

RESEARCH REPORT

# Exploring Approaches to Increase Economic Opportunity for Young Men of Color

## A 10-Year Review

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# Executive Summary

The past decade has brought significant developments in the scope and scale of efforts to close equity gaps for young men of color, but additional progress must still be made. This report aims to advance the national dialogue on how to increase economic opportunity for young men of color between the ages of 16 and 24, an important time for development and skill-building. 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.

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, throughout the report.

## What Is Economic Opportunity?

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.

As a result, disparities remain along various indicators of economic opportunity. 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.

## Recent and Promising Approaches

We identify seven promising approaches for increasing economic opportunity for young men of color that have emerged or strengthened in the past 10 years. 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.

- **Changing narratives.** To counter negative thinking about young men of color—which has important implications for how they are perceived and treated—there has been a major push 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.
- **Intervening early.** By the time boys of color reach young adulthood, their lives have already been shaped by experiences and circumstances in their homes, schools, and neighborhoods. Early childhood education programs hold particular promise for combating inequities produced by structural racism, as they have demonstrated large positive effects on the economic and noneconomic outcomes of young men of color.
- **Empowering young men of color to lead.** A wave of empowerment efforts in recent years recognizes that young men of color are experts on their own needs and must be leaders in creating and implementing solutions. They build on young men of color’s confidence, leadership, and understanding of culture and self-worth.
- **Promoting mental health and well-being.** Recognizing the mental health stressors that young men of color face, direct service providers have been shifting toward culturally responsive models of care. Two approaches—one trauma-informed, the other healing-centered—have been at the forefront of this movement.
- **Preparing for higher education and careers.** Recent training and education models bring innovative approaches for increasing participation, retention, and success by tailoring programs to young men of color. These include allowing participants to combine education and training with paid work, promoting program retention using culturally appropriate supports, and providing mentoring and career navigation.
- **Building wealth.** Notable strategies for wealth-building include the work of community development financial institutions and initiatives focused on entrepreneurship for people of color. A potential federal policy gaining attention is baby bonds, which would provide an endowment at birth, with additional income-based endowment payments each year.
- **Tailoring interventions to the local context.** Place-based approaches focused on increasing economic opportunity for young men of color have largely adopted a collective impact framework. These interventions seek to break down silos between service providers, bringing cross-sector collaboration, resource-sharing, and knowledge exchange.

# 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 reforms at the federal, state, and local level are addressing discriminatory policies and practices in the criminal legal system, school discipline disproportionality, 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

Based on our research, future efforts to improve economic opportunities for young men of color must dismantle structural inequities, account for diverse strengths and needs, share results and best practices, invest in targeted programs and monitor progress, and recognize young men of color as experts and leaders in driving solutions. As we move into the 2020s, we must continue to build on progress made to ensure that young men of color can thrive and prosper.





# Introduction

The past decade has ushered in significant developments in the scope and scale of efforts to increase economic opportunity for young men of color. These efforts seek to bolster the chances for success of Black, Latinx, Native American, and Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) young men, talented and culturally rich populations whose potential has not yet been fully realized.<sup>1</sup> Yet as we move into the next decade, there is still significant progress to be made. Despite record low unemployment rates and increasing requirements for postsecondary education in the labor market, persistent structural racism continues to drive disparate outcomes along indicators of economic opportunity between Black and white young men (Carnevale et al. 2018). To move the needle for young men of color and advance effective and culturally appropriate interventions and policies, we must learn from past and current efforts.

Key events in the past 10 years have elevated this issue as a national priority. Massive public outcry in the wake of a series of high-profile police shootings of Black men has focused unprecedented attention on racial inequities. And in 2014, building on early community and philanthropic efforts to improve the lives of Black men and boys, the Obama administration launched My Brother's Keeper, an initiative focused on addressing persistent opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color. In response to these developments, federal, state, and local governments have implemented and expanded policies, programs, and initiatives serving young men of color.

Recent efforts recognize the unique assets and multifaceted challenges facing young men of color while working to improve outcomes in various domains that affect economic opportunity, including education, employment, health and mental health, and the criminal legal system.<sup>2</sup> These efforts have expanded our collective understanding of the ways in which the experiences of young men of color

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, the authors use Black to describe people of African descent, Latinx to describe people with Latin American ancestry, and Native American to describe all Native people of the continental US and Alaska. We use Latinx instead of Latino to be respectful of the gender spectrum. We use Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) to describe, respectively, people of Asian descent living in the US, the indigenous people of Hawaii and their descendants, and people with ancestral roots in American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, the Polynesian Islands, the Micronesian Islands, and the Melanesian Islands. We use these terms because they represent current best practices from the literature for inclusivity, but we acknowledge that these terms have limitations and try to address them where possible.

<sup>2</sup> The authors use “criminal legal system” instead of “criminal justice system” because the current system does not produce justice for all people. In this context, we include both the adult and juvenile systems as part of the criminal legal system. Urban strives to avoid stigmatizing and dehumanizing language as a matter of professionalism and respect for historically underserved populations.

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## **The Urban Institute's Partnership with JPMorgan Chase**

The Urban Institute is collaborating with JPMorgan Chase over five years to inform and assess JPMorgan Chase's philanthropic investments in key initiatives. One of these is New Skills at Work, a \$350 million multiyear workforce development initiative that aims to help people build new in-demand skills, prepare for the future of work, and succeed in an ever-changing world of work. The goals of the collaboration include using data and evidence to inform JPMorgan Chase's philanthropic investments, assessing whether its programs are achieving desired outcomes, and informing the larger fields of policy, philanthropy, and practice. To inform policymakers, funders, and practitioners this report and highlights brief look back at 10 years of strategies for increasing economic opportunity for young men of color.

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of different races, ethnicities, and sexual orientations differ and intersect. Many of these efforts also seek to address and dismantle racism in American systems, institutions, and culture that makes attaining positive economic outcomes more difficult for young men of color.

This report furthers the conversation on increasing economic opportunity for young men of color by lifting up promising approaches that have emerged or gained traction in the past decade. Our goal is to track progress, share important lessons, illuminate examples from the field, and highlight opportunities for action for policymakers, practitioners, social justice advocates, and funders.

For this report, we consider young men of color to be between 16 and 24 years old, as that age range aligns with current research on youth and represents an important time for social-emotional development and for gaining knowledge and skills that affect economic opportunity (Hutchison, Wagner, and Leigh-Osroosh 2016). Our focus on young men of color is not intended to mitigate the challenges faced by young women of color, but to facilitate a better understanding of the intersection of race and gender in the lives of young men of color. We recognize that subgroups of young men of color—according to country of origin, tribe, immigrant generational status, refugee status, sexual orientation, and language spoken—do not have homogenous histories or life experiences, and that the varying strengths they possess and challenges they face proscribe different policy and program approaches. We address those issues whenever possible throughout the report.

The findings in this report are based on four data sources: an extensive review of relevant literature and current programs serving young men of color; analysis of data from the American Community Survey; interviews with 18 experts on issues related to young men of color who work in research, advocacy, policy, and direct service (see the appendix); and two focus groups that we conducted with young men of color in New York City, New York, and Austin, Texas.

This report synthesizes what we learned and highlights common themes that emerged. The report is organized as follows: First, we discuss the meaning of economic opportunity and provide an overview of how young men of color fare today. Next, we present recent and promising approaches for increasing economic opportunity for young men of color, as identified in the literature and by the young men and experts we spoke with. These approaches are organized into seven categories:

1. changing narratives
2. intervening early
3. empowering young men of color to lead
4. promoting mental health and well-being
5. preparing for higher education and careers
6. building wealth
7. tailoring interventions to the local context

We describe how each approach relates to economic opportunity and how it has been implemented, and we provide examples of programs, initiatives, and public policies using the approach in compelling ways. We then highlight efforts to dismantle structural racism through federal, state, and local policy changes, which experts highlight as critical to tangibly increasing economic opportunity for young men of color. We conclude with considerations for moving forward with this important work. Throughout the report, we reference important bodies of research and evidence in relevant fields and highlight quotes and key themes we heard from the young men we spoke with.

# Understanding the Issues

A discussion of how to improve economic opportunity for young men of color requires defining “economic opportunity.” This section provides an overview of what economic opportunity means in this report and discusses the role of pervasive structural racism in shaping the economic opportunities available to young men of color. It also takes stock of how young men of color fare along various indicators that affect economic opportunity.

## What Is Economic Opportunity?

“Economic opportunity” is used widely in various fields of study with nuances in definition. For this report, economic opportunity has the following components:

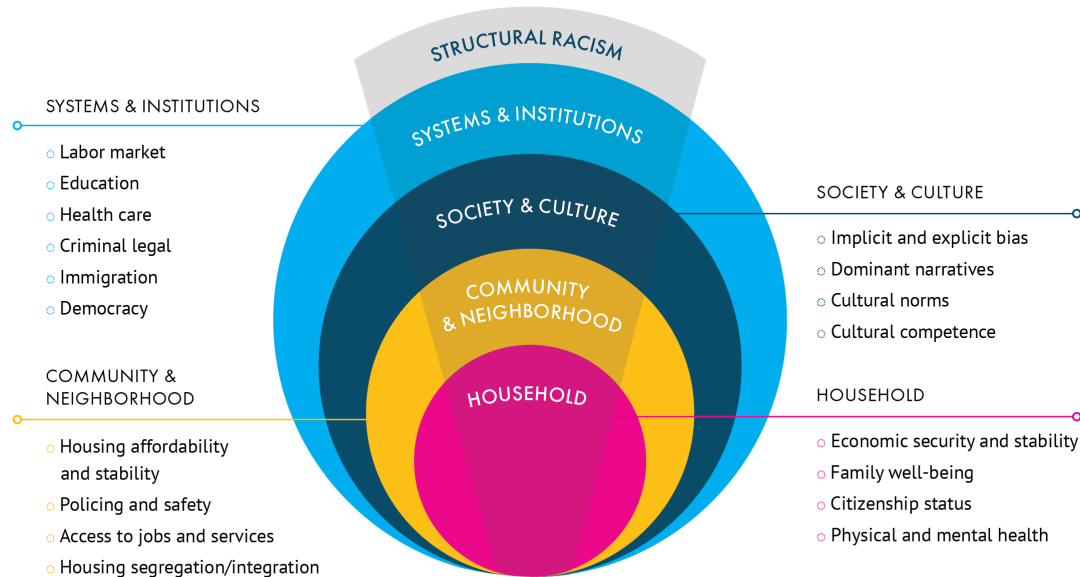
- **the existence of chances to achieve positive economic outcomes**, including having access to high-quality education and training programs and good jobs;
- **the ability to act on those chances**, including having access to the resources, social supports, and equitable treatment needed to take advantage 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.<sup>1</sup>

Per the above definition, the presence of economic opportunity ties directly to achieving positive economic outcomes. In assessing economic opportunity, it is also important to note its intergenerational nature, as parents’ economic status largely influences the opportunities available to their children (Bradbury and Triest 2016).

