

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a white jacket, smiling and holding a baby. The baby is wearing a bright blue jacket and a blue and white striped hat. They are outdoors at a playground, with a wooden tree trunk and colorful play equipment visible in the background.

# Strengthening Supports for Young Parents and Their Children: A Focus on Low-Income Rural and Suburban American Families

Center  
for the  
Study  
of  
Social  
Policy

Strengthening Supports for Young Parents and their Children:  
A Focus on Low-Income Rural and Suburban Families

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The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) works to secure equal opportunities and better futures for all children and families, especially those most often left behind. Underlying all of the work is a vision of child, family, and community well-being which serves as a unifying framework for the many policy, systems reform, and community change activities in which CSSP engages.

Center for the Study of Social Policy

1575 Eye Street, Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20005  
202.371.1565 telephone

50 Broadway, Suite 1504  
New York, NY 10004  
212.979.2369 telephone

1000 North Alameda Street, Suite 102  
Los Angeles, CA 90012  
213.617.0585 telephone

Website: [www.cssp.org](http://www.cssp.org)

Email: [info@cssp.org](mailto:info@cssp.org)

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## Executive Summary

As a nation, we have long prided ourselves on being a good place to raise a family, with ample opportunities to own a home, provide for basic needs and succeed economically. In recent years, persistent economic distress and the lack of opportunity for good jobs has significantly diminished the potential for young adults to provide a stable, nurturing environment for a family during the years when childbearing often begins. In 2013, almost half of all young children lived in low income families (\$48,500 for a family of four), with about a fourth in families below the poverty line (\$24,250). Even though the birthrate continues to decline, teens and young adults give birth to almost a million babies each year. Importantly, many of these young parents reside far from the urban areas where service systems have been developed to provide support. Rural areas continue to lag behind the rest of the nation as a slow economic recovery is taking place, with poverty rates increasing. Suburban areas are increasingly challenged as well, with pockets of poverty rapidly developing in these previously middle-class enclaves.

At the same time, recent findings from neuroscience provide new urgency to supporting young parents and their children more effectively. A baby's experiences in the earliest days and months of life can have lifelong developmental impact. Living with chronic economic challenge, coupled with other significant adversity, can change the function of the human brain, beginning in early childhood and continuing into adulthood. The full development of essential decision making and self-regulation skills is still emerging as young adults enter their late twenties. Even though these findings have not yet been fully incorporated into policy and practices, it is clear that young parent families require multiple avenues of support to manage the demands of providing a stable environment and consistent, positive relationships with their babies while they are also navigating their own developmental stage along with the stresses of a dismal economic situation and the urgent need to take positive steps for the future.

To find out more about supporting young parent families in settings that are far from the usual targets of anti-poverty programs, CSSP sought out examples of innovative strategies in rural areas and suburban pockets of poverty. We scanned nationally for programs that employ an intentional two-generation approach to meeting the needs of young children and their parents, integrate services from multiple service providers and actively seek systems-level action for better housing, employment, education, health and mental health services for their participants. This report details six promising programs representative of current work in these underserved communities. While each one is unique, several themes emerged across the programs:

- a stunning lack of consistent resources over time, even though programs continue to operate through a mix of collaboration and local support
- strategies adapted to the needs and resources of the local community rather than adoption of existing models in other places
- acknowledgement and encouragement of the vital role of grandparents and peers in providing multiple kinds of support for young families
- a developmental approach for both young parents and their children at the same time
- coordination of multiple service providers gathered together through personal connections and a history of collaboration
- ongoing advocacy to garner additional resources through existing systems intended to provide support for young parent families such as child welfare, early care and education, job training and others
- a significant lack of resources for substantial evaluation and tracking of results over time that make it even more difficult to get and sustain funding

There are clear similarities between the programs included in this report and other two-generation approaches now being explored nationally. Analysis of the strategies in these resource-poor contexts also highlights two areas for further exploration in as two-generation work moves forward: 1) Including fathers, grandparents and other third generation kin as an integral part of the

## Executive Summary

approach can strengthen support around mothers and children and potentially lead to longer term success. 2) Focusing more intentionally on the impact of racial, health and educational inequity as part of two-generation analysis and approaches can lead to more tailored strategies in diverse communities.

Advocates, policymakers and foundations have important opportunities to consider to meet the challenge of expanding services for young parent families in rural and suburban pockets of poverty. These include: widespread information sharing about the need for support in these areas; focusing on local leaders and innovative strategies by creating multiple platforms to highlight and share their work; using policy and practice changes to support a more coherent developmental approach across service sectors; integrating new neuroscience findings into workforce strategies for young adults; and improving technology access in rural areas to better connect families with each other and information they need.

Program / Area served	Program focus
<b>CLIMB Wyoming</b> <i>(10 counties in Wyoming)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Job training and placement program serving single mothers of all ages</li> <li>• Therapeutic model focuses on mental health and the challenges of parenting as participants transition to self-sufficiency</li> </ul>
<b>Fostering Hope Initiative</b> <i>(Polk, Marion and Yamhill Counties in Oregon)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community-level collective impact initiative serving families and their young children in high poverty neighborhoods; includes targeted outreach to pregnant teens and young parents</li> <li>• Residents select multiple strategies to build social connectedness, empower local leadership and connect families with resources and services</li> </ul>
<b>Discover Together</b> <i>(Grundy County in Tennessee)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrated system of programs targeting multi-generational impact on social connectedness and resilience</li> <li>• Programs include a family co-op for parents/caregivers and their children from birth to age five; summer program for children; and a learning lab for students and parents</li> </ul>
<b>Lamoille Family Center</b> <i>(Lamoille County in Vermont and 5 towns in surrounding counties)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family center providing a system of care for children and their families through a variety of programs and services</li> <li>• Operates Families Learning Together, an independent high school serving expectant and parenting young people by providing job-readiness and high school completion opportunities</li> </ul>
<b>Pascale Sykes Foundation</b> <i>(Atlantic, Cumberland, Salem and Gloucester Counties in Southern New Jersey)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• South Jersey Strengthening Families Initiative includes interagency networks and strong partnerships focused on strengthening family self-sufficiency in rural, impoverished communities</li> <li>• County coalitions award grants to local groups to achieve results around family well-being in their service areas</li> </ul>
<b>The Prosperity Project</b> <i>(Jefferson County in Colorado)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interagency collaboration between Jefferson County's Department of Human Services, Department of Health, community groups and county schools to serve low-income families in a suburban county with increasing poverty rates</li> <li>• Recruits families at Head Start and connects them with Jefferson Prosperity Project coaches who assist both parents and their children through trainings, goal setting and participation in a social network of other families</li> </ul>

# Introduction



As a nation, we have long prided ourselves on being a good place to raise a family, with ample opportunities to own a home, provide for basic needs and succeed economically. The assumption was that each succeeding generation would have similar opportunities as they raised families of their own. In recent years, persistent economic distress in some areas and the lack of opportunity for good jobs has significantly diminished the potential for young adults to raise a family during the years when childbearing often begins. Rural areas lag behind the rest of the nation as a slow economic recovery is taking place, and suburban areas are increasingly challenged as well, with pockets of poverty developing in these previously solidly middle-class enclaves. This leaves a significant part of a generation of young people unable to create stable living conditions for themselves and their children.

When today's adolescents and young adults become parents, the need for them to succeed is urgent. In recent years, our knowledge about the impact of experiences in the earliest days and months of a child's life on their lifelong health and development has expanded rapidly. Over the past decade and a half, we have come to understand that living with chronic economic challenge, coupled with other significant adversity, can actually impact the development and function of the human brain beginning in early childhood and continuing long into adulthood. Helping young parents, still in the midst of a critical developmental period themselves, provide a nurturing environment for their babies can be challenging, especially in areas where needs are great and resources and support are scarce.

Since the 1960's, a variety of public policies and programs have attempted to ease the impact of poverty on young parents and give low-income children a good start, primarily in urban neighborhoods. Other programs have focused on addressing the challenges of teen parenting, also often focused in urban schools and neighborhoods. Less is known about the few programs and policies designed to assist young parents and their children living in rural areas and in suburban communities where poverty is growing rapidly.

This report brings together several strands of emerging knowledge about today's young parents and their children in rural and suburban poor areas. It examines current data about young parent families and the context of rural and suburban poverty, new information about child and young adult development, and new approaches for helping young parents. Promising work in several different rural and suburban communities, discovered through a national scan, illustrates creative approaches to serving these families that may inspire further innovation in other parts of the country. The report concludes with themes from the innovative programs, linkages to two-generation strategies emerging nationally and suggestions for policy, program and practice based on learning from the scan.

## PART 1 America's Young Families



Who are America's young parent families? This question is not as easy to answer as it may seem. Fully describing the nation's young parent families requires a look at data across a variety of sources. Taken together, these data illustrate the need for a more effective approach to supporting vulnerable young families in our rural and suburban areas, as well as in our cities.

### One Million Babies...

Recent data reveal that adolescents and young adults in the United States give birth to over one million babies each year, although birth rates in these groups continue to decline. The data also reveal that about half of these babies are born into low-income families. Importantly, many of these young parents reside in rural communities and newly challenged suburban neighborhoods while our service systems continue to be more geared toward addressing economic and other challenges in an urban context.

### Births to Young Women

Roughly 21.5 million women between the ages of 15-24 live in the United States.<sup>1,2</sup> In 2012, these young women gave birth to a total of 1.22 million babies: about 305,000 babies born to adolescents between 15-19 of age and about 917,000 babies born to young women between the ages of 20 through 24.<sup>3</sup>

The U.S. Census Bureau tracks birth rates by cohort according to age, race and other variables; several national organizations analyze and publish the data.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, the birth rate for "...teenagers aged 15-19 declined 10% in 2013 from 2012, to 26.5 births per 1000, another historic low for the nation; rates declined for teenagers in nearly all race and Hispanic origin groups. Birth rates also declined for women in their 20s to record lows in 2013."<sup>5</sup>

The data also reveal important differences by race and ethnicity. For the cohort of women and girls ages 15 through 19 in 2013, there were 42 births per 1,000 women of Hispanic ethnicity; 39 births per 1,000 African-American (non-Hispanic) women, and 19 births per 1,000 White women.<sup>6</sup>

### Poverty and Young Parent Families

US Census Bureau data reveal that for the year 2010 there were 1,746,000 *households* with children headed by a young adult between 15 and 24 years of age across all income levels. Six in ten of these households (59%) were single parent families, headed most often by women (54%). Thirty seven percent (37%) were married-family households.<sup>7</sup> These data are important because economic and life stressors are generally more prevalent for families headed by a single parent.

Some of these young parent families are also included in the 5% of US households considered to be "multi-generational," meaning that a parent, child and grandchild reside in the same household (regardless of who is considered the head of household).<sup>8</sup> The rate of multi-generational households varies by race and ethnicity. In 2012, 3% of White non-Hispanic households<sup>9</sup> were multi-generational, compared to 6% of Asian households and 8% of Black or Hispanic households.<sup>10</sup>

The National Center for Children in Poverty provides regularly updated information about young children who live at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) as well as those at or below 100% of the FPL. The former group is often referred to as "low-income" or "near poor." Other analyses look at families in "deep poverty," defined as at or below 50% of FPL.

