulnerable youth, and how are these funds being augmented by businesses, foundations, and other charitable organizations?
5. What data or indicators (e.g., dropout rates, youth employment rates, teen pregnancy, high school and college completion rates) are being used locally to make decisions about vulnerable youth, and how are we working with the municipal planning department, United Way, the school district, the courts, the child welfare system, and local colleges/universities to collect and share this information?
6. How are young people accessing needed services and opportunities (e.g., use of a single point of entry into the system; assistance in overcoming barriers to services by receiving child care, training, housing, counseling, and/or transportation; communication and referral among the agencies and programs)?
7. What roles do these youth play in determining and implementing the policies and practices that impact their lives (e.g., participation in youth advisory councils, youth service, mentoring, and recreation activities)?

WHY ARE MUNICIPAL LEADERS PURSUING THIS WORK?

Municipal leaders find focusing time, policy, and resources on vulnerable youth is in the best interest of cities and towns because:

- ◆ **Educating young people builds strong communities.**

Many vulnerable youth have dropped out of, or been expelled from, their local high schools. Cities are working to re-connect these young people to educational opportunities so they can become engaged, productive citizens. "In the 21st century, cities that successfully prepare [all] their children for success in life will become the true winners," says San Jose, CA, Mayor Ron Gonzales.

- ◆ **Ignoring the challenges facing vulnerable youth is costly.**

Police departments, city property, residents, and local businesses bear the costs inflicted by vulnerable youth, both in actual costs (e.g. police officers' salaries or costs of damages) and in lost potential earnings. A recent national study found that each youth who drops out of school and becomes involved in a life of crime and drug abuse costs society \$1.7 million.

- ◆ **Providing positive opportunities for vulnerable youth is preventative.**

Vulnerable youth need supports similar to those offered to other youth. They also need opportunities to connect with caring adults, develop their talents, and serve as leaders. By providing positive opportunities for vulnerable youth, cities lessen the need for more costly, high-risk interventions further down the line. One alternative charter high school has saved Chicago residents over \$18 million per year for the past 5 years by re-enrolling and successfully graduating school dropouts. Most of these former dropouts are now working or pursuing higher education.

- ◆ **Investing in vulnerable youth pays off for the whole community.**

According to the Boston Strategy to Prevent Youth Violence, "... a job not only connects a young person to the mainstream economy, but also provides access to education and skills building" with an ultimate outcome of "declining rates of youth violence ... and poverty." After cities re-connect vulnerable youth to the workforce and/or education, many of them make positive contributions to the city: paying taxes; purchasing goods and services; and engaging in civic activities.

- ◆ **Offering vulnerable youth a second chance promotes equity.**

All youth, not just privileged youth, deserve a chance to recover from their mistakes. Youth from wealthier families often benefit from private solutions to their problems, allowing them to learn and recover from their mistakes. By providing vulnerable youth with similar opportunities to change their lives, cities help to promote equitable treatment and leave room for the possibility that these young people can become productive community members.

"I went to [places] where we had violence problems, and I said, 'What do we need?' I was fully expecting to hear 'more cops, more tough judges,' but the cops said, 'We need jobs and alternatives for these kids.'"

- Paul Evans, former Boston Police Commissioner

WHAT MAKES SOME YOUTH “VULNERABLE”?

For most youth, the teenage and young adult years are full of excitement, new challenges, and opportunities for growth. For their less fortunate peers, however, these same years can be fraught with disappointment, frustration, and danger.

Without strong or lasting connections to school, work, and caring adults, vulnerable youth can easily lose their way on the road to adulthood. Recent research by Michael Wald and his colleagues at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation provides a glimpse of the scope and seriousness of the problem.

They estimate that a total of 2.8 million young people between the ages of 16 and 24 are at-risk of permanent disconnection from the labor force and positive, productive social support systems.

These 2.8 million youth are unemployed or out of the labor force, high school dropouts, and high school graduates who are not looking for work and are not being supported by a spouse. This figure also includes youth 16-24 who are incarcerated, homeless, or in foster care without being in school, having a job, or having a stable place to live.