Improving the lives of young men of color depends on recognizing the many factors that affect economic opportunity and on understanding how the interaction and compounding of these factors alters the likelihood of positive economic outcomes. Key factors that determine economic opportunity can be understood using the four contexts summarized in figure 1: systems and institutions, society and culture, community and neighborhood, and household (Rawlings 2015). The figure includes examples of factors that operate within each context.

FIGURE 1

## The Creation of Economic Opportunity across Four Contexts



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## How Structural Racism Affects Economic Opportunity for Young Men of Color

Young men of color in the US must navigate a significant barrier to economic opportunity that permeates all four contexts in the figure above: structural racism. Structural racism can be defined as the feature of our social, economic, and political systems in which an array of dynamics—historical, institutional, cultural, and interpersonal—legitimize and reinforce racial inequity.<sup>2</sup> These racist dynamics facilitate the upward mobility of white people and allow 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. Recognizing the central role of structural racism in shaping economic opportunity for young men of color avoids isolating symptoms of disadvantage and creates the space for addressing and remedying root causes.

The intergenerational effects of centuries of discriminatory policies and practices propagated against people of color—particularly Black people and Native Americans—have produced persistent racial disparities in outcomes. Government-sanctioned exploitation and occupational segregation of workers of color through human trafficking and bondage, Jim Crow, and the exclusion of many people of

color from New Deal programs and union membership have disproportionately concentrated people of color in low-wage occupations. As a result, young men of color are less likely than their white peers to have access to jobs that offer economic stability, good benefits, and career mobility (Solomon, Maxwell, and Castro 2019).

Housing and criminal legal system policies have also severely limited economic opportunity for young men of color. Federal government policies that encouraged redlining, the construction of segregated public housing, unfair zoning laws, and the subsidization of white-only suburbs by the government have disproportionately isolated young men of color in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty (Rothstein 2017). In comparison to predominantly white neighborhoods, these neighborhoods provide less access to good jobs, schools, health care, and transportation, and they have higher crime rates, lower levels of social capital, and poorer environmental conditions (Aspen Institute 2004; Granovetter 1995). Additionally, disproportionate policing of communities of color and harsh sentencing laws ushered in by the War on Drugs and a wave of policy change in the 1980s and 1990s have fueled mass incarceration—particularly of men of color—in the United States (National Research Council 2014). In effect, the criminal legal system has been a mechanism for continued repression and control of young men of color and their communities, depressing economic opportunity and outcomes for the people involved in the system and their families (Alexander 2010).

Despite important civil rights legislation that dismantled many explicitly racist laws more than 60 years ago, racism remains ingrained in American systems and institutions such as the labor market, the housing market, schools, and our criminal legal, health care, immigration, and political systems. This makes it more difficult for young men of color than for white young men to build the skills and obtain the supports they need to secure good jobs and to influence the processes that determine how resources and opportunity are allocated. As a result, American systems and institutions often perpetuate inequities rather than serving the interests of young men of color.

## How Do Young Men of Color Fare Today?

People of color have made significant progress in the past half-century, even in the face of tremendous structural adversity. The poverty rate has fallen faster for Black people than for white people (though Black people remain disproportionately likely to be poor), and racial and ethnic gaps in infant mortality, life expectancy, and academic achievement and attainment have narrowed significantly (Jones, Schmitt, and Wilson 2018). In the past two decades, juvenile incarceration rates have been reduced by between one-half and two-thirds for all racial and ethnic groups, though large disparities remain.<sup>3</sup> Additionally,

the representation of Black and Latinx men at all levels of government has increased dramatically.<sup>4</sup> Today, society more widely recognizes that many young men of color excel across professions and are leaders in their communities.

Despite important gains, disparities stemming from structural racism remain along various indicators of economic opportunity. Below, we compare outcomes across racial and ethnic groups of young men to illustrate these gaps.

All groups of young men of color are more likely to live in low-income households than are white young men (table 1). Native American, Black, and Latinx young men have significantly lower rates of school enrollment and high school completion than their white peers. AANHPI young men have the best outcomes of any racial or ethnic group on education indicators, but racial and ethnic subgroups have vastly different outcomes (not shown in table). For example, as of 2014, only 62 percent of Hmong Americans and 63 percent of Cambodian Americans had graduated from high school, compared with 91 percent of Indian Americans and 93 percent of Japanese Americans (Ramakrishnan and Ahmad 2014). Educational attainment also varies widely by place of origin for Black people in the US: 20 percent of American-born Black people have a college degree compared with 28 percent of Black immigrants, and the rate varies further among Black immigrants by country of origin.<sup>5</sup> This is consistent with the finding that many African, Asian, and Latinx immigrants are better situated than people born in the US, making them and their children more upwardly mobile (Chetty et al. 2019).

**TABLE 1**  
**Key Economic Indicators for Men Ages 16–24 in the US, by Race and Ethnicity**

	<b>AANHPI</b>	<b>Native American</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Latinx</b>	<b>White</b>
Living in low-income household	43.8%	54.6%	52.6%	49.8%	33.2%
Enrolled in school	76.0%	46.2%	52.8%	53.1%	59.1%
Graduated from high school (ages 20–24)	95.6%	81.0%	85.9%	82.2%	93.1%
<b>Employment</b>					
Employed	37.9%	39.1%	39.7%	51.1%	53.7%
Unemployed	5.9%	12.2%	13.4%	8.7%	7.6%
Disconnected from school and work	7.0%	26.2%	22.2%	13.4%	10.3%

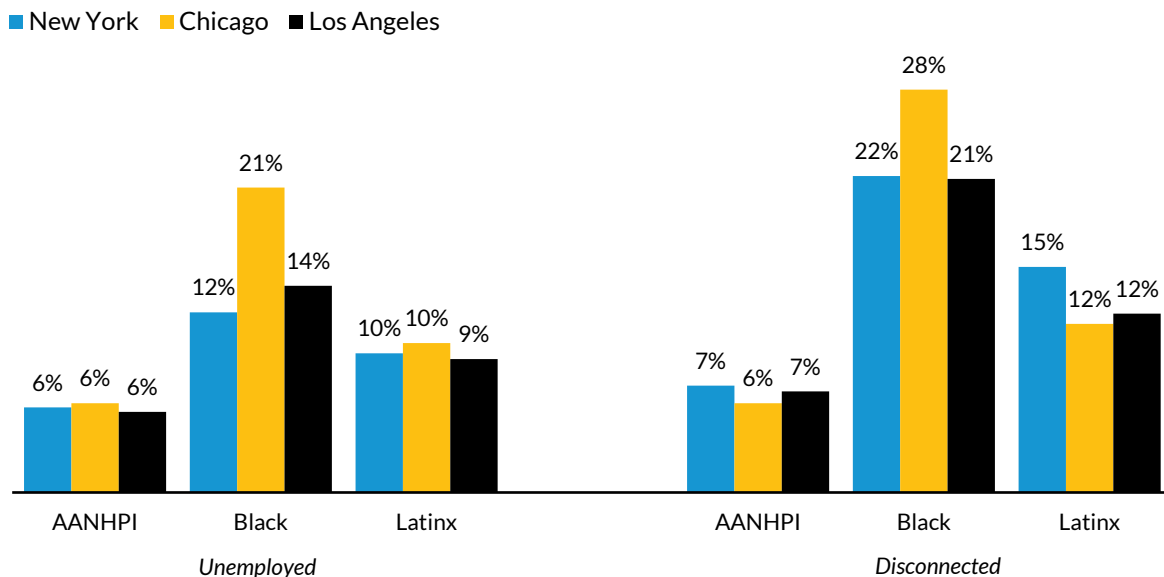
**Source:** Authors’ calculations using the American Community Survey five-year estimates, 2013–17.

**Notes:** All racial categories exclude people who identify as Hispanic. “AANHPI” refers to those who identify as Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islander. “Native American” refers to people who identify as American Indian and Alaska Native. “Latinx” refers to those who identify as Hispanic and can be in combination with any other race. Someone is considered low income if their reported household earnings are less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level. “Enrolled in school” includes all levels of education.

Employment rates also differ by race and ethnicity: white young men are employed at a rate that is 14 percentage points higher than Black young men and 15 percentage points higher than Native American young men. Latinx young men are employed at nearly the same rate as white young men, yet they tend to be concentrated in low-wage, low-mobility occupations like their Black and Native American peers (Maldonado and Farmer 2006). Finally, Black, Native American, and Latinx young men are more likely to be disconnected from both school and work than white and AANHPI young men. These young men, often called “disconnected youth” or “opportunity youth,” warrant particular attention, as disconnection puts youth at a higher risk for negative outcomes, such as lower future earnings, lower educational attainment, poorer health, and higher rates of criminal legal system involvement (Loprest, Spaulding, and Nightingale 2019).

Economic indicators for young men of color vary by local context. The chart below shows a sample of geographic variation across New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles (figure 2). Black young men are much more likely to be unemployed and disconnected from school and employment in Chicago than in New York and Los Angeles, and Latinx young men are most likely to be disconnected in New York.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Key Economic Indicators for Young Men of Color in Three Major Metropolitan Areas**  
 Ages 16 to 24



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**Source:** Authors’ calculations using the American Community Survey five-year estimates, 2013–17.

**Notes:** Native American young men are not included because their sample size was less than 100. All racial categories exclude people who identify as Hispanic. “AANHPI” refers to those who identify as Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islander. “Latinx” refers to people who identify as Hispanic and can be in combination with any other race.



Despite positive trends in some outcomes for young men of color, trends in other economic outcomes are troubling. The share of Black men in the labor force has declined over the past four decades (Toossi and Joyner 2018). Additionally, since 2000, real wages have declined among low-wage workers and workers with less than a high school degree, populations that disproportionately include men of color. This decline has been driven in part by a growing gap in median wages between Black and white workers and between Latinx and non-Latinx workers since 1979 (CRS 2019).

The size and growth of wealth inequality is far greater than in wages. In 2016, the median white household held 10 times more wealth than the median Black household and 8 times more wealth than the median Latinx household,<sup>6</sup> and between 1992 and 2016, the black-white gap grew by 54 percent when adjusted for inflation (Noel et al. 2019). Disparities in wealth between white and Native American people and among Asian Americans are large and growing as well (ACF 2014; Weller and Thompson 2016). Black men disproportionately face other barriers to economic success, including a high and growing burden of student loan debt (Espinosa et al. 2019) and lower rates of upward mobility and higher rates of downward mobility than white people (Chetty et al. 2018).

Structural racism has also led to disparities in other domains that affect economic opportunity, including academic achievement, involvement in the criminal legal system, and health. At kindergarten entry, Black and Latinx students score lower than white students on measures of school readiness (Reardon and Portilla 2016), and throughout schooling, the achievement gap between Black, Latinx, and Native American students and their white peers remains large and persistent (The Education Trust 2013).<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Black men have been incarcerated at higher rates than any other population group; the lifetime risk of imprisonment is 59 percent for Black men without a high school diploma, compared with 11 percent for white men of similar backgrounds (Western 2006). Native American youth are also incarcerated at nearly four times the rate of their white peers, an epidemic concentrated among young men (Center for Native American Youth 2016). Finally, young Native men are the most likely of any population group to commit suicide and to exhibit substance dependence or abuse,<sup>8</sup> and Native youth overall have the highest rates of obesity and diabetes (Center for Native American Youth 2016). Interestingly, first-generation Latinx people have lower criminal legal system involvement and better health outcomes than their white peers, but these advantages disappear by the third generation, which has been called the “acculturation paradox” (Lieberman and Fontaine 2015).