Among all young children in America in 2013, nearly one in two (48%) lived in low-income families. One in four (25%) lived in families at or below FPL. "The percentage of young children living in low-income families (both poor and near poor) has been *on the rise*—increasing from 43% in 2007 to 48% in 2013."<sup>11</sup> In 2009-2010, roughly 48% of teen mothers were living in poverty, with those who lived with their families

2015 Federal Poverty Level (FPL) guideline:	50% of FPL: Families in Deep Poverty	100% of FPL: Families in Poverty	200% of FPL: Low-Income Families
Family Size:			
Family of 4 with 2 children	\$12,125/year	\$24,250/year	\$48,500/year
Family of 3 with 2 children	\$10,045/year	\$20,090/year	\$40,180/year
Family of 2 with 1 child	\$7,965/year	\$15,930/year	\$31,860/year

of origin significantly less likely to live in poverty (34%) than those living on their own (63%).<sup>12</sup> Overall, though, multi-generational households (those that include at least one child, parent and grandparent) were more likely to be living below FPL (18%) than households overall (11%) in 2012.<sup>13</sup>

The poverty rate among young parents varies dramatically by race and ethnicity as well. Sixty percent of Hispanic teen mothers lived in poverty in 2009-2010, compared to 48% of non-Hispanic Black teen mothers and 39% of non-Hispanic White teen parents.<sup>14</sup>

Among all children under six years old in the U.S, nearly seven in ten (69%) of African American children, Native American children (69%) and Hispanic children (66%) live in families at or below 200% of FPL. This compares with one in three (34%) White children under the age of six years who live in low-income family circumstances. These cross-race/cross-ethnicity differences are even starker when we consider young children living at or below FPL. While just 15% of White children lived at or below FPL in 2013, 44% of African American children, 35% of Hispanic children and 41% of Native American children lived in poverty.<sup>15</sup>

*Parents Too Soon*

About 305,000 adolescents in America gave birth in 2012, and while the teenage birth rate continues to decline, the challenges facing very young parents and their children—especially in rural areas—require continued policy and community attention.

Early parenthood can hinder young parents from completing their education, prevent access to jobs with good pay and result in chronic economic challenge. At the same time, these parents—not yet complete in their own development—are faced with meeting the needs of *their* young children.<sup>16</sup> A recent review of teenage pregnancy and parenthood by the National Conference of State Legislatures presents sobering data on the life trajectory of these young parents *and* their children.<sup>17</sup>

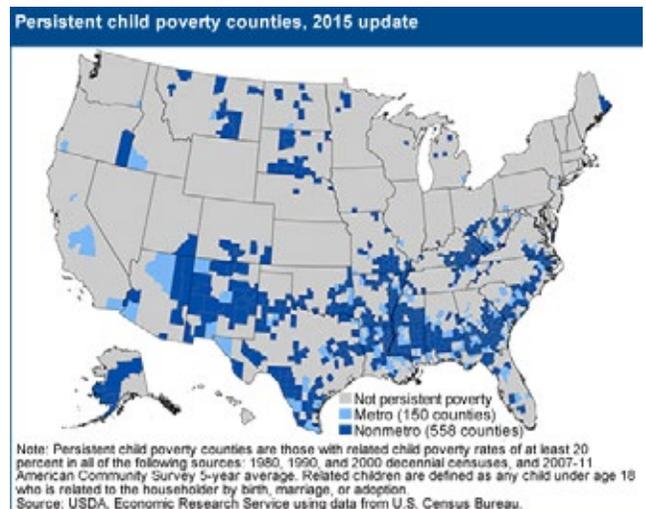
Key data from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy’s report, “Teen Childbearing in Rural America,” confirm the need to focus on young parents and their

children in a rural context. In 2010, the rural county teen birth rate was 43 per 1,000 girls as compared with 33 per 1,000 girls nationwide.<sup>18</sup> The teen birth rate was higher in rural counties than in either suburban counties or urban centers, regardless of race or ethnicity. While the teen birth rate declined overall between 1990 and 2010, this decline was not as great among teens in rural counties (a 32% decline over 20 years) as in urban centers (49% decline) and in suburban counties (40%).

**Geography and Poverty: The Importance of Place**

*Rural Poverty*

The data tell a sobering story about the changing face of poverty in America, especially for young children living with young parents in rural and newly poor suburban communities. Recent analyses published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service (ERS) reveal the prevalence of poverty in urban and rural communities. For children under six years old, the poverty rate in non-metro areas was 30.3 percent in 2013, compared to 23.9 percent in metro areas.<sup>19</sup> Non-metro child poverty was also disproportionately deep, with more children living in families with income less than half that of the poverty threshold. For non-metro children under age six, the deep poverty rate was 14.2 percent in 2013, compared with 11 percent for metro young children.<sup>20</sup>



# The Impact of Teen Parenting

(Adapted from the National Conference of State Legislatures)

<b>High School Completion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 30% of teenage girls who drop out cite pregnancy or parenthood (36% for Hispanic girls; 38% for African American girls)</li><li>• Only about half of all teen moms finish high school</li></ul>
<b>Impact on Their Children</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Children perform less well on school readiness indicators such as communication, social skills and cognition than children of older mothers</li><li>• Children perform less well in school, score lower on standardized tests, are retained in a grade twice as often</li><li>• Only about 2/3 graduate from high school</li></ul>
<b>Economic Well-being</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Two-thirds of unmarried teen mothers are poor</li><li>• About 25% enter the welfare system within 3 years of giving birth</li><li>• Over 7 in 10 teen mothers are single (not married or cohabitating) a year after the birth of the child</li><li>• Teen fathers are also often poor and frequently pay less than \$800/year in child support</li></ul>
<b>Foster Care Youth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Nearly half of girls in foster care become pregnant by age 19; 75% report becoming pregnant by age 21</li><li>• Half of young men aging out of foster care at age 21 report having gotten someone pregnant</li></ul>

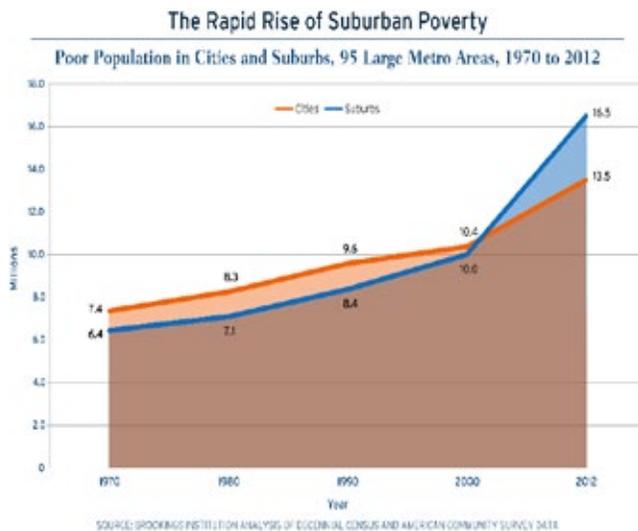
Source: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. (2010). "Preventing Teen Pregnancy is Critical to School Completion," Briefly...

Non-metro versus metro differences in child poverty are also striking when “persistent poverty” is analyzed. Persistent child poverty counties are those where 20 percent or more of the children in the county have been in poverty over the past 30 years.<sup>21</sup> Based on Census data from 1980-2011, ERS identified 708 counties with persistent child poverty (22 percent of all U.S. counties). These persistently poor counties are overwhelmingly non-metro (558 or 79 percent).

### The Rise of Suburban Poverty

Over the past decade, America’s suburban areas have seen a spike in the number of families living with economic challenges. This is related to the movement of lower-income families out of cities into the suburbs in search of better jobs and better schools, the crash of the housing and mortgage market and the impact of the Great Recession that began in 2007.<sup>22</sup>

Reporting in 2009, the Brookings Institute noted that between 2000 and 2009 “...the suburban poor population grew almost five times as fast as the city poor population, so that suburbs are now home to almost 1.9 million more poor people than their primary cities.”<sup>23</sup>



Reporting in 2014, Brookings described the growth of “concentrated disadvantage.” Concentrated disadvantage refers to *distressed neighborhoods*, with at least 40 percent of residents below poverty, and *high-poverty neighborhoods*, with at least 20 percent of residents living in poverty.<sup>24</sup> Over the period from 2000 to 2012, “the number of suburban poor living in distressed neighborhoods grew by 139 percent—almost three times the pace of growth in cities.”<sup>25</sup>

### Challenges in Addition to Poverty

While young adults in all locations continue to face significant economic insecurity even after the end of the Great Recession, rural areas and newly poor suburban neighborhoods offer

special challenges. In rural areas, these persistent economic problems are compounded by a stunning scarcity of services that are often underfunded when they do exist, long travel times between community population centers and limited public transportation systems. The social isolation of rural families and a significant lack of Internet access in homes add to the challenges of building a system of support for young parents with young children.<sup>26</sup> Suburban neighborhoods where poverty is growing face some similar challenges as in rural communities and some challenges that are quite different.<sup>27</sup>

### Suburban Challenges: A Case Example

“Washington DC is a perfect example. The city is gentrifying and pushing the poverty out to the suburbs where public transportation is not as good and services are spread out. Even if you keep all of the services in one central place, it’s hard for people to access them. Jobs, training programs and wraparound services are mostly located in the inner-cities. It’s hard to find foundations who are focused on the suburban setting, and local governments have a hard finding the funding to support these program on their own.”

Uma Ahluwalia, Director of Montgomery County, Maryland Department of Health and Human Services

Perhaps the biggest problem in suburban areas is a lack of awareness among local leaders and service providers of the presence of disconnected families headed by young parents in their midst. As a result, local governments and foundations are only beginning to respond to the growing presence of families in need of much greater support. In addition, most suburban areas do not have the infrastructure often available in cities, with limited public transportation and fewer services in place for struggling families.

As much as rural areas are challenged, they also have assets that may point the way to strategies for improving outcomes for young parents and their children. In rural areas, “everyone knows everyone” and when “...outreach workers come from the community, they are aware of local expectations and can create strategic partnerships designed to promote outreach and effective engagement.”<sup>28</sup> Many rural communities also pride themselves on taking care of their own. Similarly, many rural areas have some kind of interagency collaborating structure already in place as well as the informal connections among people in a smaller community.

While some of these assets may also be in place in some suburban communities with pockets of economic challenge, the “invisibility” of the problems of young parents and their children there remains a barrier to creating better support.

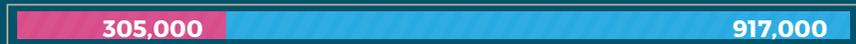
# Challenges of Poverty & Early Parenting



IN THE U.S. IN 2012, THERE WERE

# 1.22M

## BABIES BORN TO WOMEN AGES 15-25



25%

WERE BORN TO  
ADOLESCENT GIRLS  
15-19 YEARS OLD

75%

WERE BORN TO  
YOUNG WOMEN  
20-24 YEARS OLD

## BIRTH RATES AMONG RACIAL GROUPS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS AGES 15-19 IN 2013



39 / 1000  
BLACKS



42 / 1000  
HISPANICS



19 / 1000  
WHITES

## OF THE 1.75 MILLION HOUSEHOLDS LED BY 15-24 YEAR OLDS



59%

SINGLE PARENT  
HOUSEHOLDS



54%

FEMALE-LED  
HOUSEHOLDS



37%

COUPLES-LED  
HOUSEHOLDS

## THE DECLINE IN TEEN BIRTH RATE 1990-2010



32%  
IN RURAL  
COUNTIES



49%  
IN URBAN  
CENTERS



40%  
IN SUBURBAN  
COUNTIES

# g in Rural and Suburban Environments

FEDERAL  
POVERTY  
LEVELS  
(FPL)

\$24,250  
FAMILY OF  
**FOUR**  
WITH TWO  
CHILDREN

\$20,090  
FAMILY OF  
**THREE**  
WITH TWO  
CHILDREN

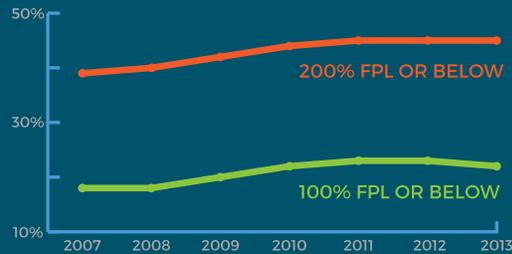
\$15,930  
FAMILY OF  
**TWO**  
WITH ONE CHILD