What makes some youth more likely to end up without these connections to school, the labor market, and essential social networks? While there is no single answer, research suggests that young people are particularly vulnerable when they face two or more of the following “risk factors:”

- ◆ Household income that is inadequate to meet basic family needs;
- ◆ Unstable, substandard, or overcrowded housing conditions;
- ◆ Absence of one or both parents from the household or high levels of conflict within the family environment;
- ◆ Mental health or substance abuse problems among youth or their parents; and
- ◆ A poor school environment, including high rates of staff turnover and high concentrations of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

SITE PROFILE

Sylacauga, AL

Population: 12,616

Innovation: **Community-Inspired, Family-Based Solutions**



In Sylacauga, the mayor led a grassroots effort to create community solutions to family issues, resulting in the creation of a full-service family resource center that works with infants, children, youth, and adults.

In 1995, the mayor challenged residents to generate community solutions to challenges such as high illiteracy and juvenile crime rates. He called together faith-based groups, parents, civic groups, government, and businesses.

For two years, a group of over 40 community members met, held focus groups, and discussed what their community could do to address the needs of youth and families. Their work resulted in the establishment of the Sylacauga Alliance for Family Enhancement (SAFE). SAFE is a full-service, non-profit, family resource center that is maintained by a number of grants as well as a small, annual city allocation. Over the years, city council members have been actively involved in supporting and promoting SAFE.

SAFE serves youth and families in a holistic way and prides itself on offering programs that evolve from needs identified by the community, much as SAFE itself evolved from the community.

For example, a community taskforce was concerned about high truancy and juvenile crime rates. In response, SAFE created Turning Point, which provides counseling and case management to juvenile offenders and other misbehaving youth. In line with the center's holistic, family-centered approach, services are also provided to the families of these young people. Youth in Turning Point are also easily connected to additional positive, supportive activities and resources, because the family resource center offers many other services such as GED preparation, afterschool programming, and job training.

SAFE's director acknowledges that it is a challenging task to work with young offenders and their families. "It's not 10 lessons and then a change in lifestyle" for these families. SAFE recognizes and accepts the fact that some youth and families will need to come back multiple times before they are able to succeed.

Vulnerable youth can be found in many different settings. Many are enrolled in poorly performing schools. Large numbers are already known to child welfare caseworkers and local social service providers. Young people caught up in the juvenile justice or foster care systems are frequently among the most at risk of becoming “disconnected” from the larger community.

At the same time, the challenges facing the most troubled youth are often complex and interrelated. For example, lack of a high school diploma in itself is a major source of vulnerability for youth, but this school failure is almost always the combined product of low quality schools, inadequate family resources, and social or personal difficulties.

The table below offers an expanded list of the educational, social, institutional, and personal factors that contribute to the varied faces of America’s vulnerable youth. Even though many of the economic and social conditions referenced here cannot be quickly or easily changed, the list serves as a reminder that effective interventions on behalf of the most vulnerable youth must be made along multiple dimensions.

Single-focus initiatives that address only one element (e.g., low academic achievement or a pattern of risk-taking behavior) may prove insufficient to overcome the challenges these young people face.

“Young people cannot be bludgeoned to greatness on the result of a test. As a nation of communities, we need to re-connect with vulnerable youth to ensure the American Dream is within reach for all.”

- Charles Lyons, NLC Vice President; Selectman, Arlington, MA; and Superintendent, Shawsheen Technical School



Table 1: Factors Leading to Vulnerability

Institutional Challenges	Educational Challenges	Social Challenges	Personal Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Schools with few resources · Unsafe schools and conditions · Unsafe neighborhoods · Economically deprived neighborhoods · Silos in development and delivery of youth services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · English language learners · Special education needs · Over age for grade by two or more years · Low literacy skills · Truancy, suspensions, and behavioral infractions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Poverty and unemployment · Racism and discrimination · Recent immigration or migrant families · Experience of abuse · Juvenile justice/ prison experiences · Homelessness, unstable home life · Gang influences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Lack of self-efficacy and resiliency · Legal problems · Substance abuse · Mental and physical health problems · Low self-esteem · Teenage pregnancy and parenthood

PROMISING EFFORTS TO CONNECT VULNERABLE YOUTH

We know a lot about what works when seeking to re-connect vulnerable youth to school, the job market, and the broader community. For example, we know that vulnerable youth often need the smaller learning environments provided by many alternative schools and community-based education programs in order to boost their academic skills.