These disparities and trends provide reason for concern, but they are not insurmountable. Many approaches show promise for combating inequities in economic opportunity and changing the systems and institutions that created the disparities in the first place. The next section details some of those approaches.

# Recent and Promising Approaches

This section presents seven approaches that are particularly promising for increasing economic opportunity for young men of color, both because they have gained traction in recent years and because they demonstrate encouraging results. The approaches are based on key themes that emerged from our research and provide a comprehensive way of thinking about increasing economic opportunity that builds on the assets of young men of color and works to alleviate the barriers they often face.

## 1. Changing Narratives

Dominant narratives about young men of color are shaped by a multitude of factors, including history books, the news media, pop culture, political rhetoric, and social norms. Instead of highlighting the assets and resilience of young men of color, these narratives, which have been driven by white people, have been negative and deficit-based. They have produced illusions of inferiority by presenting young men of color as intrinsically dangerous, unintelligent, impoverished, and a problem to be solved. America's white-centric historical narrative has also largely erased the achievements and contributions of leaders and communities of color to the nation's growth and development. To directly counter harmful tropes and stereotypes, there has been a major push in recent years to promote narratives that highlight the successes, strengths, and potential of young men of color.

Narratives have real consequences for economic opportunity, as they affect the way young men of color are perceived and treated by individuals and systems. They can lead to inaccurate stereotypes, implicit biases, and low expectations of young men of color that in turn can negatively influence their chances of success in the labor market and reduce political will around supporting and investing in communities of color. Perceptions of young Black, Latinx, and Pacific Islander men as hyper-masculine and older than they actually are can lead to disproportionately harsh discipline practices in the classroom and in the criminal legal system (Goff et al. 2014; Rudd 2014). And if young men of color internalize harmful narratives, that can lead to a diminished sense of self-worth and self-efficacy that may adversely affect their ability to capitalize on economic opportunities (Pyke 2010).

Centuries of carefully crafted racist political rhetoric and policies have linked Black young men to criminality, sexual predation, and poverty (Johnson and Godsil 2018). Latinx young men have been painted as similarly aggressive, as immigrants "taking jobs" from white people, and as dependent on public assistance programs.<sup>9</sup> Native Americans and AANHPI young men have long suffered from

conditions of invisibility and perceptions of group homogeneity both in general social and political discourse and in specific discussions around young men of color (where Black and Latinx boys tend to be the focus), which weakens their political power and leads to inadequate targeting of resources (Lee 2019; Reclaiming Native Truth 2016). AANHPI young men have been subject to the “model minority myth,” which portrays them as universally successful, thus obscuring large disparities in the outcomes of Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders, which are as severe as those facing other groups of young men of color. And unlike Black, Latinx, and Pacific Islander young men, Asian American young men are confronted with emasculating stereotypes (Lee 2019).

Particularly in the past five years, there has been a shift toward promoting asset-based narratives among organizations that advocate for and serve young men of color. These narratives emphasize the strengths of these young men, rather than the challenges they face. Such approaches focus on positive group qualities, including resiliency in the face of hardship, intellectual capacity, unique cultures, and commitment to family. Additionally, asset-based approaches highlight the achievements of young men of color—for example, those who are excelling in school, are entrepreneurs, or are active in their community—lifting them up as leaders for facilitating change.

Narrative change work is occurring at the national and local levels (table 2). This work includes running trainings and workshops for community leaders and elected officials, building toolkits with suggestions for language and framing, constructing asset-based frameworks, and designing and implementing campaigns aimed at changing the ways communities see young men of color. Programs and initiatives are often explicit about the narratives they are working to change and call out those that

**TABLE 2**  
**Changing Narratives: Promising Programs**

<b>Program name</b>	<b>Location(s)</b>	<b>Focal population</b>
Black Male Engagement (BMe) Community	Nationwide	Black men
Brown Boi Project	Oakland, CA	Masculine-of-center womyn, queer, and trans people of color
Facing History and Ourselves	Nationwide	Teachers and students
Flip the Script	Washington, DC	Black and Latinx fathers and sons
Milwaukee Public Schools’ Positive Narrative Change Campaign	Milwaukee, WI	Black and Latinx male students
<i>New York Times’</i> 1619 Project	Nationwide	Black people
Reclaiming Native Truth	Nationwide	Native Americans
US House congressional hearing on reparations and Evanston, IL, local reparations fund	Washington, DC, and Evanston, IL	Black people

have negatively characterized racial and ethnic groups. Narrative change movements target entities working with young men of color as well as the public at large, recognizing the need for external shifts in dialogue.

**BMe Community** is a network of innovators, leaders, and champions that, since 2013, has invested in communities, offered fellowships, and run trainings to change narratives for Black people through an initiative called “Next Narrative for Black America.” The campaign uses an asset-based framework that avoids terms such as “disadvantaged” or “at-risk;” instead, it emphasizes positive aspects of Black American culture such as dedication to civic duty and community, high rates of Black business creation and philanthropic contributions, and engagement of Black fathers.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, **Reclaiming Native Truth**, a national research project started in 2017, emphasizes the assets of Native Americans, including spirituality, commitment to family, connection to art and culture, responsibility to land and environment, and resilience in the face of extreme challenges. Reclaiming Native Truth recently released two versions of a report on changing narratives—one for a target audience of Native peoples and organizations and one for allies—underscoring the importance of linking Native and non-Native efforts around unified new narratives.<sup>11</sup>

Narrative-changing work can also take place at the local level. Launched in 2017, Milwaukee Public Schools Department of Black and Latino Male Achievement works to address disparities in outcomes for boys and young men of color, in part by employing strategies that reimagine Black and Latinx boys in the school district to ensure that they are seen as assets that bring “brilliance, creativity, and greatness to the Milwaukee community.”<sup>12</sup> In 2018 and 2019, the department worked with the local campaign #SeeMeBecause to highlight Black and Latinx young men within Milwaukee Public Schools and how they ask to be seen. Known as the **Positive Narrative Change Campaign**, the project produced photos of the young men with quotes from each individual about the traits they hope others see in them.<sup>13</sup>

A similar visual initiative was launched in public spaces throughout Washington, DC, in 2019 by the mayor’s office. Titled “**Flip the Script**,” the positive visual campaign aims to “dispel common myths about men of color and combat negative imagery frequently used by the media.”<sup>14</sup> In addition to school districts and governments, local community-based organizations have participated in narrative change efforts. **The Brown Boi Project**, based in Oakland, California, was founded in 2010 and is a community of “masculine of center womyn, men, two-spirit people, transmen, and our allies” that works to transform the way that communities of color talk about gender by delivering trainings, hosting retreats, and facilitating community conversations.

Also critical to changing negative narratives is ensuring that the American history taught in school curricula highlights the contributions of people of color to important social change and accurately represents America's history of oppression of people of color. [Facing History and Ourselves](#) provides teachers, schools, and entire districts with resources to heighten students' understanding of racism, antisemitism, and prejudice to enable them to relate history to their own lives and consider how they can make a difference. Its pedagogy begins with an exploration of individual and group identity, applies those concepts to a case study, encourages students to assess lessons learned, and highlights individuals who have made a difference in a related field.<sup>15</sup> Facing History's network serves almost 80,000 teachers and reaches more than 7 million students across the world each year; studies have shown that Facing History students report improved empathy, tolerance, and civic responsibility in comparison to their peers (Facing History and Ourselves 2019). Relatedly, the *New York Times*' [1619 Project](#) and corresponding lesson plans aim to reframe the start of US history around the arrival of slaves in 1619, placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black people at the center.

Conversations focused on changing the narrative of US history are also happening outside the classroom. For example, conversations about reparations for the descendants of slaves increasingly recognize the profound social and economic impacts of the institution of slavery over generations and acknowledge the nation's role in its perpetuation. On June 19, 2019—also known as Juneteenth—the US House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties held its first **congressional hearing on reparations** in more than a decade.<sup>16</sup> There has also been unprecedented conversation among some 2020 Democratic presidential candidates on this topic.<sup>17</sup> At the local level, Evanston, Illinois, passed a measure in 2019 to funnel the city's tax revenue generated from the sale of recreational marijuana to a [local reparations fund](#). Town hall discussions are being held and a Reparations Commission has been formed to determine how the fund will be used and distributed.<sup>18</sup>

## 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. The years between birth and age 5 are particularly important, as children experience a critical period of rapid brain development; they are learning language and emotional regulation, building neural networks, and creating secure attachments to caregivers (Center on the Developing Child 2007a, 2007b). Early intervention holds particular promise for combating inequities caused by structural racism, as high-quality early childhood education programs have demonstrated large positive effects on the economic and noneconomic

outcomes of low-income children and children of color. Efforts focused on early childhood have proliferated in the past decade thanks to an increase in federal resources for states and an expansion of public preschool at the state and city levels. Young men of color were explicitly brought into this conversation in 2014, when My Brother's Keeper (MBK) elevated early intervention as one of its six key milestones. As a result, policymakers and program creators are focused on early childhood as a way to close disparities and put all children on a path to success.

Early childhood experiences have important effects on brain development, which shapes outcomes later in life. However, as a result of structural racism, Black, Latinx, and Native American boys disproportionately grow up in low-income households where limited financial resources and free time can lead them to hear fewer words, participate in fewer enriching activities, and receive less supportive parenting—all of which are critical for healthy child development—than boys who grow up in higher-income households (Francesconi and Heckman 2016). Because of conditions associated with poverty, Black and Latinx children are far more likely than white children to be exposed to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in early childhood (Sacks and Murphey 2018). ACEs can negatively affect social-emotional development and are linked to a higher likelihood of risky health behaviors, chronic health conditions, incarceration, and lower educational attainment and earnings.<sup>19</sup>

A growing body of research demonstrates the promise of early intervention for improving outcomes later in life, especially for historically underserved children. Studies of high-quality preschool programs show large positive effects on children's short-term performance in language, literacy, and math. Effects persist into adulthood, bolstering longer-term outcomes including social-emotional development, educational attainment, earnings, and avoidance of teen pregnancy and crime (Elango et al. 2015). Benefits of preschool are at least as strong or stronger for low-income children (Elango et al. 2015) and Black and Latinx children (Bassok 2010), and boys benefit significantly more than girls on such outcomes as grade retention and special education classification (Magnuson et al. 2016). Additionally, high-quality preschool programs have demonstrated a larger return on investment than nearly any other public program in the form of lower government spending on public assistance, grade retention, special education, health care, and crime (Garcia et al. 2016).