## POVERTY AMONG CHILDREN IN THE US

 **25%**  
AT OR BELOW FPL

 **48%**  
LIVE IN LOW INCOME FAMILIES  
(BELOW 200% FPL)

## CHILDREN IN LOW-INCOME AND POOR HOUSEHOLDS

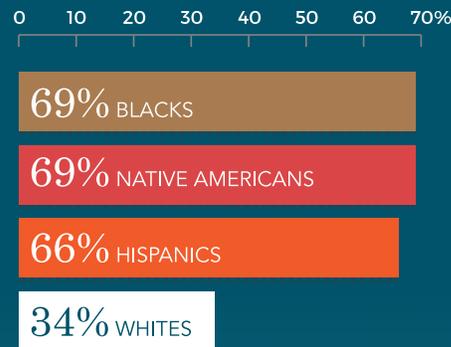


## CHILDREN UNDER AGE 6 AT OR BELOW FPL

 **23.9%**  
IN METRO AREAS

 **30.3%**  
OUTSIDE OF  
METRO AREAS

## CHILDREN IN HOUSEHOLDS ≤200% FPL BY RACE



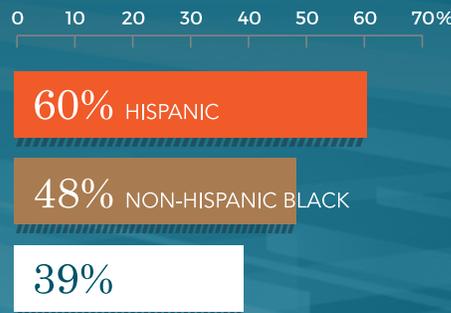
## TEEN PARENT POVERTY

 **48%**  
OF TEEN MOTHERS  
WERE LIVING IN  
POVERTY IN 2009-2010

 **34%**  
WHO LIVED WITH  
THEIR FAMILIES  
WERE POOR

 **63%**  
WHO LIVED ON  
THEIR OWN  
WERE POOR

## TEEN MOTHERS WHO LIVE IN POVERTY



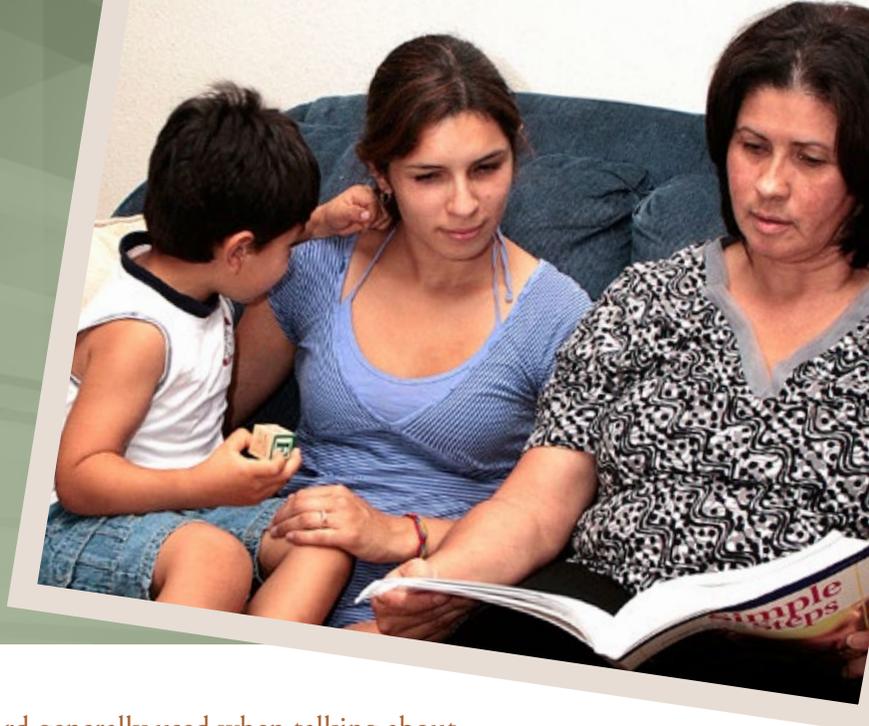
## TEEN BIRTH RATES

 **43 per 1000**  
IN NON-METRO AREAS

 **33 per 1000**  
IN METRO AREAS

## PART 2

# Developmental Science Takes Center Stage



Just two decades ago, “neuroscience” was not a word generally used when talking about young children’s development. Even the *idea* of brain science informing public policy and decision-making was rarely on the early childhood radar screen.

Today’s developmental science brings a new urgency for new approaches to young children and young parents as well. Perhaps the most important scientific finding of the past two decades is the power of chronic stress and adversity to change the architecture and functioning of a young child’s developing brain.<sup>29</sup> The early impact of toxic stress can leave its imprint on a child’s brain architecture and genetic makeup, capable of impacting health and well-being over a lifetime and across generations, but this knowledge is only beginning to be integrated into the understanding of early childhood and reflected in program and policy.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, strategies for young adults have not yet caught up with the science that shows adversity’s impact on the development of basic skills and functions of both children and adults—executive functioning and self-regulation skills essential to manage the events and experiences of their lives effectively.<sup>31</sup>

### Brain Development in the Early Years

From birth through the first five years of life, a young child’s brain grows at an astounding rate. This process begins before birth, and during the first few years of life, 700 to 1,000 neural connections are created *every second*. Simple neural connections form first, followed by more complex brain circuitry.<sup>32</sup>

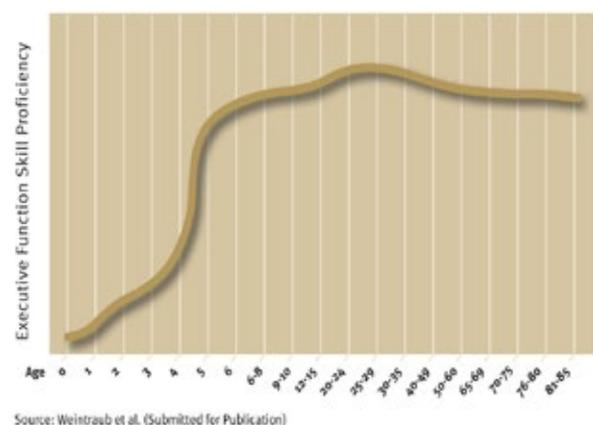
While genetic background sets a framework for future development across many domains,<sup>33</sup> young brains grow within the context of everyday experiences with the adults who care for them. Beginning at birth, parents and other key caregivers engage in a “serve and return” relationship with infants and young children, which promotes the full range of children’s early development and builds the positive bond between parent and child that can buffer the child from harmful impacts of stress and adversity.<sup>34</sup> For many families, this powerful process of exchange—looking,

smiling, cooing, talking and cuddling—occurs naturally. In other families, especially those living in circumstances of stress and adversity, young children may not experience as much of this nurturing back and forth, which in turn makes the risk of social, emotional and cognitive developmental delays or impairment more likely.

### Brain Development in Adolescence and Young Adulthood

While brain development in children’s very early years is very important, brain growth among young people between the ages of 15 and the mid-twenties is also critical; during this period, essential executive function and self-regulation skills are growing rapidly.

Executive Function Skills Build Into the Early Adult Years



These are skills that young adults need to plan, manage, monitor and regulate their behaviors in such basic contexts as school, with peers and in employment settings. From the perspective of a young parent, they are fundamental skills necessary to find and get a job, manage household expenses and take care of young children. While learning these skills begins in early childhood, the growth of executive function skills is dramatic during the later teenage years and into the middle twenties, a period when many young people become parents, with over a million young women giving birth each year.

Adolescent behavior is also influenced by dramatic hormonal changes, stressful life transitions and a still-developing emotional impulse system. While parents often shake their heads over adolescent behavior and ask: “What was he (or she) thinking?” the National Institute of Mental Health describes the teenage brain as ‘still under construction’ because the parts of the brain responsible for “top-down, controlling impulses, and planning ahead—the hallmarks of adult behavior—are the last to mature.”<sup>35</sup>

When teens and young adults have babies, the fact that their own essential life management and self-regulation skills are still under development can add to the natural stress that comes with their new role and responsibilities as parents. While becoming a parent is a challenging experience for anyone, more serious challenges arise when adolescents and young adults, often disconnected from school or jobs, become parents. These young parent families require multiple avenues of support to manage the demands of providing a nurturing environment and consistent, positive relationships with their babies while also navigating the stresses of a dismal economic situation and the urgent need to take positive steps for the future.

### The Impact of Scarcity, Stress and Adversity

Teen and young adult parents and their children are both in critical periods of development and are vulnerable to suffer negative effects from the challenges they encounter. Recent findings from developmental science tell us that some of the greatest threats they face come from the stress of scarcity, toxic stress and adverse childhood experiences. Young parents who have experienced trauma and adversity as young children themselves may find it particularly difficult to nurture and form strong bonds with their babies, thus creating an intergenerational cycle of developmental challenges.

#### *Stress of Scarcity*

A substantial body of research reveals that many children who grow up in poverty experience poorer outcomes than their economically advantaged peers. Described by some as the “stress of scarcity,” it is now clear that living with chronic poverty can create changes in brains of both children and adults that negatively impact their health, mental health and

cognitive functioning. The impact of these biological changes is most significant for children in their early years when brain growth is most rapid and neural architecture is expanding and solidifying.<sup>36</sup>

The everyday stress of scarcity affects parents’ ability to seek help or to provide their children with the positive experiences and nurturing support that is so critical for optimal child development.<sup>37</sup> Parents whose time and energy are focused on meeting basic needs—and whose stress response systems may be activated due to past and current adversity—can struggle to engage in the consistent, nurturing interactions their children need or to buffer their children from stressful experiences.

#### *Toxic Stress*

The human brain is “wired” to respond to our physical, social and emotional environment. When a person feels threatened or highly stressed, brain chemicals and stress hormones are sent throughout the body, allowing the individual to respond to the threat.<sup>38</sup> Heart rate and breathing speeds up, and the brain is on high alert. The popular literature often refers to these responses as fight, flight or freeze. If this stress-response system is activated frequently or over a prolonged period, particularly during phases of rapid development, basic brain functions are endangered. This “toxic stress” can make individuals vulnerable to poorer outcomes and behavioral and physiological disorders throughout their lives. This includes “impairments in learning, memory, and the ability to regulate certain stress responses.”<sup>39</sup> With repeated exposure to toxic stressors, the “flashpoint” when these stress hormones activate is lowered, and it takes less and less frustration or agitation to activate the flight, flight or freeze response.