Approaches that combine work and learning, set high expectations while allowing young people to progress at their own pace, and focus on their talents and strengths rather than their deficits appear particularly effective.

In addition, it is important that a program or school *intentionally* connects what it wants to do – based on sound principles and practices – with what it ultimately wants to achieve, based on measureable outcomes that have meaning to the recipients of those opportunities.

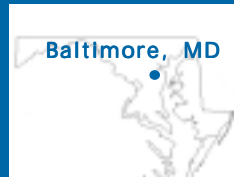
The three site profiles included in this publication provide a few examples of ways that cities have sought to reach out and re-connect vulnerable youth.

Municipal leaders, working in partnership with schools and community groups, can tackle these challenges in many other ways as well. Ideas worth considering include:

- ◆ **Anti-truancy efforts** – Chronic absences from school frequently signal that a student is on the verge of dropping out. Cities such as Boston, MA, and Trenton, NJ, have forged collaborative efforts between schools, police, churches, and other city and community-based agencies to intervene at the first signs of trouble and try to get truants back on track.
- ◆ **Alternative learning options** – Through Casa Verde Builders of Austin, TX – an award winning comprehensive program of American Youth Works – youth build affordable, energy efficient homes in low-income areas. These young people, many of whom are completing diplomas or studying for GEDs, are also enrolled in community college and often gain jobs in the building trades or architectural sectors.

SITE PROFILE

Baltimore, MD



Population: 650,000 Innovation: Partnerships to Support Vulnerable Youth

In Baltimore, city leadership – through the Mayor's Office of Employment Development (MOED) – has created networks among various public and private providers that support an overall system for vulnerable youth.

In 1999, as part of its participation in local workforce strategies, the city obtained a U.S. Department of Labor Youth Opportunity Grant (YOG). The process of applying cemented partnerships, encouraged new ones, and developed a sophisticated discussion about vulnerable youth among youth providers. One outcome is coordinated wrap-around education and employment programs through the city's "one-stop centers" for youth.

Baltimore City Career Connections is another critical, youth-focused network. Since 1994, this coalition of business, labor, education, and government leaders has been working to keep youth engaged in education and on the path to becoming productive workers. In partnership with the Baltimore Workforce Investment Board's Youth Council, this effort has expanded to include school-to-career activities, drop out prevention, alternative high schools, and a focus on serving homeless teens.

In a new partnership to re-engage high school dropouts, the school district re-enrolls them in community-based diploma programs run by contract providers. The school district benefits because those who re-enroll bring with them formerly lost state funding. The youth, in turn, gain the opportunity to earn a regular high school diploma in a small, community-based learning environment that addresses the "whole person" and is sensitive to individual strengths and needs.

The MOED – in tandem with the city Health Department and the city office of Children and Youth – is currently strengthening partnerships with the state Department of Juvenile Justice to ensure that youth leaving that system are connected to the youth development, employment, and education opportunities offered in the city.

These multiple networks and partnerships – and a Mayor committed to youth – have come together to develop a strong community of support for vulnerable youth.

- ◆ **Strategic use of data** - Using strategic data analysis, cities can reveal key gaps in services and opportunities, allowing the community to focus on the most vulnerable of youth. Youth Opportunities United (Y.O.U.) in Corpus Christi, TX, uses targeted indicators to continually assess the well being of youth and families in the community.
- ◆ **Re-entry help for youthful offenders** - Through Project RISE, Covenant House of New York City provides pre- and post-release services for youth (18-21) released from local correctional facilities. Skilled job developers and counselors offer one-on-one assistance, workshops, and guidance to prepare youth for a positive transition into the community. The availability of supports such as housing, mental health services, access to necessary identification papers, and education contributes to the program's success.
- ◆ **Investing in youth employment** - The Youth Opportunities (YO) program in the rural counties of Desha and Chicot in southeast Arkansas offers classes in communication, money management, parenting, and other areas, with the goal of helping youth attain long-term employment. This investment is having an immediate impact on the local economy, where at least one manufacturing business has chosen to locate and expand in the area because of YO's well-trained young employees and the extensive follow-up and holistic support offered by the program.
- ◆ **Independent living** - At age 18, foster care youth must make the critical and often harsh transition to independent living. Nashville, TN, is one of several cities participating in a foundation-sponsored initiative to help youth who are exiting foster care to have improved social and economic outcomes. A local "Opportunity Passport" will provide youth with access to money management tools including an Individual Development Account to build assets and a debit account for day-to-day banking. Youth will also receive support services in housing, health, and education.
- ◆ **Supporting homeless youth** - After five years of intensive work, Portland, OR, is getting homeless youth off the streets and into housing. Local non-profits, city and county government, and the corporate sector have partnered to create a multi-agency system to address the needs of these youth. The system features centralized intake and interagency case management. Through this central network, youth are assessed and then directed toward the agency providing the services they need. A shared data system helps the providers learn more about the youth and improve their services.