Despite these findings, research also shows that boys of color who attend early childhood education (ECE) programs may not reap their full benefits. Disproportionate disciplinary action against boys of color perpetuates economic disadvantage through negative long-term impacts on children's success (APA 2008). Black and AANHPI children are also disproportionately underrepresented among those receiving early special education services, which provide critical supports to children with or at risk for developmental delays or disabilities (Morgan et al. 2012). And, though research strongly supports the

importance of integrated schools and male teachers of color for positive outcomes of boys of color, ECE settings are more segregated than K–12 classrooms,<sup>20</sup> and the presence of men—let alone men of color—in the early childhood workforce is virtually nonexistent.<sup>21</sup>

Recent years have seen focused efforts at both the policy and program levels to improve access and quality to early childhood services (table 3). Although some efforts have been targeted toward boys of color, most use socioeconomic targeting, and some have been universal. At the federal level, Early Head Start–Child Care Partnerships, Preschool Development Grants, the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five program, and Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge have funded states to increase quality and access to high-quality early learning programs for children from low- and moderate-income families.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, in 2018, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, which provides child care assistance for families and funds child care quality initiatives, received a historic funding increase, and the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program, which was created by the Affordable Care Act and funds home visiting services, was reauthorized through fiscal year 2022.<sup>23</sup>

States and cities have also undertaken major efforts to expand access to preschool in recent years. During the 2017–18 school year, over 250,000 more 3- and 4-year-olds were served in state-funded preschool than during the 2012–13 school year (Friedman-Krass et al. 2019). Locally, universal preschool programs in Washington, DC, and New York City have expanded in the past decade to serve nearly all the cities’ 3- and 4-year-olds at no cost, and a number of other large cities have implemented high-profile preschool initiatives, including Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, San Antonio, and Seattle (CityHealth and NIEER 2019).

**TABLE 3**

**Intervening Early: Promising Programs**

<b>Program name</b>	<b>Location(s)</b>	<b>Focal population</b>
Albany Promise	Albany, NY	Students in West Hill, Arbor Hill, and the South End
Educare	Various locations	Children from birth to age 5
Harlem Children’s Zone	New York, NY	Children and families
Leading on Opportunity	Charlotte-Mecklenburg region, NC	Charlotte-Mecklenburg community
State and city preschool programs	Nationwide	3- and 4-year old children
Various federal grants and programs	Nationwide	Families with young children

**Educare**, a national network of schools for young children funded through public-private partnerships, has expanded in size and influence over the past decade as evaluations have uncovered promising results for improving students' academic and social-emotional skills as well as improving parent-child interactions (Stein, Simon, and Britten 2017; Yazejian et al. 2017). The evidence-based Educare model has four core features: data utilization, embedded professional development, high-quality teaching practices, and intensive family engagement. Educare has added 15 new schools across the country since 2010. And, as part of the Early Head Start–Child Care Partnership grants awarded in 2014, Educare schools have been sharing their expertise with child care providers to improve the quality of the services they offer to families of low-income children.

Initiatives working toward closing local socioeconomic and racial gaps have also adopted an early childhood focus in recent years. In 2010, the Obama administration elevated the highly successful **Harlem Children's Zone** model as the basis for its 2010 Promise Neighborhoods initiative (discussed later in the report), and it is now being replicated in many communities across the country (PolicyLink, Harlem Children's Zone, and Center for the Study of Social Policy 2011). Harlem Children's Zone provides services to children and families but focuses on early childhood intervention, which includes educating parents on child development and a year-round, full-day preschool program.

Another community initiative focused on early childhood is the **Albany Promise**, a coalition of Albany-based education, business, civic, and community leaders that have developed target outcomes for students in their neighborhoods. One of its three key areas of focus is early childhood learning, with goals of establishing a formula for kindergarten success, providing professional development for early childhood providers, engaging in a districtwide assessment of incoming kindergarteners, and expanding the use of research-based curriculum and assessment tools.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, early care and education is one of the five central tenets of **Leading on Opportunity**, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg's region's initiative to increase upward mobility. Included in this focus are strategies to increase access to ECE programs, strengthen the ECE workforce, and support parents and other caregivers in promoting cognitive, social, and emotional development and early literacy.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. Empowering Young Men of Color to Lead

"Empowerment" can take on various meanings, but at its core, it refers to increasing the autonomy and self-determination that people have over their lives and communities. Young men of color can face barriers to positions of power because of historical discrimination, negative stereotypes about their intelligence, and the perception—as is common for many young people—that they are too young to be



decisionmakers. In practice, this has meant that decisions affecting the lives of young men of color have typically been made by people who lack shared life experiences or knowledge of their needs, and those decisions are often in direct opposition to the interests of the young men. While many young men of color are already leaders in their families and communities, they remain underrepresented in formal leadership positions, including in politics, courtrooms, businesses, philanthropy, schools, and nonprofit organizations. In response, a wave of community and organizational efforts has aimed to elevate young men of color into leadership roles. These efforts, with young men of color as both leaders and participants, are playing a key role in restoring and enhancing personal agency.

Empowerment is key to the three facets of economic opportunity set forth at the beginning of this report: its existence, the ability to take advantage of it, and the possibility of achieving the outcomes it promises. Increasing the level of autonomy and self-determination that 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. And the presence of people of color at all leadership levels is closely tied to economic opportunity. Research shows that Black children have substantially better academic outcomes when they have Black teachers, and that these effects are larger for boys than for girls (Gershenson et al. 2018). This finding suggests the importance of the role model effect and can be instructive for delivering other services to young men of color. Additionally, leadership or supervisory jobs tend to pay higher wages, provide better benefits, and offer more possibility for upward mobility. Finally, when people of color have hiring power, it increases the chances of people of color being hired into good jobs (Stoll, Raphael, and Holzer 2001).

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*“The conversation needs to shift from ‘I’m going to tell you what to do and how to get there’ to ‘I’m going to help you figure out your path to get there.’ My journey is my journey. Everyone’s journey is unique. Inspiration and sharing your story is important.”*

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Recognizing the value of empowerment, there has been strong movement to foster the agency and leadership of young men of color in recent years (table 4). 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. These efforts also seek to prevent replication of the power dynamics that have excluded young men of color from decisionmaking. And they hold the potential to be an important lever for change—not just because these efforts address the root causes of inequality, but because research

TABLE 4

**Empowering Young Men of Color to Lead: Promising Programs**

Program name	Location(s)	Focal population
Brothers on the Rise	Oakland, CA	Boys and young men of color
Brothers, Sons, Selves	Los Angeles, CA	LA Unified School District students
Compton Empowered	Los Angeles, CA	Ex-gang members
Encuentros Leadership	Los Angeles, CA	Boys of Latinx descent
Fresh Tracks	Nationwide	Young leaders
Native Youth Leadership Alliance	Nationwide	Native youth
NYC Men Teach	New York, NY	Men of color
Teens Take Charge	New York, NY	NYC high school students

suggests that advocacy, activism, and critical consciousness may help protect against the effects of oppression (Hage, Mason, and Kim 2010).

Many empowerment efforts are grounded in trainings, programs, and curricula that are culturally relevant and seek to build on young men of color's confidence, sense of self-worth, and leadership skills. **Brothers on the Rise** is a direct service and systems change organization serving young men of color in Oakland, CA. Its Brothers, Unite! model delivers a curriculum focused on positive male identity, confidence, leadership training, manhood training, conflict resolution, and coping skills. The organization works to put the young men in leadership positions through Lift a Brother Up, a program that involves a speaker's series, job training, two years of paid internships, and college preparation.<sup>26</sup>

**Encuentros Leadership** is a nonprofit in Los Angeles that provides culturally relevant training to support boys of Latinx descent in attaining optimal educational outcomes. Its Platicas program is a five-week intervention aimed at improving father-son communication skills in order to improve self-esteem and self-worth among participating young men.<sup>27</sup> Founded in 2009, the **Native Youth Leadership Alliance** is a yearlong leadership development support program that focuses on the assets and strengths of Native communities: cultural values, sacred traditions, and strong intergenerational relationships. The goal of the program is to empower members to be young change makers in Native communities.<sup>28</sup>

Programs that provide leadership and empowerment curricula to young men of color also build networks of peers and professionals into their programming. This facilitates access to mentors and the opportunity to serve in leadership positions. For example, **Fresh Tracks**, launched by the Center for Native American Youth at The Aspen Institute, offers three-to-five-day training programs that recruit

young leaders for cross-cultural leadership experiences aimed at improving community cohesion. The model is built on four foundational pillars: the power of personal narrative, leadership development, community organizing, and action planning. It also has a mentorship component.<sup>29</sup>

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*“Sometimes I just feel like I can’t take advantage of opportunities because I don’t have papers, so I feel like everyone is better than me because everyone else has an advantage at doing stuff—but I still try to work hard.”*

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Many young men of color are already leading advocacy efforts on behalf of their communities. Teens in New York City began hosting **Teens Take Charge** events in 2017 that provide a platform for high school students to share their experiences in the school system in such venues as public hearings, meetings, spoken word events, and news outlets. Teens Take Charge also facilitates education on present-day education inequity and its roots for its members to make them better equipped to solve these challenges. One of Teens Take Charge’s key policy foci is an “enrollment equity plan,” which proposes a three-pronged plan for meaningful integration in New York City high schools.<sup>30</sup>

On the other coast, **Compton Empowered**, born out of a 2014 meeting on gang intervention hosted by the mayor, is a community-based gang reduction initiative focused on empowering ex-gang members to take back their neighborhoods through peace treaties, unity activities, and employment activities.<sup>31</sup> **Brothers, Sons, Selves**, also in Los Angeles, was launched in 2011. Each year, a cohort of 25 students is chosen to plan and execute advocacy campaigns at the city, county, and state levels. The coalition’s first victory was persuading the Los Angeles Unified School District to adopt a “school climate bill of rights,” which led to a reduction in student suspension. Brothers, Sons, Selves is now a national model for groups seeking to build leadership skills among their young members by engaging them in advocacy campaigns.<sup>32</sup>

School systems, businesses, and nonprofit organizations have also joined in empowerment efforts, changing their practices to foster the inclusion of people of color in leadership positions. For example, **NYC Men Teach** is an NYC Young Men’s Initiative program that engages and recruits men of color to become teachers in New York City. The program is currently being studied for its effectiveness by the city’s Department of Education’s Student Diversity Advisory Group, which has outlined a specific goal of increased representation of nonwhite men in its teaching staff.<sup>33</sup>

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## BOX 1

### What We Heard from Young Men of Color in Two Cities

As part of data collection for this report, the project team conducted focus groups with young men of color in New York City and Austin. These focus groups ensured that the perspectives of young men of color contributed to the discussion of barriers and promising approaches presented in our research. The input of these young men was invaluable to this effort. Here, we summarize key takeaways.