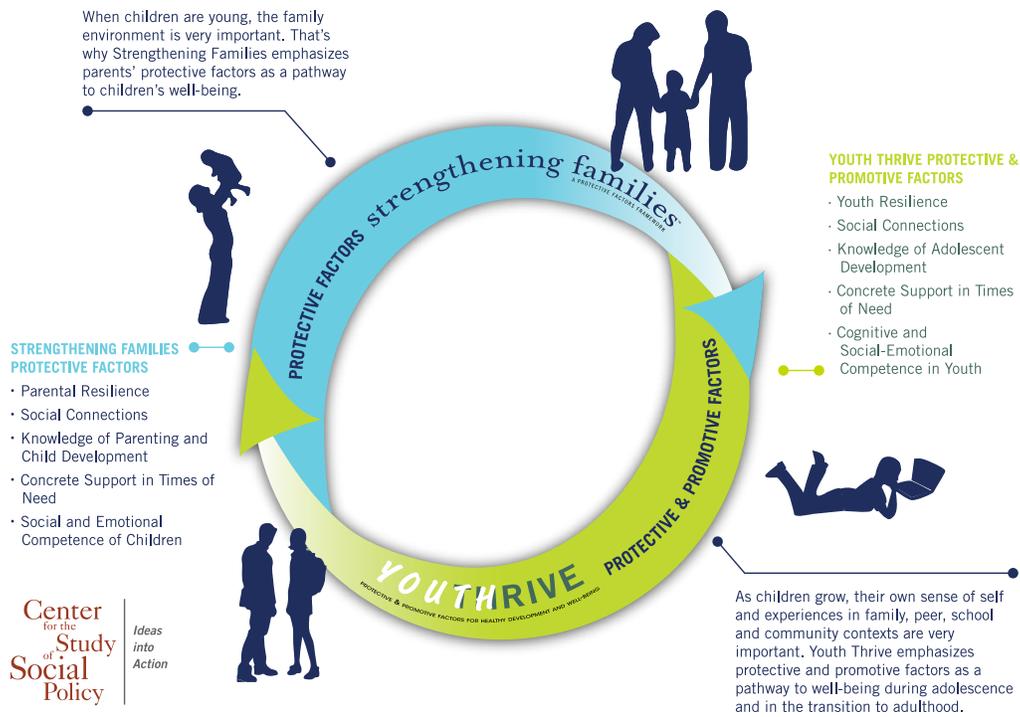
The Center for the Developing Child at Harvard has developed a simple taxonomy of stress to explain the distinctions among normal and healthy stress, tolerable stress and “toxic” stress.<sup>40</sup>

**Positive stress** e.g. Meeting new people, entering a new child care setting, getting immunized, overcoming fear of animals

**Tolerable Stress** e.g. serious illness or death of a loved one a frightening incident, an acrimonious parental separation or diverse, persistent discrimination

**Toxic Stress** e.g. events that are “chronic, uncontrollable, and/or experienced without children having access to support from caring adults”

## Protective/Promotive Factors Across Development



### Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Adding to the neuroscience findings about how the brain develops, the foundational study of “adverse childhood experiences” (ACEs)<sup>41</sup> conducted by Kaiser Permanente and the federal Centers for Disease Control from 1995 through 1997 dramatically showed the critical (and often lifelong) impact of trauma and adversity early in the lives of children.

This research has shown that the cumulative impact of multiple adverse experiences can lead to significant health and mental health problems over an individual's lifetime. “ACEs have been linked to a range of adverse health outcomes in adulthood, including substance abuse, depression, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and premature mortality.”<sup>42</sup> It is important to note that even though the findings demonstrate the urgency of avoiding adverse childhood experiences, a high number of ACEs is not predictive of negative outcomes for every individual. More research is needed to understand the mechanisms of resilience (such as a nurturing adult that buffers the impact of adverse experiences) that allow many children to experience potentially toxic stressors and go on to thrive.

### A Developmental Framework for Young Parents and Their Children

The brain science findings call for more urgent innovations to help both young children and their families, and strategies

from multiple sectors have begun to emerge. Research about the characteristics of families that promote children's optimal development and buffer them from harmful stress and traumatic experiences has helped programs across the country respond to the new scientific findings.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) has synthesized developmental research into a framework of protective and promotive factors that identifies and defines the characteristics that make youth and families more likely to thrive and less likely to experience poor outcomes across the lifespan. Through the Strengthening Families and Youth Thrive initiatives, CSSP has identified the protective and promotive factors that can help families promote the optimal development of young children and assist youth to realize their full potential. These protective and promotive factors are aligned with the new brain research and have the advantage of providing guidance about what families, communities, programs and systems can do to promote a young parent's development as a youth and simultaneous transition into a positive parenting role.<sup>43</sup> The frameworks can also serve as a common language across service sectors—a useful tool as health, education, employment, economic opportunity, family support and other sectors work together to achieve better outcomes for both children and their families.

# Research-Informed Protective and Promotive Factors for Young Children and Adolescents

(Center for the Study of Social Policy)

## Youth Thrive (youth 9-26)

**Youth resilience:** Managing stress and functioning well when faced with stressors, challenges or adversity.

**Social connections:** Having healthy, sustained relationships with people, institutions, the community and a force greater than oneself that promote a sense of trust, belonging and feeling that the youth matters.

**Knowledge of adolescent development:** Understanding the unique aspects of adolescent development; implementing developmentally and contextually appropriate best practices.

**Concrete support in times of need:** Understanding the importance of asking for help and advocating for oneself; receiving a quality of service designed to preserve youth's dignity, providing opportunities for skill development and promoting healthy development.

**Cognitive and social-emotional competence of youth:** Acquiring skills and attitudes that are essential for forming an independent identity and having a productive, responsible and satisfying adulthood.

## Strengthening Families (with children 0-8)

**Parental resilience:** Managing stress and functioning well when faced with challenges, adversity and trauma.

**Social connections:** Positive relationships that provide emotional, informational, instrumental and spiritual support.

**Knowledge of parenting and child development:** Understanding child development and parenting strategies that support physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional development.

**Concrete support in times of need:** Access to concrete support and services that address a family's needs and help minimize stress caused by challenges.

**Social-emotional competence of children:** Family and child interactions that help children develop the ability to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate their emotions and establish and maintain relationships.

## PART 3

# The Scan of Innovations in Rural Areas and Suburban Pockets of Poverty



For this paper, we scanned programs in Native American communities, rural areas and suburban areas of concentrated poverty for innovative strategies that serve the unique needs of young children and their families through a multi-generational approach.

Dozens of programs were suggested from national networks that link programs for early care and education, health, family support, child abuse prevention, employment, youth development, higher education, job training and mental health. While many programs offer help for families such as a link between a Head Start program and a job training opportunity, this scan sought a more comprehensive approach. It sought strategies that fully integrate the supports for each generation, with practices that specifically reflect the developmental needs of both children and parents, negotiate agreements among multiple service providers and take action to influence the broader systems that can provide additional support.

The scan was also seeking information about how current rural and suburban programs might be seeking different strategies than those that have been proven effective in fighting urban poverty and creating better outcomes for both parents

*Several promising Native American programs were contacted for the purposes of this scan, but none have been operating long enough to provide substantial information on their success. Native American approaches, whether on reservations or in urban areas where Native American communities are clustered, may provide important insights about how cultural influences can shape effective multi-generational strategies in addition to information on implementation in uniquely isolated locations. More investigation is needed to understand Native American programs, similar to the information gleaned on rural and suburban programs.*

and children. While policymakers generally agree that simply “transferring” urban anti-poverty strategies directly into suburban or rural settings does not generally work, “innovators across the country are finding creative ways to navigate the legacy-based anti-poverty system.”<sup>44</sup> One aspect of this scan was to seek out examples of innovative ideas that work specifically in these settings far from the usual targets of anti-poverty programs.

Specific criteria were developed for selecting the six programs to be highlighted in this scan:

- The program employs an intentional two- or multi-generational approach to meeting the needs of young children and their families
- Services are located in or are serving rural areas or pockets of concentrated poverty in suburban communities
- The host agency integrates services and supports to young children and their families from multiple service providers
- Services and support are linked to systems-level action to better meet the needs of their participants across such sectors as housing, employment, education, health and mental health.

The profiles that follow include descriptions of the populations served, the service continuum employed and each program’s special focus on developmental needs of both young parents and their young children. A summary of the programs’ focus and financing is noted in the chart on page 31. Results for each of the highlighted programs are consolidated and presented in Part 4 of this report.



A group of CLIMB Wyoming participants are eager to start their forklift training as part of a Warehouse Inventory Tech program.

### PROMISING INNOVATION 1: CLIMB Wyoming



CLIMB Wyoming's mission is to move single mothers out of poverty through research and industry driven job training and placement as well as life and parenting

skills training and counseling. To meet Wyoming's workforce needs, the CLIMB Wyoming programs help women enter a variety of occupations: construction and energy, health care, truck driving, office careers and more. The basis of the model is a job training and placement program, but CLIMB Wyoming also provides mental health services, life skills training and parenting skills training, which address personal barriers that have impeded success for mothers in the past.

CLIMB Wyoming serves 10 of the 23 counties in Wyoming, many of which are rural communities. They have six offices across the state, located in Casper, Cheyenne, Gillette, Laramie, the Sweetwater Area and the Teton Area. One in four children in Wyoming live in a family without a full-time year-round employed parent and 43 percent of single mothers in Wyoming and their children lived in poverty in 2012.

Recognizing this need, CLIMB Wyoming serves single mothers of all ages, although they began their programming over 25 years ago with a focus on single mothers ages 16 to 21. Even though they have expanded to serve all ages, 60 percent of the mothers they serve are under the age of 26, and 16 percent are teenagers. Seventy-six percent of CLIMB Wyoming's participants to date have been White, 16 percent have been Latina, 3 percent have been American Indian and 3 percent have been African American, mirroring the demographics of the state.

#### *Program Features*

CLIMB Wyoming's entry point to serving young families is through employment training and job placement. They recruit young mothers into the program and the mothers go through an application process to determine if they are able to manage the demands of the rigorous CLIMB Wyoming program. Participants are carefully selected with the goal of serving those who need the program the most *and* are able to successfully complete the program—participants can only go through the program once. Then, the mothers begin the comprehensive training, group and individual counseling and weekly parenting and life skills training. A home visit at the beginning of the program allows a mental health worker to note any possible developmental issues with the children and make appropriate

referrals for screening and intervention. Near the end of the program, participants are placed in jobs that match their interests and skills to give them hands-on work experience.

While their main focus is employment, the program employs a therapeutic model that focuses on the participants' mental health and addressing the challenges of parenthood more widely. This model builds upon the idea that young mothers need to have the logistics of parenting in order, such as child-care and working with their children's schools, as well as strategies to manage and cope with the stress of parenting, before they are able hold jobs successfully.

CLIMB Wyoming employs approximately 35 staff people full-time and contracts with job training providers. These professional training entities include accredited CDL trainers, community colleges, as well as individuals with expertise in more traditional office training. Instructors and other staff are focused on providing concrete skills as well as being able to speak with participants about their fears, history, relationships and their impact on their children.

CLIMB Wyoming establishes memorandum of understanding with their job skills trainers, parenting instructors, contracted mental health professionals and industry research consultants. They also maintain informal relationships with referral agencies that address housing and other needs.

CLIMB Wyoming is financed primarily by federal funding, distributed by agencies in the state of Wyoming. They also receive public funding from local cities and counties and are growing a diverse private funding stream that includes grants, family foundations and individual donors. They are currently funded at about 64 percent public and 36 percent private donations. Looking forward, CLIMB Wyoming is looking to diversify their funding streams further.

### *Serving Young Parents and their Young Children in Rural Wyoming*

CLIMB Wyoming's Founder and Executive Director, Dr. Ray Fleming Dineen, shared that they have shaped their work around the concept that, developmentally, younger moms need to be with their peers and typically most do not have a strong peer group when they enter the CLIMB Wyoming program. They also recognize that when women become mothers at a young age, they often drop out of school and are not involved in the same socially interactive activities as their peers. Their program model uses groups of 10 moms to create a healthy group dynamic that allows for the creation of strong peer networks.

She also identified that young mothers have often been derailed from traditional education pathways. When they begin to understand and get a taste of the career ladder through the CLIMB Wyoming program that can provide them with an

opportunity to move out of poverty, they often realize their own potential and improve their ability to overcome struggles in the future.

"There is a lot of shame—from society, from families, from peers—that comes with getting pregnant at a young age," says Director of Communications Shannon Brooks Hamby. "CLIMB provides a place where young single moms are allowed to discuss their fears and their shame without judgment."

CLIMB Wyoming also operates knowing that young mothers typically have little experience with independent problem solving. CLIMB's curriculum focuses on teaching them how to negotiate and navigate challenges. They incorporate training on the resources available for young moms and how to utilize them. They also assist them closely with negotiating the school system and become advocates for their children in programs such as Head Start.