SITE PROFILE

Albany, NY

Population: 96,658
Innovation: Navigating Services Successfully



The city's Department of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) uses case managers to help young people access services that can help them to lead positive and productive lives. This innovative service navigation system connects young people to a number of positive activities, including alternative education, job training, and employment.

Before entering a program, each youth works with a case manager to complete educational and psychological assessments as well as eligibility screening. All of the city's programs for vulnerable youth provide individual case management and counseling. Each case manager works with 25-35 youth. Low caseloads not only connect the young people to caring adults, but also ensure they make progress and do not "fall between the cracks."

In the coming months, technology will also assist this system. A new "swipe card" will allow the city to collect data on the youth it serves and the services they access. To gather this data, the city plans to install terminals in different parts of the DYFS building. Youth will swipe their cards before entering the programs. Eventually, the city would like to place these machines throughout the community in different organizations. This new technology may also cut down on paperwork and expedite enrollment processes because standard data can be carried on the card.

"The people of RISE are really sticking out an arm and a leg for me. I really greatly appreciate it. And I promise, this time around things will be different. Only I can change that around - with the help of people who really care."

- Letter to Project RISE from a student

AUTHORS

This publication was written and designed by the National League of Cities' Institute for Youth, Education, and Families (Alicia Johnson, Clifford Johnson, and John E. Kyle) and by the AED Center for Youth Development and Policy Research (Christopher Ashford, Eric Kilbride, and Bonnie Politz) with support from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

For more information on vulnerable and out-of-school youth and other youth-related topics, contact the authors at:

Academy for Educational Development Center for Youth Development and Policy Research

The AED Center for Youth Development and Policy Research is focused on creating and strengthening the infrastructures that support positive development of all youth in America. The Center works with communities nationwide on issues related to youth development including afterschool programming, alternative education, and Community YouthMapping.

Contact: (202) 884-8267 or cyd@aed.org
Website: www.aed.org/us/youth.html

National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education, and Families

The Institute for Youth, Education, and Families, a special entity within the National League of Cities (NLC), helps municipal leaders take action on behalf of the children, youth, and families in their communities. The Institute offers conferences, technical assistance, and publications for city officials, including an Action Kit on Vulnerable and Out-of-School Youth available in late 2003.

Contact: (202) 626-3046 or ajohnson@nlc.org
Website: www.nlc.org/iyef



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Building Blocks for Youth

For the latest research, summaries of key studies, fact sheets, and resources related to juvenile justice issues, including disproportionate minority confinement.

Contact: info.bby@erols.com

Website: www.buildingblocksforyouth.org

Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)

For information on the financing of community-based-organization (CBO) schools.

Contact: (202) 408-5505

Website: www.ccsso.org

Harvard Civil Rights Project (HCR)

For research on key civil rights and equal opportunity policies. HCR's School to Prison Pipeline project examines practices that too often take certain high-risk, minority children directly from school into the criminal justice system.

Contact: (617) 384-9398 or aharris@law.harvard.edu

Website:

www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/research/criminal_justice.php

Jobs for the Future- Margins to the Mainstream (JFF)

For policy and research on providing youth - particularly those who are poorly served by current educational and employment systems - with the learning and credentials they need to make the transition to productive adulthood.

Contact: (617) 728-4446 or info@jff.org

Website: www.jff.org/Margins/Index.html

National Youth Employment Coalition

For research, best practices, and legislative information regarding youth workforce development, education reform, juvenile justice, and youth development.

Contact: (202) 659-1064

Website: www.nyec.org

Transformational Education

For policy, research, and best practices regarding effective alternative education programs. The online database allows you to locate such programs in your community.

Contact: (202) 884-8267

Website: www.tedweb.org

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