**Having a group of peers with similar backgrounds and experiences can provide support and promote positive outcomes for young men participating in programs and efforts focused on increasing economic opportunity.** Several young men expressed that having a cohort of peers provides fellowship and facilitates learning and accountability. Conversely, a lack of peers with similar life experiences can hinder success in various settings. School districts and other local areas around the country often provide opportunities for a few students from communities of color to access affluent, predominantly white schools or programs. However, if young men of color lack peers who share similar life experiences in those schools and programs, those opportunities can be especially difficult to navigate, and such isolation can impede success. In contrast, when young men of color are provided with a peer group or cohort model, where groups of young men enter and progress through a program at the same time, the comradery can help facilitate success.

**Having role models that understand the experiences of young men of color within their communities can expand opportunity and success.** Several young men of color explained that a lack of knowledge in their communities about opportunities like alternative education models and programs focused on helping young men of color succeed limits young men's awareness of what might be available. They expressed that the networking aspects of their programs were particularly helpful in exposing them to careers and opportunities they had been unaware of. Many also emphasized that when these role model figures had similar lived experiences, it was easier to trust and depend on them. A few young men expressed a sense of duty to go back into their communities as role models and to help other young people get on their own paths to success. Examples of role models provided by the young men included program staff, mentors, and parents.

**Access to financial literacy and resources is important for economic success.** Some young men stressed the importance of gaining financial literacy skills for realizing economic stability. They also noted that a lack of economic resources and financial knowledge—such as how to budget, save, and invest effectively—perpetuates economic inequality, and that having access to these resources and knowledge could help young people from their communities achieve success.

**Racial bias continues to negatively affect young men's lives, but they persevere.** Most young men mentioned some experiences with racism and felt that made it harder for young men of color to succeed in education and beyond. Some young men felt that people like employers and teachers immediately judge them based purely on how they look or the neighborhood they come from. Generally speaking, the young men are determined to succeed despite the presence of racism in many aspects of their lives.

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## 4. Promoting Mental Health and Well-Being

In recent years, as part of greater nationwide awareness of mental health issues, there has been increasing focus on how the mental health outcomes of young men of color—which tend to be worse than those of their white peers—can be impacted by historical and ongoing racial trauma, trauma associated with conditions of poverty, and toxic masculine norms. 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. In response, there has been a growing movement to ensure that services provided to young men of color take into account these unique challenges in culturally responsive ways that address trauma and promote healing.

The mental health stressors faced by many young men of color are closely tied to economic opportunity. The relationship works in both directions: poor mental health puts individuals at increased risk for poverty and unemployment, and the conditions associated with poverty can beget stress, depression, and anxiety. Historical trauma, which refers to the intergenerational, cumulative emotional and psychological wounding by group traumatic experiences, has implications for the physical, social, and mental health of individuals and communities (Sotero 2006). Centuries of dehumanization by white oppressors has caused historical trauma in communities of color. This phenomenon is closely tied to African Americans, as an enduring result of the legacy of human trafficking and bondage, and to Native Americans, as an enduring result of mass murder, displacement, and forced assimilation through boarding schools. The resulting degradation of Native culture has contributed to increasing rates of depression, suicide, and substance use among Native youth (Barker 2013).

Similarly, racial trauma (also known as race-based traumatic stress), which refers to the impact of witnessing or experiencing racism, discrimination, and prejudice in one's own life, has profound impacts on mental health and can lead to a higher likelihood of aggression or substance use (Comas-Díaz 2016). Research has definitively linked the impact of racism to disparities in birth outcomes, mental health problems in children and adolescents, and involvement in the criminal legal system (Trent, Dooley, and Dougé 2019).

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*"I feel like there's still like a little bit of racism even though it's Austin—I work, and... there are a lot of people that come in and think that I'm not good enough, and they're rude for no reason."*

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The barriers to economic opportunity associated with racism can be compounded by the harmful effects of gender norms on boys and young men. Norms of “toxic masculinity” that link vulnerability and emotion with weakness can make young men feel confused and isolated. Conformity to rigid conceptions of masculinity makes young men more likely to exhibit depression and risky sexual behavior (APA 2018). Homophobia may magnify discrimination faced by young men of color who are LGBTQ, putting their health and mental well-being at heightened risk. A 2019 Human Rights Campaign survey of LGBTQ youth found that 80 percent of Black LGBTQ youth “usually” feel depressed or down, and 90 percent have experienced racial discrimination (Human Rights Campaign 2019).

Economic hardship and associated circumstances can also lead to poorer mental health outcomes. Longitudinal research indicates that children from low-income families experience higher rates of parent-reported mental health problems and higher rates of unmet mental health needs than their higher-income counterparts (Wadsworth and Achenbach 2005). Additionally, poverty affects mental health through various social and biological mediators, including stressful life events, toxin exposure, and greater likelihood of child abuse and neglect (Simon, Beder, and Manseau 2018).

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*“You have the potential to grow if you’re given the support.”*

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In response to growing awareness of the heightened mental health stressors that young men of color face, educators, child care providers, mental health practitioners, and other direct service providers have been shifting toward culturally responsive models of care in recent years. Two types of approaches—those that are trauma-informed, and those that are healing-centered—have been at the forefront of this movement. Both aim to facilitate interaction with young men of color in ways that recognize the effects of trauma and try to mitigate its prolonged effects. Both also encourage providing support and treatment in a holistic way, rather than in a way that isolates symptoms.

Key tenets of a trauma-informed approach include creating a safe environment; conducting activities with trustworthiness and transparency; fostering peer support and collaboration; empowering those being served; and recognizing cultural, historical, and gender issues (SAMHSA 2014). Trauma-informed approaches have gained traction at the local, state, and national levels; entire school districts, child welfare systems, and juvenile justice systems are offering trainings in and implementing trauma-informed practices.

Healing-centered approaches go a step further than trauma-informed care. First, they recognize that trauma is often a collective experience, rather than an individual one. Second, they promote civic engagement and empowerment as key a form of healing. Third, rather than simply treating symptoms, they address the root causes of trauma by focusing on how to foster lasting well-being. As a result, healing-centered approaches seek to promote possibility and hope by building on collective strengths.<sup>34</sup>

In recent years, national initiatives and nonprofit organizations have increasingly adopted healing-centered strategies in their work with young men of color (table 5). These approaches are asset-driven and seek to improve young men of color’s perceptions of self-worth, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging by harnessing the protective effects of agency (Evans and Prilleltensky 2007). They also celebrate and encourage practicing culture and using native language, which have been established as important protective factors against negative outcomes for some people of color (McIvor, Napoleon, and Dickie 2009; Nasim et al. 2011).

At the national level, the **Campaign for Black Male Achievement’s Health and Healing Strategies** program and **Forward Promise** are leading networks of communities implementing healing-centered strategies for boys and young men of color. The Health and Healing Strategies program provides caregivers with healing-centered engagement strategies, recruits and trains Black men to facilitate Wellness Mentoring Circles, implements culturally responsive teacher training and professional development, and provides resources for strategic communication on asset-based narrative change. The Forward Promise national program office provides grants to nonprofits, offers technical assistance, and disseminates research to those working to improve the lives of boys and young men of color.

**TABLE 5**  
**Promoting Mental Health and Well-Being: Promising Programs**

Program name	Location(s)	Focal population
Boys with Braids	Nationwide	Boys and their families
CBMA's Health and Healing Strategies	Nationwide	Boys and young men of color
Forward Promise	Nationwide	Boys and young men of color
Native American Community Academy	Albuquerque, NM	Native students
Native Education Raising Dedicated Students (WeRNative)	Nationwide	Native youth
YBMen Project	Jackson College, Eastern Michigan, Michigan State, Ohio State	Young black men
Youth Guidance’s Becoming a Man (BAM) program	Nationwide	Young men

Also on a national scale, the [Young Black Men Project](#) uses social media to deliver mental health education and social support to young Black men. The content is culturally sensitive, age-appropriate, and gender specific; in a comparison-group study, members of a project Facebook group reported a decrease in depressive symptoms while members of the comparison group reported no such decrease.<sup>35</sup>

Nonprofit organizations also deliver valuable, targeted mental health resources to Native American youth via online platforms that reach broad audiences. [Boys with Braids](#) runs social media platforms aimed at indigenous boys and their families that share about the sacredness of hair and why boys, men, and elders wear braids; foster a sense of pride; and educate the public to interrupt teasing. [WeRNative](#) is a comprehensive online health resource launched in 2013 for Native youth, by Native youth, that provides content and stories about the topics that matter most to them. The site contains over 330 health and wellness pages, including a section devoted to “My Mind,” which features articles on such topics as depression, mental health difficulties, and historical trauma.<sup>36</sup>

Schools and school systems are also involved in delivering mental health services to young men of color. The [Native American Community Academy](#), founded in 2006, is a public-charter school in Albuquerque that educates students from more than 37 tribes. As part of its core curriculum, the school teaches personal wellness in all grades (6–10), in addition to providing a range of wellness and support services and hosting one of two First Nation’s Community Healthsource-School Based Health Centers.<sup>37</sup> Launched in 2001, the [Becoming a Man \(BAM\)](#) program operates in Chicago Public Schools, Boston, Los Angeles County, and King County, creating spaces for young men to receive support, express themselves, and develop the social and emotional skills they need to succeed. A 2016 randomized controlled trial found that BAM reduced violent crime arrests by 50 percent, reduced total arrests by 35 percent, and improved school engagement for male Chicago Public Schools students (Heller et al. 2017).

## 5. Preparing for Higher Education and Careers

Increasing economic opportunity for young men of color requires that they 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, as discussed, the legacy of racist policies and practices causes young men of color to be disproportionately likely to live in low-income neighborhoods that limit access to quality education, jobs, and professional connections that would prepare them for careers. There is a long tradition of government and community programs working to help young men of color increase skills and knowledge through education and training programs; it is important to continue to build on



these models to make sure young men of color have access to programs and supports than have been shown to be effective. More recent models have incorporated innovative approaches to increase participation, retention, and success by structuring programs in ways that take into account the specific circumstances of young men of color and by providing individualized guidance and mentorship to help them better understand and make choices about their career options.

Early employment experience and postsecondary education increase economic opportunity for young men of color. Being employed as a teenager provides income and work experience that can help gain future employment (Edelman and Holzer 2013), and having some postsecondary education or credentials is increasingly important for most good paying jobs (Carnevale et al. 2018). The MBK Task Force highlighted the importance of early work experience in the context of closing racial equity gaps, noting that it can help young men of color “break out of a cycle of poverty, unemployment, crime and incarceration,” and that such opportunities are especially valuable when they develop “critical career skills within manageable hours” (My Brother’s Keeper Task Force 2014, 48, 46).

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*“With people from our background, they don’t know a lot of people who have graduated college and been successful. The people in our lives haven’t done those things.”*

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However, young men of color face various barriers to securing opportunities that would prepare them for good careers. As presented earlier in this report, young men of color are less likely to be employed and graduate from high school and are more likely to be disconnected from both school and work than their white peers. As a result, they are less likely to have access to guidance and information on career options and how to plan and prepare, particularly if they are not in school (Bryant, Harris, and Bird 2013). Some young men of color are also forced to choose between preparing for their futures (through continuing their education) and supporting the immediate financial needs of their families. One study found that 70 percent of Latinx youth either did not finish high school or did not pursue postsecondary education so that they could work and support their families (Lopez 2009).