CLIMB Wyoming recognizes that rural communities in Wyoming tend to be close knit and distrustful of outsiders, so they have adopted an approach to relationship building with individuals and organizations that have strong relationships with potential participants such as school counselors, DFS benefit workers, mental health centers, developmental pre-schools, WIC staff and Public Health nurses.

CLIMB program staff also go out into the community to educate people about the program. "We recognize their knowledge and expertise in the communities they work in, and we are interested in their work and what they know about the population we serve," says Brooks Hamby. "Our respectful, collaborative approach models how we treat the women in our program, so they get a taste of the work we do."

"Our program directors are empowered with a lot of creative leeway to respond to the unique demands of serving rural moms. We have counselors on staff who are trained in distance counseling—we have staffing challenges in a few of our more rural areas and have had to be creative with staffing. These counselors are part-time and are responsible for training staff, leading group counseling sessions where needed and doing individual counseling where needed."

Recruitment in rural areas has also been identified as a challenge. CLIMB's potential participants are typically not actively looking for opportunities for employment training. They are just focused on keeping a roof over their heads and food on the table for their families. Knowing this, CLIMB conducts recruitment campaigns through their community contacts and traditional channels like newspaper ads, to the less traditional like Facebook, flyers on pizza boxes and tables at shopping malls.

When serving rural populations, they also face the obstacle of ensuring that there are jobs available for women after they

complete the program successfully as there are fewer jobs available in those geographic areas. “The workforce research we do is very thorough, very collaborative with employers in the community, and constant as community workforce opportunities are always changing,” says Brooks Hamby.

Transportation is also a barrier for young mothers in rural communities to access CLIMB Wyoming’s services as public transportation is unavailable in some communities and some of the women have expressed concerns with the cost associated with traveling long distances. As a result, CLIMB Wyoming uses gas cards as incentives to help with transportation costs during the program. The incentives also support appropriate workplace behavior, as they reward consistently showing up on time.

## PROMISING INNOVATION 2: Fostering Hope Initiative

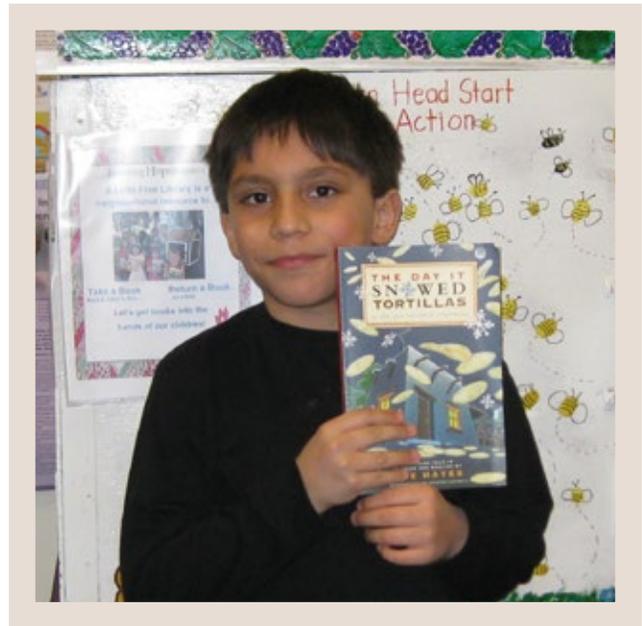
**Fostering Hope Initiative** The Fostering Hope Initiative (FHI) is a neighborhood-based initiative in Oregon that strengthens and empowers families, promotes optimal child and youth development, strengthens collaborative systems and advocates for family-friendly public policy. This collective impact initiative is sponsored by Catholic Community Services of the Mid-Willamette Valley and Central Coast.

The FHI targets seven high-poverty communities in Marion, Polk and Yamhill Counties in Oregon. Three of these communities are in rural areas with greater than 95% of their residents economically disadvantaged. The remainder are greater than 50% economically disadvantaged. Three of the communities are predominantly Latino, with Latinos making up from 62% to 98% of the population, and the service catchment areas include approximately 1,500 children.

### Program Features

FHI provides a collaborative range of services and activities to achieve its mission. These include social services, early learning, health provider collaborations, community cafés, home visiting with wraparound supports, parenting education, nutritional cooking and financial literacy classes and mobilization of neighborhood residents to connect with one another to make their neighborhoods safe, healthy, nurturing places to raise children. They also advocate for family-friendly public policy.<sup>45</sup> FHI’s theory of change embraces the Strengthening Families approach to support families in building protective factors.

FHI recognizes the importance of robust collaboration among a wide range of partners. They have received a collective impact grant from the United Way that is dedicated solely to bringing partners to the table to participate in the



Angel Guerrero borrows a book from the FHI Free Little Library.

Initiative. As Dr. Maureen Casey, Special Projects Director at FHI, explains, “Some of our smaller non-profits, including our Latino outreach organizations, are dependent on grants that most often do not cover the costs of meeting time and partnership activities. The FHI offered some small grants to support their participation in the collective impact activities, attending the meetings, developing a shared vision, committing to common measurements and engaging in continuous communication efforts. This strategy has been successful in leveraging resources and increasing participation. It brought everyone in as equal partners and increased everyone’s capacity to be able to collaborate.”

FHI’s partnerships with local school districts also have had a significant impact in their communities. One example of an effective outcome of this partnership has been the implementation of the *Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors*<sup>46</sup> parenting classes for 15-20 Latino families with children from birth to five years old per class. The evidence-based program offers a 10-week curriculum to parents around topics ranging from the importance of parents as their children’s first teachers, to nutrition and early literacy and included a field trip to the local library. During the program, the school district provided child care, led by a teacher who worked on kindergarten readiness skill development with the children. FHI provided incentives for *Abriendo Puertas* attendance such as gas cards and food baskets. FHI also uses bilingual/bicultural “Neighbor Connectors” who serve as the community contacts for each neighborhood. These Connectors host community events and



Little Free Libraries are built by community members and high school students and stocked with books donated by community members, Goodwill and United Way, making books accessible to the children and families in the FHI Neighborhoods.

work with families to connect them to assistance and resources that support their family's well-being.

### *Serving Young Parents and their Young Children in Rural Oregon*

Families in the more rural parts of FHI's service area struggle with the lack of housing and affordable child care. "In one of our rural counties, there are 14 slots available per 100 children," Casey explained. "In that community, the child care for one toddler is 35 percent of the annual income for minimum wage earners. It jumps to 40 percent in another community. That keeps people out of the workforce and perpetuates the cycle of multigenerational poverty." FHI provides support for families struggling with these issues through their partnerships with local organizations that help families to access affordable housing and child care.

FHI acknowledges that social connectedness is essential to the success of young families, and hosts parent community cafés, parent support groups, community dinners and other opportunities for families to come together to learn and connect. The FHI "Neighbor Connectors" link families to services, help eliminate barriers to accessing resources, facilitate parent

engagement in the community cafés, empower parents to take on leadership roles, share strategies to reduce toxic stress and target outreach efforts to pregnant teens and young parents in particular.

As in other rural communities, FHI acknowledges that the lack of access to public transportation is a barrier to providing services to and foster social connections for families in their communities. Although constantly trying to address this issue in innovative ways, FHI has capitalized on their partnerships with the school districts and faith based communities to reinforce their roles as serving as the community hubs where families and children gather already. They have provided easily accessible, free space for activities, such as parenting classes, literacy activities, clothing exchanges, exercise classes and health fairs.

Catholic Community Services also operates a program using the Safe Families for Children model<sup>47</sup> as part of their array of supports. FHI vets and trains volunteer families who agree to make their homes available to host children whose parents are experiencing a temporary crisis until the parents can get back on their feet, thus avoiding the need for potential child welfare involvement. Community members beyond those host

## Using Social Media & Social Networking

Providing young parents with useful health and parenting information, fostering social networks and peer-to-peer learning with other parents and keeping track of their needs and the outcomes of the services they have received has required initiatives to be creative with the use of social media and social networking tools.

- Discover Together will be using a phone-based app that has been piloted by the MOMS Partnership in New Haven to help parents connect to one another.
- CLIMB Wyoming is experimenting with using Facebook both as a way to track the outcomes of their program for young mothers and their families who may be unresponsive via e-mail and phone, and as a way to advertise their program to young mothers in rural Wyoming.
- ParentLink at the University of Missouri partners with programs serving parents with new babies in the Bootheel region of Missouri. The project, entitled Bootheel Baby Connect, aims to reduce new-parent stress, help them have realistic expectations as parents and reduce the isolation often felt by young parents. The project uses a Facebook page to give parents the potential to network online while receiving parenting advice and information from trained professionals.

families provide support in other ways, e.g. by providing diapers, food, toys and clothing or taking children to joint family outings or other recreational activities.

By hosting this program, FHI has been able to assist parents of all ages, but it's been particularly impactful with young parents. Teen pregnancy is particularly high in the FHI neighborhoods, around 9 percent in one of the communities (as compared to 4.5% in the state of Oregon).<sup>48</sup>

"We had a pregnant teen in an unhealthy living situation in one of our rural communities. Through FHI's Safe Families for Children, a family with a mom who was also pregnant served as a host and took the teen mom in to their home. That gave the teen a positive role model and a stable home. Our Neighbor Connector helped her transition out of their home and helped her find an apartment, obtain some local resources for furniture and baby needs like diapers and formula. She's currently living independently, participated in our community café facilitator's training and has been co-facilitating community cafés in her neighborhood. She continues to see her former host family frequently for support and friendship. The local high school program has 15 pregnant teens and they have asked her if she'd be willing to facilitate a community café for teen parents—a great example of the impact of the FHI model."

### PROMISING INNOVATION 3: Discover Together



Discover Together is a place-based system of programs currently operating in Grundy County, Tennessee that aims to foster social connectedness and resilience for the families it

serves. Although still in its infancy, Discover Together brings to light some of the challenges and opportunities encountered when bringing a multi-generational approach to a rural area of high poverty.

Discover Together targets two- or multi-generation impact in the South Cumberland Plateau, which is part of Appalachia, with a focus on Grundy County, Tennessee. The area is home to a population of 13,700 people in seven small communities, each with its own preK-8 elementary school. One high school serves the area. The population is almost entirely White, with African Americans and Hispanic populations jointly comprising just over 1 percent. Almost 30 percent of the residents in the area live below poverty, due in great part to a high proportion of disabled adults (29.9% of adults in Grundy County between the age of 18 and 64 are classified as having a disability, as compared to 13% of Tennesseans and 10% of US population) and only 43% of the population 25 and older have a high school diploma.

Eighty percent (80%) of school-aged children in the area are economically disadvantaged. Children in Grundy County also demonstrate very poor health outcomes and low performance in math and reading.

#### *Program Features*

Formed in 2012 out of a partnership between the Yale Child Study Center, Scholastic, Sewanee: The University of the South, Tracy City Elementary School and most recently, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the program targets multi-generational impact through an integrated system of programs. Although in its early stages, Discover Together has embarked on this work through a family co-op for parents/caregivers and their children from birth to age five. It also has a summer



Nature journaling is just one of many ways literacy is integrated into all programming at Camp Discover.

program that includes a literacy curriculum that is paired with community field trips that are designed to allow children to explore and celebrate their local identity. The final component is a learning lab, designed both to be a space where children can come for help with school projects after school and to serve as a location for parents to get together and learn about their children's school and connect with other parents.

One major component of Discover Together's programs is honoring the power of stories. The curriculum is designed to help both children and adults recognize the strength of their own narratives and those of their communities. As explained on the program's website, "through stories and an exploration of their own region, families connect with each other, build a sense of pride in the place they are from, and develop optimism about where they are going."<sup>49</sup> In Discover Together's theory of change, stories emphasizing family and community strengths are used to foster social connectedness, build a sense of pride in place and support positive adaptive skills for children and adults.