Additionally, finding jobs and opportunities can be difficult for students whose immediate families lack the social capital and personal experience to help them (Wiener and Mincy 2014). Research has shown the importance of these “social networks” in helping youth receive information about career options and job and internship opportunities (Holzer 2009). Employers also tend to rely heavily on

personal connections and social networks in hiring, severely limiting the access that applicants of color have to certain well-paying fields, such as medicine, law, and finance.<sup>38</sup>

*“Last year I was in a job and I only saw one [other] Black man. These spaces are always dominated by white people.”*

Promising education and training programs promote the success of young men of color by preparing them for careers while addressing their unique experiences and challenges. Three approaches stand out: allowing participants to combine education and training with paid work; promoting program retention by integrating culturally appropriate supports; and utilizing mentors and career navigators who increase the knowledge, networks, and exposure that young men of color have to education and career options. Some of the programs using these approaches target young men of color specifically, and others target low-income youth more generally (table 6).

First, to address the tradeoff between continuing schooling and earning an income, some schools and academic programs serving high-school age youth are trying to encourage completion by better meeting the needs of working students. One example is **Texans CAN Academies**, a network of 14 tuition-free public charter schools across the state that provides services like day care in combination

TABLE 6  
Preparing for Higher Education and Careers: Promising Programs

Program name	Location	Focal population
Alaska Native Science & Engineering Program (ANSEP)	Alaska	Alaska Native students
Black Male Initiative	City University of New York	Black and Latinx male students
Georgia Youth Apprenticeship	Georgia	Youth
Las Artes Arts and Education Center	Pima County, AZ	Disconnected youth
Project MALES	Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio, TX	Latinx secondary and postsecondary students
Texans CAN Academies	Texas	High school students
The Fellowship Initiative	Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, and New York City	Young men of color
Year Up	Nationwide	Urban young adults ages 18–24

with a shorter school day. Another example is [Las Artes, Arts & Education Center](#), in Pima County, Arizona, that couples a 30-hour per week GED preparedness course with community art projects and job-readiness skills and pays students a weekly stipend to attend school, aimed to offset the cost of transportation, clothing, and school supplies.

Other youth-targeted career preparation programs offer paid internships or apprenticeships to allow youth of color to earn income while they gain skills. For example, [Year Up](#) is a program serving urban young adults ages 18 to 24 with a high school diploma or equivalent. The program provides weekly stipends to participants while they complete six months of full-time customized training in the IT and financial service sectors followed by six-month internships at major firms. Early evaluation findings show large positive impacts on earnings for participants (Fein and Hamadyk 2018). Youth apprenticeships (combining classroom and on-the-job learning) have also been expanding in recent years. They allow youth to earn a paycheck and provide access to adult mentors and supervisors who teach occupational and employability skills, offer guidance, provide immediate feedback on performance, and are attentive to specific interest and aptitudes and tailor training accordingly (Lerman and Packer 2015). Georgia has a long history of investing in work-based learning for youth and has recently expanded its [Georgia Youth Apprenticeship](#) program statewide. Results show that a majority of youth apprentices earn an industry-recognized credential and are offered full-time employment after completion (Lerman, Kuehn, and Shakesprere 2019).

Education and training programs that specifically target young men of color are also increasingly integrating culturally appropriate supports into their programming to promote retention. One example is the [Alaska Native Science & Engineering Program](#) (ANSEP). ANSEP is a multistage initiative designed to prepare and support Alaska Native students from middle school through graduate school to succeed in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) careers. ANSEP offers intensive academic support, exposure to industry, and the opportunity to participate in a learning community incorporating Alaska Native cultural identity. The program was also designed to effect systemic change to improve the climate for Alaska Natives in the educational system (Bernstein et al. 2015). Additionally, the [Black Male Initiative](#) at City University of New York provides academic and social support to increase participation and retention in college for “students from groups that are severely underrepresented in higher education, particularly African, African American/Black, Caribbean and Latino/Hispanic males.”<sup>39</sup> The initiative recruits young men of color into college programs and offers culturally competent peer-to-peer mentoring and academic supports. It also has a stated goal of institutionalizing its activities at CUNY and absorbing itself into departments’ regular programming. Outcomes data shows that GPA,

retention, and credit accumulation are higher for black and Latinx men participating in the initiative than those who do not.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, career-oriented programs are connecting participants with mentors who understand the circumstances and experiences of the participants they are serving in an effort to increase trust and relatability. **Project MALES (Mentoring to Achieve Latino Educational Success)**, which launched in 2010 at the University of Texas at Austin, couples research focused on the experiences of Latinx men in secondary and postsecondary education with a mentoring project that aims to cultivate social capital via an engaged network of Latinx men at the university and in the Central Texas community. Project MALES works with the Austin CAN Academy, providing mentorship opportunities for its students. Additionally, **The Fellowship Initiative**, sponsored by JPMorgan Chase, is a program in Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, and New York that targets young men of color from economically distressed communities in high school with the mission of supporting high school completion and preparing them to excel in college. In addition to providing academic support, the program includes activities such as leadership training, mentors, and college preparation advice.

## 6. Building Wealth

Wealth is accumulated over generations, passed down from parents to children largely through investments in higher education and homeownership (Pfeffer and Killewald 2018). It captures all an individual's economic assets and debts, making it a stronger indicator of economic well-being than income alone. Yet the enduring effects of government policies that have intentionally protected white families' wealth and prevented wealth accumulation in families of color have distributed wealth far more unequally than income (Brown, Montes, and Hassani 2019). This means that young men of color are more likely than their white peers to be locked into a cycle of poverty and debt, unable to invest in their futures. However, in the past several years, bold approaches have emerged for closing the racial wealth gap. They build on a host of strategies intended to create wealth at the community level by providing young men of color and their communities with the resources to unleash their potential.

Wealth is not only an indicator of economic well-being; it is also a key driver of economic opportunity for young men of color. Wealth affects families' ability to buffer financial shocks, to buy and remain in their homes, to live in opportunity-rich neighborhoods, and to send their children to college. Yet what makes wealth—and its inverse, debt—so critical to economic opportunity is the way that it can multiply within and across generations. Assets allow people to obtain credit and earn interest, which enables them to make investments in more wealth-building assets, such as education, a home, or a

business. And debt can compound, driving people into poverty and preventing them from accumulating wealth through savings and investments. Wealth also persists across generations because it affects the power structures that determine how resources and opportunity are allocated. As a result, many low-income families and families of color inherit little or no wealth. Intergenerational wealth transfers account for 72 percent of the wealth of the top 10 percent of income earners but only 3 percent of the wealth of the bottom 50 percent.<sup>41</sup> White families are also three times as likely to receive inheritance as Black families (Zewde 2018). Finally, people of color often have less access to capital than their white counterparts, which limits their ability to start businesses, weather financial shocks, and build wealth from business ownership (Klein 2017).

As rising income inequality has taken center stage in recent years, concern over the racial wealth gap has also entered onto the national agenda. Current efforts and proposed solutions to closing the wealth gap tend to focus on increasing the wealth of Black people, though many would benefit all people of color (table 7). Others target young men of color specifically.

The first set of responses has been local and include the work of community development financial institutions (often referred to as CDFIs) and initiatives focused on entrepreneurship for people of color. Though the community development field has received criticism for failing to meet the needs of people of color because it targets low-income people more broadly, some institutions have explicitly focused on closing the racial wealth gap in recent years. For example, The **Chicago Community Trust** laid out a strategic plan to close the racial wealth gap between “Latinx, Black and White households that forms the root of our communities’ most significant challenges.”<sup>42</sup> To do this, the trust is advancing policies and practices aimed at combating predatory lending, increasing incomes (like the earned income tax credit), increasing access to responsible banking products and tools, combating debt-incurring practices

**TABLE 7**  
**Building Wealth: Promising Programs**

Program name	Location(s)	Focal population
Baby bonds	Nationwide proposal	Low-income families
Chicago Community Trust	Chicago, IL	Chicago community
Child savings accounts	Oklahoma, Illinois, Florida (for example)	All families
Emerging Entrepreneurs Loan Program	Minnesota	People of color, people with disabilities, people with low incomes, veterans, and/or women
Prosperity Now’s Racial Wealth Divide Initiative	Des Moines, IA; Minneapolis and St. Paul, MN; Portland, OR; Seattle and Tacoma, WA	Black people

through stronger regulations and consumer protections, and reforming the collection of punitive fines and fees in the criminal legal system.

Further, community development financial institutions remain an important vehicle through which entrepreneurs of color can access low-risk capital (Theodos et al. 2017). Minnesota’s **Emerging Entrepreneurs Loan Program**, which was launched in 2017, makes grants to community development financial institutions that are lending to Twin Cities–area businesses owned and operated by people of color, people with disabilities, people with low incomes, veterans, and women. As of 2019, the program had awarded funds to 113 qualifying projects for a total of \$3 million in loans, which attracted an additional \$19 million in financing.<sup>43</sup>

Additionally, with its campaign to promote entrepreneurship, My Brother’s Keeper has ushered in a wave of community-based and philanthropic efforts focused on giving young men of color the resources to use their talents to innovate and drive economic growth in their communities. **Prosperity Now’s Racial Wealth Divide Initiative** has funded projects that promote entrepreneurship, financial capability, and building high-impact nonprofits led by people of color in six cities across the country. Nonprofit and member organizations such as Prosperity Now and the Association for Enterprise Opportunity are also increasingly tracking and releasing metrics on Black-owned businesses in cities and states across the country, promoting business ownership as a wealth-building strategy (AEO 2017).

Although community wealth-building strategies show promise in making a dent in racial wealth disparities, many advocate that changes in public policy are the only way to meaningfully close the gap. One policy that has recently received attention for its potential to narrow wealth inequality is a national “baby bond” program, such as the one proposed by Senator Cory Booker’s 2020 presidential campaign. As envisioned, **baby bonds** would be federally funded and managed trusts given to all children at birth. The government would contribute to this interest-bearing fund every year until the child turns 18, with lower-income children receiving larger amounts. Once the child reaches age 18, the money could be used for certain purposes such as education, homeownership, and retirement. A recent study evaluating Senator Booker’s proposal found that the benefits would largely go to Black and Latinx children and that baby bonds would nearly eliminate the Black-white wealth gap (Zewde 2018).

Baby bonds are similar to children’s savings accounts (CSAs), which already exist in many states and help families—particularly those with low income—save for their children’s futures. All CSAs use seed funding and incentive structures to grow savings and require that the savings be spent on postsecondary education, homeownership, or small business development, but the structure of CSAs differs across states. Some leverage existing financial products such as 529 college savings accounts as

the vehicle for saving, and in some states, seed and matching funds come from a combination of public and private sources (CFPB 2018). Evaluations of CSAs have produced promising results, finding that they are associated with better educational outcomes for children who receive them (Elliott and Beverly 2011; Elliott, Jung, and Friedline 2010). However, because CSAs have not been piloted at the national level and are typically seeded with a smaller initial value than the baby bonds in Senator Booker's plan, CSAs do not offer the same promise in closing racial wealth gaps that baby bonds do.<sup>44</sup>

## 7. Tailoring Interventions to the Local Context

Since the mid-20th century, place-based interventions have been a popular strategy used by government, philanthropy, community-based organizations, and research institutions to tackle urban distress. This approach stems from an acknowledgement that localities have different demographics, infrastructure, resources, politics, and dynamics, and therefore have unique needs that preclude one-size-fits-all solutions. Recognizing the efficacy of this approach, My Brother's Keeper launched the **MBK Community Challenge** in 2014, setting off a wave of local leadership and action across the country dedicated to closing opportunity gaps for boys and young men of color. The 250-plus cities, Tribal Nations, towns, and counties who have joined the challenge have built on and complemented existing place-based approaches serving young men of color across the country.

Targeted efforts to increase economic opportunity at the local level are critical to improving the outcomes of young men of color and their communities. The immediate environment in which young people grow up determines their exposure to resources, supports, and information that can foster positive economic outcomes, such as schools, jobs, role models, and knowledge of career pathways. It also determines exposure to risks related to negative outcomes, such as crime, gang involvement, and environmental hazards. And finally, a community's economic and civic vitality depends on the success of all its residents, which necessitates investment in young men of color.

However, as described earlier, the enduring legacy of racist policies and practices has created conditions in which young men of color are much more likely than their white peers to live in areas of concentrated poverty that limit economic opportunity. By investing in these neighborhoods, place-based strategies directly combat concentrated poverty and its effects. Recent research also bolsters the case for local intervention targeting specific racial subgroups, as disparities between white young men and young men of color are large not just *across* neighborhoods, but *within* them (Chetty et al. 2018).

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*“One barrier is your environment. If you grow up in a poor place, you don’t know anything else outside of it. If you don’t go to a program that helps you, you won’t try to leave, and you’ll do what people have done before you.”*

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In recent years, place-based approaches focused on increasing economic opportunity for young men of color have largely adopted a collective impact framework for designing and carrying out local interventions. This framework recognizes that people’s needs are multifaceted, simultaneous, and compounded, and it rests on the idea that these needs can be most effectively and efficiently addressed by breaking down siloes between service providers and introducing cross-sector collaboration, resource sharing, and knowledge exchange between government, educational institutions, philanthropy, employers, and community and faith-based organizations.<sup>45</sup> Some place-based approaches are targeted to young men of color and others target people of color more generally, but all are working toward closing local equity gaps through innovative interventions and policy reforms. They typically operate through national networks, are formed through action-oriented commissions and roundtables, or are integrated into local government (table 8).

The **Campaign for Black Male Achievement (CBMA)** is a national membership network of over 2,700 organizations and 5,200 individuals committed to improving life outcomes of Black men and boys (Dickerson et al. 2018). Launched in 2008 and an independent nonprofit since 2015, CBMA takes a city-by-city approach, increasing awareness of the movement for Black male achievement through strategic

**TABLE 8**  
**Tailoring Interventions to the Local Context: Promising Programs**

Program name	Location(s)	Focal population
Alliance for Boys and Men of Color	Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, Texas	Boys and young men of color
Campaign for Black Male Achievement	Baltimore, Detroit, Louisville, Milwaukee, Oakland	Black men and boys
Cities United	Nationwide	Black men and boys
The Ferguson Commission and Forward through Ferguson	Ferguson, MO	Ferguson, MO, community
Greater Buffalo Racial Equity Roundtable	Buffalo, NY	Buffalo, NY, community
Our Best	Seattle, WA	Young Black men
Young Men’s Initiative	New York, NY	Black and Latinx young men



communications and convenings. It also monitors efforts across the nation through a city index, which assesses cities based on five indicators: demographics and data, commitment to Black men and boys, CBMA membership, presence of national initiatives supporting Black men and boys, and targeted funding for Black men and boys.<sup>46</sup> CBMA is also partnering with on-the-ground leaders by directing resources to scale local impact in five Promise of Place cities: Baltimore, Detroit, Louisville, Milwaukee, and Oakland.

CBMA and the National League of Cities also support **Cities United**, an initiative launched in 2011 focused on eliminating the violence in American cities related to Black men and boys. The 92 mayors currently participating in Cities United receive assistance with planning and implementing solutions, instituting innovative approaches, and understanding how and where to reconfigure resources. Each mayor intends to reduce homicides in their city by 50 percent by 2025. Another leading organization is the **Alliance for Boys and Men of Color** (ABMoC), which was launched in California in 2011 and now operates in nine states. The ABMoC network includes over 200 advocacy organizations and leaders focused on transforming state and local policies that negatively impact boys and young men of color. Since its launch, ABMoC has influenced policy changes nationwide and passed more than 100 bills in the California state legislature, including banning suspensions for “willful defiance” in kindergarten through third grade classrooms, new job training programs for formerly incarcerated people, and ending the use of solitary confinement for young people incarcerated in California youth prisons and jails.<sup>47</sup>

Place-based interventions have also been designed and carried out by action-oriented roundtables and commissions, which serve as hubs making change city- or countywide. In the wake of the police shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, in Ferguson, Missouri, the governor asked 16 regional leaders to study racial strife and inequity in the community and provide a path forward. This group, **the Ferguson Commission**, incorporated the input of more than 3,000 community members to deliver an “unflinching report containing specific, practical policy recommendations for making the region a stronger, fairer place for everyone to live” (Ferguson Commission 2015, 14). The report’s findings led to the creation of **Forward through Ferguson**, a nonprofit responsible for implementing the report’s 189 “calls to action.” Six of the 47 signature priority calls to action focus on youth, including supporting early childhood education, increasing access to child care, reforming school discipline policies, ending hunger, revising the school accreditation system, and creating an innovative education hub to coordinate efforts to improve schools. All calls to action have been implemented at some level, but the level varies widely (Forward through Ferguson 2018).

Another example is the [Greater Buffalo Racial Equity Roundtable](#), which comprises 37 members and partners with 210 local organizations. In 2016, the Roundtable released a report that set forth an eight-point agenda and five coalitions, including a coalition on boys and young men of color. The coalition created a 100-member youth leadership council called “Breaking Barriers” to advocate for racial equity, social justice, and policy change.

Local governments are also leading place-based interventions. New York City’s [Young Men’s Initiative](#) (YMI), launched in 2011, is a public-private partnership aimed at addressing disparities in education, employment, health, and justice among Black and Latinx young men between the ages of 16 and 24. YMI connects the city’s young men of color to organizations and opportunities and works to change local policy in various areas, including accountability, school discipline, and hiring discrimination against people with a criminal record. In 2015, held its first annual MBK/YMI Community Convening to align its work with MBK priorities, which brought together YMI partner agencies, youth, and local leaders to share and discuss new strategies. Finally, [Our Best](#), launched in 2017, is Seattle’s first-ever initiative focused specifically on outcomes for the city’s young Black men. Specific goals focus on educational attainment, job acquisition, positive health outcomes, mentoring, and reduced interactions with the criminal legal system.

# Dismantling Structural Racism through Policy Change

Programs and initiatives to improve economic opportunity for young men of color are making important change in the lives of young people. However, many scholars and advocates, including all the experts we spoke with, made clear that significant and sustained progress requires the intentional deconstruction of racist policies and practices that depress economic opportunity for these young men. Research and community-based organizations have worked to elevate knowledge of structural racism and its consequences for years, with limited political support.

However, a series of high-profile police shootings of Black men in the past decade has increased attention to racial inequities from people living outside communities of color, and unprecedented political pressure to address these gaps has engendered policy change at the federal, state, and local level. These policies seek to make the criminal legal system, schools, the labor force, health care, and neighborhoods more equitable by addressing disparities rooted in racism at the historical, systemic and institutional, and individual levels. Many target all people of color or low-income families generally, and some target young men of color specifically. In this section, we discuss a sample of relevant policies. The impacts of the policy changes have not all been rigorously evaluated, and some show mixed evidence, but they show promise for increasing economic opportunity for young men of color.

## Reforming the Criminal Legal System

As described earlier, as a result of discriminatory policies and practices in the latter half of the 20th century, communities of color face mass incarceration. Today, discrimination in sentencing and enforcement are rampant, and extended formal supervision after completing jail time contributes to a cycle of incarceration (Schanzenbach et al. 2016; USSC 2017).<sup>48</sup> Incarceration is a major barrier to economic success for young men of color, dramatically increasing the likelihood of unemployment and inhibiting youth development in ways that make them more likely to reoffend (Couloute and Kopf 2018; Janetta and Okeke 2017). The effects of criminal legal system involvement extend beyond the individual, impeding neighborhood economic development and increasing the likelihood that boys with an incarcerated parent will exhibit physical aggression, delinquency, and behavioral problems (Haskins 2016; Irvin-Erickson et al. 2017).

In the past decade, significant reforms of the criminal legal system have taken place at all government levels and show promise to reduce system involvement among young men of color. Notably, leadership by those directly affected by mass incarceration has played a growing role in advancing these reforms (Sturm and Tae 2017). The first major set of reforms has sought to address inequities on the front end of incarceration. These efforts have included New York City’s dramatic curtailment of its stop-and-frisk program and limitation or abolition of the use of cash bail in such states as New Jersey, New York, and California.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, since the police shooting in Ferguson in 2014, 34 states and Washington, DC, have created laws for police body cameras in an effort to restore trust between communities and law enforcement.<sup>50</sup> Early research on body camera technology found that it made officers less likely to engage in force and receive citizen complaints, but more recent studies have had mixed findings (Lawrence and Peterson 2019; Yokum, Ravishankar, and Coppock 2017). Critical reforms have also occurred in school discipline practices, which are discussed in the next section.

A second set of reforms has been implemented to reduce the duration of criminal legal system involvement for those convicted of crimes and mitigate the negative long-term effects of incarceration. In recent years, nearly every state has passed laws to reduce prison populations, and 32 states have reduced both their crime and imprisonment rates since 2013 (Bragg 2018). State legislatures, including in California, Florida, Michigan, and Oklahoma, have adopted sentencing reforms that include improving parole reviews, limiting incarceration for parole violations, and allowing sentencing reforms to be retroactive.<sup>51</sup> In 2018, Florida restored felons’ right to vote, and San Francisco became the first city to eliminate fees for convictions on those exiting the criminal legal system.<sup>52</sup> And several states have adopted “clean slate” legislation that automatically seals criminal records for certain crimes after a set period of time.<sup>53</sup> The First Step Act, passed by Congress in 2019, is the first major federal criminal legal system reform legislation in more than two decades. It expands job training and other programming aimed at reducing recidivism rates among federal prisoners, expands early-release programs, and modifies sentencing laws, including mandatory minimums for nonviolent drug offenses.<sup>54</sup> However, the reforms it introduced are less extensive than the ones many states have already implemented.<sup>55</sup>

## Addressing School Discipline Disproportionality

Large racial and gender disparities in school discipline practices fuel what is often called the “school-to-prison pipeline,” the funneling of Black male students from public schools into the criminal legal system (GAO 2018). During the 2013–14 school year, Black students in kindergarten through 12th grade were 3.8 times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than white students, and boys represented 74 percent of expulsions. The problem is acute in preschool settings, where disciplinary action is three

times more common than in K–12 settings (Stegelin 2018). Such practices can have detrimental impacts on children’s futures, as students who are suspended or expelled are up to 10 times more likely to drop out of high school, experience academic failure, or face incarceration than those who do not experience school discipline (APA 2008; Lamont et al. 2013; Petras et al. 2011)

In 2014, *My Brother’s Keeper* drew attention to disproportionate school discipline practices with the release of the “Rethink Discipline” guidelines. Also at the federal level, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 allows states’ accountability systems to use measures of school climate and discipline as indicators of success, and the Child Care and Development Block Grant reauthorization of 2014 allows states to use funds to support professional development around promoting positive social and emotional development and reducing expulsions for young children (GAO 2018).