Dr. Linda Mayes, M.D., Professor, Yale Child Study Center and Visiting Professor, Sewanee: The University of the South, has been involved with Discover Together since its inception. She explained that the lack of infrastructure around service delivery in rural areas has limited their ability to build formal

partnerships across services in the community, but that informal relationships have been made between those services in place in the county.

### *Serving Young Parents and their Young Children in Rural Tennessee*

Discover Together's system of programs works with families of young children, especially in the family co-op. The curriculum is intended to focus on parenting and developing adult skills that, as a result, translate into becoming a better parent. "It tackles questions such as: how do you manage your stress? How do you deal with challenges in your life?" says Mayes. When considering future programs, Mayes notes that though the current programming is "not specifically focused on adolescents, adolescence and young adulthood is a time of laying down brain capacity around those types of skills."

Discover Together also recognizes that young mothers who are socially isolated need opportunities to come together, which is why each of their programs stress parent interaction so strongly. "I do think there is a tremendous role for bringing together and enhancing the social connectedness among young parents both as support for them, as stress reducing, as peer to peer learning from one another."

Mayes and her colleagues in New Haven who have worked on the MOMs Partnership<sup>50</sup> based at Yale, have created a mobile app in their work in New Haven to allow young mothers to connect to one another. They plan to bring a similar app to Grundy County as well.

It is important to note that Discover Together's service area has a high number of grandparents serving as primary caregivers for young children.<sup>51</sup> Emily Partin explained that this "lost generation" of parents in Grundy County is often due to drug dependence and incarceration, a reality in many rural communities. The programs welcome grandparents as the caregivers for their young children and understand that there is a need to explore the brain capacity of older adults, particularly when grand-parenting, and to view it as another developmental stage.

Based in the urban setting of New Haven and working with young mothers and families through the MOMs partnership, Mayes noted that many of the issues that young families face are the same across the board. But she pointed out that "in rural areas, it's a different kind of isolation." "You can be profoundly isolated in an urban setting. Many of the moms we work with here in New Haven talk about living in an apartment complex but feeling isolated. But in a rural setting, you are not only psychologically isolated but also often physically isolated. It can be a fair distance to your nearest neighbor. That can have some beauty to it, but it's a challenge when both physical and psychological isolation come together."

Mayes also pointed to a lack of basic infrastructure around both transportation and health and human services: "a big difference is transportation—in New Haven, you can still get around on a bus. Many of the families we are working with in Discover Together, there's one car in the family. If one of the parents has to go 'off the mountain' for work, that car is gone for the day. So how do you get together?" They are tackling this issue by creating carpooling systems among families and looking into options around community shuttles using church vans.

Similarly, there is a shortage of medical care provision in Grundy County. For example, Mayes points out that there is no obstetrician in the community and members of the community have to drive across county lines to access certain medical services. Even with these challenges, Mayes notes that the community has tremendous strengths. There is a closeness of family structures and a pride in place that is often lacking in more populated areas. She also notes that residents of the area understand the need for community members to come together and decide they want to make a change. The Discover Together model builds on that by ensuring those qualities by building social connectedness as a mechanism of support for its families.

#### PROMISING INNOVATION 4: Lamoille Family Center



The Lamoille Family Center is one of 15 parent-child centers across the state of Vermont that provides a system of care for children and their families. Serving families in the Lamoille Valley for over 39 years, the Family Center offers four types of services: Children's Integrated Services, Child Care Support Services, Youth and Young Adult Services and Family Support Services.



Lamoille Family Center – Families Learning Together  
Students and Staff at River Arts Exhibit

The Lamoille Family Center serves all of Lamoille County plus five towns that touch other surrounding counties. The county has a population of about 31,000 people, with about 2,200 children birth to six and 2,000 youth ages 13 to 17. The county is mostly rural and approximately 97 percent White. The county is home to some pockets of wealth, but nearly 18 percent of children under age six are living under the poverty line.<sup>52</sup> The Lamoille Family Center's system of programs reaches about 1,600 parents, caregivers and children annually.

#### *Program Features*

The Lamoille Family Center implements a system of care comprised of 17 different programs that fall under their four major types of services. The programs that fall under the category of Children's Integrated Services make up approximately 40 percent of Lamoille Family Center's work. One program provides education to families with children birth through six to support social-emotional development. Another program under this category supports prenatal and postpartum mothers and their children birth through six. They also provide specialized



Lamoille Family Center, Families Learning Together & River Arts. Montreal Street Photography, February 2015

child care services to help families through times of high stress, homelessness or other personal hardship.

Other highlights of their programming include the Families Learning Together program, which is a Recognized Independent High School and serves pregnant and parenting young people by providing job-readiness and high school completion opportunities. This work is paired with the work under their Reach Up program, which “helps young parents receiving financial assistance, overcome barriers to self-sufficiency by completing a high school education, identifying strengths, setting goals, gaining and maintaining employment and balancing work and family life.”<sup>53</sup>

Lamoille Family Center also provides parent education workshops and playgroups and many of these programs are made more accessible to young parents by the services of their licensed childcare center for children from six weeks through two years of age. By weaving together these and other programs, the Lamoille Family Center is able to provide comprehensive support for young parents and their young children.

The Lamoille Family Center also relies on strong partnerships to have an impact on the families in their service area. They have established formal partnerships with non-profit organizations serving the same populations, the United Way, local government and state agencies, local businesses and a large network of volunteers from the community. For example, the Family Center’s Lamoille Interagency Network for Kids (LINK) program is a member of the Vermont Coalition for Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs, a statewide organization with 13 members.<sup>54</sup> This program provides strength-based services for youth, including pregnant and parenting youth,

who are at risk of running away or at risk of homelessness. They offer a summer program as well as services such as crisis intervention, case management and temporary shelter.

The Lamoille Family Center is funded mostly through Medicaid or Fee for Service funds (around 55 percent of their revenue for FY14). They also receive about 35 percent of their funding from government grants and an additional 10 percent from foundations and contributions. Staff braid together funding from their 33 funding streams to meet the varied needs of the families who walk through the door. Each family member may have his or her own service needs and may meet eligibility requirements for different programs and funding streams—but as Scott Johnson explained, “we do everything in our power to make the set of services seamless to the person or family.”

The Lamoille Family Center has also embedded the Strengthening Families framework into their approach to creating programming for their families. The breadth of programming and partnerships with other community organizations helps to ensure that families in Lamoille Valley have support to build all five of the Strengthening Families protective factors.

### *Serving Young Parents and their Children in Rural Vermont*

Many of Lamoille Family Center’s programs are designed to serve young parents, teenaged and young adults and their young children. Their programming is designed to provide a net of supports for families, particularly recognizing the special needs of families in this age group and the importance of intervening with struggling families when their children are



Family Day of Service: Families gave back by building a playground at a local park in Cumberland County, NJ.

infants and toddlers. Johnson observed that schools are more accommodating of student parents now and the stigma around early childbearing is not as great as it was in years past, but these parents still face complex challenges and need support.

While there are age limits on some funding streams, the Lamoille Family Center finds that the challenges faced by “young parents” are not limited to adolescents. The Families Learning Together program recently shifted back to serving only pregnant and parenting young people—after serving a broader “at-risk” population in recent years—and are seeing more parents in their 20s taking advantage of the support offered by the program. “Is 16 young, or is 26 young?” mused Johnson. “I don’t think the exact age really matters, if you’re on your own with a baby, haven’t finished high school and are struggling to make ends meet.” For example, many young parents encounter conflicts with their own parents. For teens, those conflicts can be complicated by legal dependency, but the same types of conflicts can also be a source of stress for young adults who are dependent on their parents to varying degrees.

Serving a rural area, the Lamoille Family Center finds that transportation, housing, jobs and economic concerns top the list of challenges faced by the families they serve. Many of the jobs available in the Lamoille Valley are seasonal, service

industry jobs at ski resorts. Combined with a lack of public transportation and high rents, Johnson says, this means that young parents struggle to find a job, get to the job once they have it and make ends meet on low wages.

### **PROMISING INNOVATION 5:** **Pascale Sykes Foundation’s South Jersey** **Strengthening Families Initiative**



The Pascale Sykes Foundation is funded by a 30-year endowment that began serving families in New Jersey and New York City in 1992. In 2011 they targeted rural New Jersey and are focused on Atlantic, Cumberland, Salem and Gloucester counties in southern New Jersey. This service area is home to many high-poverty rural communities. In Salem County, for example, 32.9 percent of families with children under the age of five are living below the poverty line (compared to approximately 12.2 percent statewide).<sup>55</sup> Wanting to make an impact on families in the four-county area, the board of the Pascale Sykes Foundation decided to strategically fund innovative, flexible, holistic and long-range programs that support the needs of low-income families in a way that created a system or network of supports.

### Program Features

In the four counties it serves, the Pascale Sykes Foundation works through county coalitions of about 20-30 key players who represent different corners of society and different interest groups. The Pascale Sykes Foundation works through these coalitions to award grants to groups focused on strengthening family self-sufficiency through a framework of interagency networks and strong partnerships.

They also require that the groups selected for funding support two-parent families, or, if a second parent is not in the picture, that they support families where two adults are committed to the well-being of the family. This model is based on the idea that there is a correlation between family well-being and the additional support of a second committed adult. “The trustees of the foundation feel that systems sometimes unintentionally force families apart,” says Colleen Maquire, Executive Director of the Pascale Sykes Foundation. “Our intention is that whether parents are together or not, we need to serve two parents who should be working together on behalf of their kid. But if one parent is completely out of the picture, we look for another adult who can be there to help that family succeed.”

In the past fiscal year, Pascale Sykes awarded grants to 12 programs in the four counties under their South Jersey Strengthening Families Initiative. These include, for example, a community shuttle and parent family support network in Atlantic county; *Unidos para la Familia* (United for the Family) which serves immigrant families with holistic, family strengthening services such as English as a second language classes, GED and parenting instruction in Cumberland County; a family enrichment center in Salem County; and a family strengthening network, which places a family advocate in natural settings throughout the four communities, such as in schools, churches and community centers.

### Serving Young Parents and their Young Children in Rural New Jersey

Like other innovations outlined in this scan, Pascale Sykes has recognized that transportation is one of the biggest barriers to families not only accessing the services they provide but also with holding good jobs and accessing healthcare. To address this barrier, the Pascale Sykes Foundation has dedicated resources to building up public transit options in all four of their targeted counties.



For example, Pascale Sykes partnered with the County of Atlantic, the South Jersey Transportation Authority, the Family Service Association, NJ TRANSIT and the Cross County Connection Management Association to start the English



The South Jersey Strengthening Families Initiative supports new or enhanced public transportation options in each of the four counties it serves.

Creek-Tilton Road Community Shuttle. Launched in 2012, the community shuttle runs regularly 14 hours a day, seven days a week to connect a number of apartment complexes, shopping centers, medical centers, office locations and a local shopping mall. Of passengers surveyed after the shuttle services were in operation for one year, 55 percent said they used the shuttle to get to and from work and 45 percent use it to connect to an NJ Transit bus, a service from which many residents were isolated prior to the community shuttle service.<sup>56</sup>

In Cumberland County, Pascale Sykes has worked with the Department of Labor's One Stop Career Center, who had already been providing a shuttle to help members of the community access job opportunities, to expand their hours of operation and remove eligibility requirements for riding the shuttle so that it is now open to the entire community. The shuttle operates 10 hours a day, six days a week. Pascale Sykes' involvement has allowed for the shuttle's routes to be extended to a nearby housing development where a lot of young parents live. It has assisted those parents with dropping children off at childcare and getting to work.

### PROMISING INNOVATION 6: The Prosperity Project



The JeffCo Prosperity Project (JPP) is a cross-agency collaboration between the Department of Human Services, the Department of Health, the Action Center and the county schools in Jefferson County, Colorado.<sup>57</sup> Jefferson County, a suburb of Denver, has seen increased rates of families in poverty

in the past decade. In fact, the percentage of children in Jefferson County Public Schools who needed free and reduced lunch increased from 24 to 34 percent between 2010 and 2014.

The JPP collaboration, launched in 2013, emerged as a response to this need and works to provide supports to the increasing number of low-income families in the county as they guide their children to success in school and as they move to achieve self-sufficiency. Families enter JPP while at least one of their children is enrolled in Head Start and the project is designed to maintain involvement through the child's high school graduation. Families in the project generally make less than 100-130 percent of the poverty level, or about \$23,650 per year for a family of four. While still in the early stages of implementation, the JeffCo Prosperity Project is a promising example of how a collaboration between school, county, business and community partners is using a two-generation approach to lift its families out of poverty.

### *Program Features*

JPP focuses on coordinating and pooling the resources available to families across Jefferson County to better facilitate positive child development and the families' movement towards economic stability. JPP holds one meeting a month that is attended by both parents and community partners and families. Families also routinely meet with a JPP coach, rather than one or a series of case workers from the department of human services, to identify changes that they feel are necessary to thrive. Coaches then help families access the many resources available through the JPP network to achieve those changes. Lynn Johnson, Executive Director of the Department of Human Services in Jefferson County, explains the reasoning behind using the term coach rather than case worker: "Coaches help you grow towards your goals. The families don't need a case worker to do it for you, they need a coach who can do it with you so that later, you will be able to perform on the field."

Parents in the JPP have the opportunity to attend classes and trainings on topics ranging from how to deal with financial issues and finding and developing a purpose and meaning in their lives. Parents are also required to have a checking and savings account as well as a trust for their children. They are not allowed to use payday lenders. Families are required to routinely see doctors to take care of their own health and well-being; thus, all of the families in JPP have a medical home.

Joyce Johnson, JeffCo Prosperity Project Director, notes that the approach that project staff and coaches take when discussing JPP itself with participating families is a large part of their model. There is an emphasis on self-determination throughout. "It has been important that families know from the very beginning that the JPP does not use a deficit model, and that we don't consider them 'needy.' That approach appears to have

been successful thus far, as many of the families that express interest in the project state that it was because of the emphasis on self-determination, often expressed as 'I like that you're not telling us what to do.'"

Partners play a key role in making sure the JPP meets the needs of the families in the project. There are a few MOUs in place between The Department of Human Services, The Action Center and the schools, but the other partners who have been enlisted in the JPP network to provide assistance to the families are in a more informal partnership with the project. Lynn Johnson explains that, at the start of the project, a group of about 50 partners came together in a meeting that asked the question: 'How do we eradicate poverty in Jefferson County?' As the JPP emerged from that meeting, those partners do not have a formal role until a family needs their services. For example, one JPP mother identified her goal as losing weight. JPP called upon the mayor of her city, who had bought in to the JPP as a supporter in previous meetings, and was able to access a recreational center and a personal trainer for free through that connection.

Currently, JPP receives funding from two foundations, the Community First Foundation, and Ascend at the Aspen Institute. JPP also enjoys substantial in-kind support from the Action Center and from Jeffco Human Services.

### *Serving Young Parents and their Young Children in Suburban Denver*

As is the case with many suburban counties across the country, Jefferson County has seen a drastic increase in the number of families living in poverty since 2005. This has increased the demand on resources and services available for low-income families countywide and drove local government and community leaders to think in a new way about how to meet the needs of families in their county.

Joyce Johnson noted that a major challenge suburban service providers experience is the low visibility of poverty in suburban areas, which could have a direct impact on the attention that is given to low-income families. "Historically, the suburbs have been seen as the embodiment of the 'American dream,' and as an outward manifestation of a family's success and self-reliance," says Johnson. "Therefore, poverty in a suburban community may be more hidden and carry somewhat more stigma than it would elsewhere."

Lynn Johnson describes the southern part of the county as having "hidden pockets of poverty" and says that even though their needs are similar to families in poverty in urban communities, suburban families rarely identify as "suburban poor." She explains that the culture in the suburbs is so different from an urban setting and that the ability to address the needs of families in the suburbs is hindered by that culture. For example,

Jefferson County only has one homeless shelter and it can only house 30 families, so the partners have approached addressing housing issues through the services of faith based groups and other types of transitional housing that are more common and accepted in suburban communities.

Like rural neighborhoods, suburban neighborhoods are also subject to a lack of transportation infrastructure. “The number one thing I’ve run in to with almost every family has been transportation and cars breaking down,” says Lynn Johnson. She notes that in response to this need, she’s worked with local mechanics to find ways to get families free help with their car problems. In return for their volunteer services to JPP families, mechanics and other business that help out are given a sign to put in their window that shares that they are supporting the JPP. Johnson acknowledges that fixing cars is not usually on the list of responsibilities for human services departments, but that tackling the day-to-day issues that keep parents from working and thriving is an important part of JPP’s work. “It’s just a practical approach to helping people,” Johnson explains.

Lynn Johnson also shared that several of the families with young parents in the JPP are invited to bring their parents to JPP events and meetings with their coach. “In the JPP, we’ve had a couple of grandmas and grandpas come to the table. That’s not what was done before. The grandparents were never even invited.” They are also looking to neuroscience and recent studies around the positive impact of trauma-informed wraparound services on the adult brain that has been exposed to long-term poverty to inform how they meet the needs of young parents in a new and different way.

# Six Promising Programs

	PROGRAM FOCUS	FINANCING
<p><b>CLIMB Wyoming</b> <i>(10 counties in Wyoming)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Single mothers of all ages; 60% under age 26, and 16% teenagers. 76% of participants are white, 16% Latina, 3% African-American, and 3% American Indian</li> <li>• Therapeutic model focuses on mental health and the challenges of parenting as participants transition to self-sufficiency through job training and placement</li> <li>• Groups of 10 moms create a healthy group dynamic that allows for the creation of strong peer networks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Federal funding channeled through the state</li> <li>• Additional funding from local cities and counties</li> <li>• 64% federal and 36% private donations</li> </ul>
<p><b>Fostering Hope Initiative</b> <i>(Polk, Marion and Yamhill Counties in Oregon)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Families and their young children in high poverty neighborhoods; 1,500 children</li> <li>• 90% economically disadvantaged; 3 neighborhoods are predominantly Latino</li> <li>• Social connectedness in the form of community cafés, parent support groups, community dinners, exercise classes and other opportunities for families to come together to learn and connect</li> <li>• Neighbor Connectors perform outreach, connect families with resources and services, facilitate community cafés, mobilize the community empowering local leadership and engage in targeted outreach to pregnant teens and young parents in particular</li> <li>• Collective impact of partner collaborations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funded through a collective impact grant from United Way and a series of other program-specific grants</li> </ul>
<p><b>Discover Together</b> <i>(Grundy County in Tennessee)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Targets multi-generational impact through an integrated system of programs</li> <li>• Literacy curriculum, community fieldtrips and use of learning lab</li> <li>• Honoring the power of stories; curriculum is designed to help children and adults recognize the strengths of their own narrative and their community</li> <li>• Fundamental theory of change—emphasize that the strengths of one’s family and community can be used to foster social connectedness, which enhances engagement among families and the community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funded through support from Yale Child Study Center, Scholastic, Inc. Sewanee: University of the South, W.K. Kellogg Foundation and community partners</li> </ul>
<p><b>Lamoille Family Center</b> <i>(Lamoille County in Vermont and 5 towns in surrounding counties)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provides a system of care for children and their families; offers four services: Children’s Integrated Services, Child Care Support Services, Youth and Young Adult Services and Family Support Services</li> <li>• Families Learning Together program is an independent high school serving expectant and parenting young people by providing job-readiness and high school completion opportunities</li> <li>• Relies on strong partnerships with nonprofits, public schools and Adult Basic Education, local government and state agencies, local businesses and a large network of volunteers from the community</li> <li>• Embodies the Strengthening Families framework and results based accountability framework</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funded mostly through Medicaid or fee for service funds; around 55% of their revenue for FY2013</li> <li>• Also receive 35% of funding from government grants and an additional 10% from contributions and foundations</li> </ul>
<p><b>Pascale Sykes Foundation</b> <i>(Atlantic, Cumberland, Salem and Gloucester Counties in Southern New Jersey)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works through county coalitions of 20-30 key players who represent different corners of society and different interest groups; coalitions award multi-year grants to groups focused on strengthening family self-sufficiency through a framework of interagency networks and strong partnerships</li> <li>• Requires data-driven programming that equates to results around family well-being in their service areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funded through an endowment</li> </ul>
<p><b>The Prosperity Project</b> <i>(Jefferson County in Colorado)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interagency collaboration between Jefferson County’s Department of Human Services, Department of Health, community groups and county schools to serve low-income families in a suburban county with increasing poverty rates</li> <li>• Recruits families at Head Start and connects them with Jefferson Prosperity Project coaches who assist both parents and their children through trainings, goal setting and participation in a social network of other families</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funded through grants from the Community First Foundation and Ascend at the Aspen Institute</li> <li>• In-kind funding from the Action Center and the county Department of Human Services</li> </ul>

# Results to Date for the Six Promising Programs

Results reported by each of these promising community efforts are summarized below.

## Climb WYOMING

- Average monthly income of participants has increased from \$1,040 to \$2,445 during the program
- The overall employment rate has increased from 46% to 76% during the program
- Decrease in mothers and families on public welfare from 32% to 11% two years later
- Decrease in mothers using food stamps at intake from 50% to 31% two years after completion
- Program participation: Since inception in 1986, 1,845 mothers and 2,943 children

## Fostering Hope Initiative, Oregon

- As a participant in the Quality Improvement Center on Early Childhood (QIC-EC) Research and Demonstration project, six high-poverty neighborhoods in Northwest Oregon were included in the evaluation process, three of which received FHI's home visiting, wraparound and neighborhood-based services, and three of which did not. The results of the project indicated that families living in neighborhoods with FHI services experienced reduced parent stress, felt more competent in their child-rearing abilities and were more likely to have appropriate expectations of their children.<sup>58</sup>
- Interim results reveal reduced parental stress and strengthened family protective factors
- State legislation has authorized the expansion of home visiting services with strong advocacy from FHI and based on FHI data
- Program participation: In 2014, more than 1,500 nights and days of respite were provided to families in crisis; 65 pregnant moms were identified and received support

## Discover Together, Tennessee

- Though early in its implementation, its research partners Sewanee and Yale have implemented pre-, mid- and post-intervention analysis to gauge improvement in the child's eagerness to learn, parent-child connectedness, family stress and resilience. This is paired with a systematic assessment of children, both around their performance in school and in terms of their development, pre- and post-intervention.
- Program participation: Summer camp has served includes 75 children each year for 4 summers, with subsequent camp reunions that bring together 150 adults and children; Family co-op enrolled 13 families with 20 children ages birth to 5 (2014)

## Lamoille Family Center, Vermont

- This program employs the Results Based Accountability framework to measure their impact on families in their service area. Key indicators are tracked: Youth resilience is measured for LINK participants; and a 6-item survey to measure parental protective factors is administered annually to participants in the Families Learning Together program, parents in playgroups and families with children in child care.
- Program Participation: 803 families received financial assistance to offset the costs of childcare, 131 families with 491 children and adults received emergency assistance with rent, fuel, utilities, food, gas and other necessities (2014); the Children's Integrated Services program provided 4,786 home visits to over 391 families whose children have physical, developmental or behavioral challenges, and 33 child care programs in the area received training and support to serve 109,956 healthy meals and snacks to 332 children (2013).<sup>59</sup>

## Pascale Sykes Foundation, New Jersey

- The initiative requires three reports a year from grantees and has hired the RAND Institute to measure and evaluate the impact of their programs in Southern New Jersey through an eight-year longitudinal program evaluation that is currently underway.
- RAND and Pascale Sykes have identified four "buckets" of impact: (1) child well-being, (2) healthy relationships, (3) financial stability and (4) collaboration and partnership among agencies working together for the same families.