Although the Trump administration rescinded the Obama-era guidance in 2018, many school districts across the country have moved to restorative approaches to discipline policy in the last five years. Success has been uneven, but a few positive examples stand out. Between the 2012–13 and 2016–17 school years, Washington State schools experienced a 14 percent reduction in the ratio of Black to white students disciplined.<sup>56</sup> Maryland and California have cut the use of exclusionary discipline practices in half in the past decade but have struggled to close racial gaps.<sup>57</sup> States and districts have also implemented a host of innovative strategies to address suspension and expulsion in early childhood settings. For example, Colorado updated its child care rules to emphasize the importance of social-emotional development, and programs must now outline how decisions are made and what steps are taken prior to a suspension or expulsion (ACF 2016). And in 2016, Arkansas expanded existing non-expulsion policies and implemented the BehaviorHelp system to provide resources to teachers experiencing behavioral challenges in the classroom (Arkansas DHS 2018).

## Addressing Employment Discrimination against People with Criminal Records

Young men of color with prior involvement in the criminal legal system face acute difficulty in obtaining employment that stems from their criminal record and their race. In a study of over 3,000 employers in four metropolitan areas, nearly 20 percent reported they would “definitely not” hire an applicant with a criminal record, and 42 percent indicated they would “probably not” do so (Flake 2015). Discrimination against people with criminal legal system involvement magnifies persistently high hiring discrimination against people of color, particularly those who are Black and Latinx (Quillian et al. 2017). In effect, even after young men of color have served their time, they continue to be punished.

In recent years, states and cities have recognized such barriers and passed legislation intended to increase the chances of employment for people who have been involved in the criminal legal system. Fourteen states and dozens of cities have enacted laws that limit discrimination against people with a criminal record in public employment, and five of those states have extended the checks to the private sector (Flake 2015). The most popular version of this type of reform is “ban-the-box” laws, which remove the conviction history question from job applications and delay background checks until later in the hiring process. Though several states were early adopters, President Obama’s 2015 endorsement of the policies triggered their expansion. Thirty-five states have now passed ban-the-box laws (Avery 2019). Despite some research that ban-the-box policies reduce the likelihood of employers calling back or hiring Black and Latinx men without criminal records, recent research focusing on public employment disputes those findings and shows that the laws generally raise the probability of employment for those with convictions (Craigie, forthcoming; Doleac and Hansen 2017).

## Ensuring Access to High-Quality Health Care

Although a strong body of research shows that healthy people are more likely to obtain and retain employment (Antonisse and Garfield 2018), America’s long history of denying people of color access to quality health care has contributed to large racial disparities in health outcomes, particularly for Black and Native American people (American Psychological Association Working Group 2018).<sup>58</sup> As of 2018, a disproportionately large percentage of young men of color remained uninsured: only 72 percent of Native American young men, 77 percent of Latinx young men, and 83 percent of Black young men have health insurance coverage, compared with 91 percent of AANHPI and white young men.<sup>59</sup> Native American young men face acute challenges in accessing health care because Congress has chronically underfunded the Indian Health Service, which is the primary source of health care for many tribal members (Center for Native American Youth 2016).

Since it was signed into law in 2010, the Affordable Care Act (ACA) has been critical in increasing health insurance coverage, access, and utilization for all Americans, but particularly for people of color (Artiga and Orgera 2019). The key way that states have expanded access to health insurance for low-income residents under the ACA is through the optional expansion of Medicaid eligibility to adults with incomes up to 138 percent of the federal poverty level. Since January 2014, 36 states have chosen to undertake this expansion.<sup>60</sup> The ACA also expanded coverage by allowing young adults to remain enrolled in their parents’ health insurance coverage until they turn 26. However, even for those with insurance, income is highly correlated with the quality and accessibility of care that people receive.<sup>61</sup>

# Creating High-Opportunity Neighborhoods

As discussed, young men of color are more likely than white young men to grow up in segregated, low-income neighborhoods that offer limited economic opportunity due to the enduring effects of structural racism. Today, 45 percent of poor Black children live in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, while only 12 percent of poor white children live in those types of neighborhoods (Iceland and Hernandez 2017). Segregated neighborhoods also preclude contact between racial groups, which can foster racial stereotyping and prejudices (McArdle and Acevedo-Garcia 2017).

Considerable policy movement on fair housing in the past decade has implications for housing and school segregation. Included in the 1968 Fair Housing Act was the public obligation to “affirmatively further fair housing”—the implications of which have been the source of vast public debate. The Obama administration pushed for a more robust interpretation of government’s responsibility, requiring communities to take meaningful action to overcome segregation and combat discrimination. The Trump administration has suspended the rule indefinitely, making it more difficult for communities to effectively combat housing discrimination, though some states have responded proactively. For example, California has enacted its own fair housing law mirroring the now-suspended federal rule (National Housing Law Project 2019).

Three major federal place-based initiatives have been implemented to help facilitate the flow of resources into low-income neighborhoods. Since 2010, the **Choice Neighborhoods** program has provided funds to help communities with distressed public or HUD-assisted housing through a comprehensive approach to neighborhood transformation. Evaluations of the first five grants revealed increased stakeholder collaboration and encouraging levels of support service use by low-income residents but raised concerns about the effects of relocation on children and families when public housing was replaced by mixed-income housing (Derian 2016; Pendall et al. 2015). Also implemented in 2010, the **Promise Neighborhoods** grant program aims to transform neighborhoods of concentrated poverty into neighborhoods of opportunity by fostering a coordinated approach to supporting children and families from birth through college and careers. Evidence on the program’s effectiveness is sparse, but case studies of five sites reveal some early successes and challenges (Hulsey et al. 2015). Finally, **Opportunity Zones**, introduced by the Economic Development Administration in 2017, are tax incentives meant to spur investment in low-income communities. Despite the incentives’ potential, experts have expressed concerns that the current design of the program could exacerbate inequality because it lacks adequate targeting and accountability mechanisms (Theodos 2019).

# Considerations for Moving Forward

Much work remains to secure equitable economic opportunity for all young men of color. This report has discussed some of the many ongoing efforts working toward that important goal. In this final section, we highlight general considerations for all those interested in continuing this work, based on the research and analysis we conducted for this report.

- **Federal, state, and local policymakers, social justice advocates, and all interested in increasing economic opportunity for young men of color can move the needle by supporting policies that recognize and dismantle structural inequities.** We have highlighted programs and initiatives making important change, but significant and sustained progress requires policy change that addresses the role of past and current racist systems in shaping disparate outcomes. Policies that support early childhood interventions, close school discipline disparities, narrow the racial wealth gap, and reduce incarceration show particular promise for increasing economic opportunity for young men of color.
- **Service providers and program directors serving boys and young men of color should approach increasing economic opportunity comprehensively and consider the varying circumstances and needs of these young men.** For young men of color, economic opportunity is shaped starting early in life and is affected by many systems, institutions, and personal experiences. This does not mean that every effort must address all factors, but programs serving young men of color should understand, acknowledge, and take into account the different history, experiences, and challenges facing different groups of young men of color and the way they compound and intersect. Collective organizing and advocacy across communities of color has potential to build resources while helping young men of color understand each other's cultures and shared experiences.
- **Organizations involved in efforts to increase economic opportunity can benefit from sharing results and best practices.** Recent efforts have been undertaken to create new and expand existing communities of practice to help advocates, practitioners, researchers, and funders learn from one another and implement best practices. At the local level, mayor's offices and task forces can serve as powerful conveners. Collaboration can be particularly useful for undertakings such as implementing disaggregated data collection and analysis across public systems, determining who to partner with, implementing cross-cutting approaches, and making policy change.



- Philanthropy and government should continue to invest in approaches to increase economic opportunity and monitor progress.** Philanthropic investment in efforts supporting boys and young men of color have increased substantially in the last decade, particularly for those focused on Black boys and young men. However, funding remains insufficient, and similar efforts targeted at Latinx, Native American, and AANHPI young men are nascent. The **Executive Alliance for Boys and Men of Color** and the **Association of Black Foundation Executives** are promising examples of organizations focused on targeting philanthropic investments toward young men of color. Additionally, monitoring of progress and evaluation of existing efforts allows for effective targeting of policy, program, and advocacy efforts. Data and research should distinguish between the needs of young men of color by not only race and ethnicity, but also by subgroups, such as immigrant status, sexual orientation, and nationality. Exemplar organizations engaged in this type of work include **RISE for Boys and Men of Color**, **Experts of Color Network**, **PolicyLink**, the **Southeast Asia Resource Action Center**, and the **National Congress of American Indians Policy Research Center**.
- Policymakers, practitioners, advocates, and researchers should recognize young men of color as experts on the issues that their communities face and as leaders in driving solutions.** Young men of color themselves have played an increasingly prominent role in leading and supporting efforts to improve economic opportunity in their communities. Research has also demonstrated that young men of color benefit from interacting with teachers, program staff, and mentors that look like them. And young men of color in our focus groups indicated their desire to go back into the communities they are from after they achieve success and make sure other young men have the knowledge and resources they need to be able to succeed. It is critical to support and encourage the empowerment of young men of color in spaces where they have traditionally been marginalized, as they represent the next generation of leaders. This is critical to rebalancing race- and class-based power structures and giving communities of color agency in the decisions that affect their lives.

As a nation, we have a collective responsibility to increase economic opportunity for young men of color. The past decade has equipped us with additional knowledge of what works, what is promising, and a broader and deeper coalition of groups working toward this goal. As we move into the 2020s, we must continue to build on progress made to ensure that young men of color can thrive and prosper, as the well-being of our society depends on it.

# Appendix

The authors would like to thank the experts who gave their time to be interviewed for this study.

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Victor Saenz, University of Texas at Austin

Margaret C. Simms, Urban Institute

Erik Stegman, Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute

Kent Wong, UCLA Labor Center

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# Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The authors' working definition of economic opportunity is based on a definition of empowerment developed by Amartya Sen and formalized in Alsop and Heinsohn (2005).
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