## Jefferson County Prosperity Project, Colorado

- JPP is currently working with an outside consultant to develop a thorough evaluation plan for the project, as initial results are still anecdotal.
- JPP will be using existing test scores to measure Head Start children in JPP compared with those who were not in the JPP
- Goals set by families for themselves are being tracked, related to income, educational achievement and self-sufficiency
- Program participation: Since its inception in 2013, JPP has moved from serving just 13 families to serving 47 in 2014. This will increase to 67 families in the coming year.



## PART 4

# Findings and Recommendations

The scan of the national landscape for rural programs and suburban approaches for supporting young parents and their children offers a window into the status of supports for these populations of low-income families. While the programs and localities differ in many ways, there are clear themes that apply across the varied program approaches and locations. Similar themes appear in two-generation approaches now being explored nationally; the contexts and principles from the exemplary programs also highlight gaps in the two-generation efforts to date. Finally, there are specific challenges and opportunities for advocates, policymakers, and foundations to consider in expanding their efforts in rural and suburban pockets of poverty.

### Common Themes

While the six programs highlighted in this report are highly customized to the communities they serve and in response to local needs, they reveal several common themes.

First, the **overall lack of resources** for sustainable support for young parents and their children is striking. Funding for the programs has been secured through a variety of sources that often change over the lifetime of the innovation; some of these changes threaten to close programs altogether. Community and regional foundations sometimes play a large role, particularly in launching programs or providing supports that are difficult to fund from other sources, such as transportation. Sustainability over time is a constant challenge, given the limited resources in these areas, but creativity in terms of finding and using local resources when one funding source diminishes is a common pattern with all of these innovators..

Second, each of the innovations was **intentionally linked to systems at a larger scale** than their own program operations. These interventions' overall impact depended heavily on close relationships and collaboration with other service providers that held resources needed by the families they were serving. Mental health services, prenatal care, housing and economic assistance (to the extent they were available in the community) were an integral part of the programs through personal connections with local providers. In the locations where programs have been in operation for a longer period of time, changes have been made in local and state child welfare, family support

and early childhood systems based on what was learned through working collaboratively with the innovators. All the efforts are well aware of the limitations that a lack of resources from the larger systems pose for their work and have consistently worked alongside the systems to achieve more resources.

Third, the rural innovations **did not identify the populations they serve as “young parent families” or limit eligibility by age of the parents**, even though the primary adult participants in each program were under age 30. In part, this lack of specificity about the population served acknowledges that all families need services and supports and parents should not be subject to an arbitrary cut-off age, particularly in areas where access to services is so limited. Being open to parents of all ages also acknowledges the role that grandparents and extended families play in providing both concrete and emotional support for the young adults and the importance of engaging a young child's auxiliary caregivers in learning more about how to support the child's development and access assistance the child may need. Even though the programs do not always specify a complete theory of change about the parallel development of both parent and child, each one made sure that “eligibility” for services was defined in a way that promoted the maximum opportunity for success for both parent and child and the participation by extended family.

Fourth, although these programs vary by geography and target population, each one **emphasizes social and peer connectedness, focuses on building strengths** (sometimes identified as



protective factors) and *takes a developmental approach* to their work. The services they provide give families opportunities for social interaction and the development of friendships as a key element of the developmental progress intended for both parents and children.

Fifth, these programs generally were not modeled after existing national programs or previously tested program models, but rather *evolved from the unique needs of the communities and families they served* and from the local resources available. In a few cases, well-established program models required extensive adaptation once they began in rural settings. Where program models and funding were available—such as with the recent expansion of home visiting services—innovators integrated these services into the array of supports they provided to families. In some cases, unique aspects of the innovations grew out of local attempts to find solutions to problems that had thwarted progress for some time and had no ready funding source, for example, transportation initiatives in New Jersey, housing support in Fostering Hope and placing women in nontraditional careers in Wyoming.

Finally, while these programs track their results with a focus on overall well-being and outcomes such as child development, school performance and family financial stability, the lack of funding for more rigorous evaluation and more expensive data collection has made it *difficult for most of them to show long-term results*. The programs are well aware of the shortcomings in terms of rigorous evaluation and would welcome the luxury of being able to more fully evaluate what they are doing.

### Links to Today's Two-Generation Approaches

The organizations and programs highlighted in this report are not alone in creatively supporting young parent families. Several important organizations are leading a new national effort for new approaches for young families and their children, with a focus on breaking down social service siloes that served the child and adult family members separately and promoting programs that serve them together. The Annie E. Casey Foundation; Ascend at the Aspen Institute; the National Human Service Alliance; and the Ray Marshall Center at the University of Texas, Austin have provided support and analysis for these new programs.<sup>60</sup>

Looking across recommendations from these current two-generation approaches, there is general agreement on several common elements of an effective two-generation approach, which are reflected in the innovations described in this scan. These include:

- Completion of high school/GED; post-secondary education
- Sector-specific workforce preparation, certification and skill building
- Economic supports, including connections to existing financial benefits and asset development
- Social capital networks, including peers, neighbors, coaches and mentors
- Parenting supports and high quality early learning and care for young children in the family



- Attention to child and adult health and mental health needs and challenges, including the impact of toxic stress and adverse experiences on executive function and self-regulation skills

### Implications of the Scan for New Two-Generation Approaches

While the similarities between the programs in rural and suburban areas identified in this scan and current two-generation work are evident, the findings from the scan illuminate several issues that could be addressed as new two generation work moves forward:

*Much of the current two-generation work has focused on families in urban centers* with little attention to the needs of young parent families that are the focus of this paper. More needs to be done to understand and address the needs of rural and suburban young parent families in the context of two-generation policies and programs.

*Mothers and their children are the primary focus of two-generation approaches to date.* The rural and suburban scan illuminates the very significant role of grandparents and other third generation kin who often provide primary caregiving for many young children as key to the success of young parents. Likewise, the role of fathers and grandfathers is not always clearly defined or built into program strategies. These vital connections need to be analyzed and welcomed into a multi-generation approach.

The impact of racial, health and educational inequities is not yet a consistent part of the analysis for moving a two generation

approach forward, including the scan in this report. The new science, as well as vital data analysis shows clearly that these inequities are highly likely to be passed on from one generation to the next. They form a significant barrier to achieving lasting success for young parent families in any context and should be a more important focus of data collection and analysis and a key element of strategies intended to reach multiple generations.

### Challenges and Opportunities for Funders, Policymakers and Advocates

This initial report focused on young parents with young children living in rural areas and in expanding pockets of suburban poverty. It is clear from current data that this age group of teens and young adults—the parents of those young children who are the target of so much early childhood investment—have unique challenges and needs that are not being adequately addressed. It is equally clear from the national scan of exciting approaches for young parent families that multi-generation strategies based on new science and the realities of life in these areas can survive and thrive. Making programs like these more available in many more locations—and improving the life trajectories of these young parent families—will require attention to several key challenges from funders, policymakers and advocates.

- Lack of awareness about these “hidden” young parent families, particularly among leaders and funders in suburban areas, keep their needs and the possibilities for assistance a secret. Rural areas are also likely to resist acknowledging needs while at the same time working

# Challenges and Opportunities Related to Living in Rural and

## CHALLENGES

There has been insufficient attention to meeting the unique needs of young parent families in rural and suburban pockets of poverty, with our current social service response systems having been built around urban poverty. Analysis and adaptation are required to address the needs of these populations.

Current efforts for capacity building through education and workforce preparation have not yet incorporated proven methods to assess and address developmental, mental health and executive function challenges that impact both learning and work. New scientific findings about the development of executive function and the impact of trauma in adolescents and young adults have not been integrated into these efforts.

## OPPORTUNITIES

Development of a network of rural/suburban funders to share experiences, compare data and support more local leadership.

Documentation that highlights and honors innovations that are good examples of multi-generational, neuroscience-informed program designs in rural and suburban areas.

Analysis of the differential needs, outcomes and resources of young parent families in rural and suburban poverty; recommendations for action.

Engagement with strategic communications experts (e.g., FrameWorks Institute) to develop appropriate messaging to guide attention to rural and suburban poverty as well as a multi-generational developmental perspective based on science.

Further dissemination of information on the development of executive function and self-regulation skills for teens and young adults as well as children and strategies for building it.

Incentives and requirements from government and funders for programs building capacity for young adults to adapt their programs in response to new science.

Encouragement for new funding mechanisms (e.g., Pay for Success and Social Impact Bonds) to anchor their efforts in evidence-based strategies to address mental health challenges, especially maternal depression.

Development of family-friendly assessment strategies to identify issues such as depression or trauma that may affect performance, learning and parenting capability; tools for tracking progress toward developmental outcomes for young adults and adolescents.

# o Strengthening Young Parent Families Suburban Poverty

The role of local rural and suburban leadership and their capacities to develop and support innovative programs has been inadequately explored. For example, what tools do emerging local leaders use to advance collective action in their communities? What kinds of technical assistance and coaching would they identify as helpful? How can the energy of rural poor communities be built and emulated in newly poor suburban neighborhoods?

Foundation and governmental support for existing national networks that reach into rural areas or suburban jurisdictions to provide analysis, examples, leadership development, technical assistance, incentives and ongoing information to local leaders who might develop their own programs.

Program and systems incompatibilities (in policy, practice, funding restrictions and data sharing) make it difficult to advance and evaluate developmentally-appropriate two-generation approaches to outcomes for both young adults and their children. Programs, funding and data collection are usually aimed at either children or adults and rarely both; grandparents are rarely considered in programs designed to help young children and their parents.

Development of state, regional or national meetings to provide platforms for sharing information and creating networks of implementers and evaluators across programmatic strategies.

Development of policy options that can support the development and full evaluation of new multi-generation innovations.

Analysis of existing incompatibilities and key levers for federal, state and local policy and practice changes that can increase likelihood of innovation for multi-generation programs.

Creation of funding incentives to develop new tracking and evaluation systems that can show outcomes for both children and parents.

Lack of broadband accessibility in homes is still a problem in many rural areas. New knowledge from behavioral economics and the use of social media and other technology have not been fully incorporated into strategies for rural and suburban families to help decision making or improve parenting capabilities among young parent families.

Exploration of locally adapted apps for smartphones and other social media devices related to better parenting practices, self-regulation and critical decision-making among low-income families.

Analysis of the differential impact of low access to broadband in rural areas on using technology and social media effectively for increasing parenting capability and better decision making.

## Findings and Recommendations

hard locally to address them through informal resources. More attention to these young parent families and their needs will help bring additional resources, more nuanced data collection and analysis, and more opportunities to adapt methods proven in other places to the rural or contexts.

- Leaders in more isolated areas are often unaware of information and strategies that could benefit local young parent families and sometimes lack the skills necessary to approach developing a comprehensive strategy with multiple systems and programs. Outreach and capacity building, using examples and successful peers could help bridge the information gap and encourage greater leadership to tackle difficult problems.
- Rapidly expanding knowledge from the field of neuroscience about both young children and young adults, and sobering news about the adversity and scarcity that young people are facing, makes a unified approach to multiple generations more urgent. Strict eligibility requirements, disconnected funding streams and other program restrictions stand in the way of a coordinated approach across generations.
- New information about the developmental needs of teens and young adults is critical for program developers and systems to incorporate into their work. Teens' own cognitive and social-emotional development is not yet complete; the executive functions and skills of young adults required for both adequate parenting and for completing education and successfully attaching to the workforce are still a work in progress. Many employment, education, and parenting programs have not yet adapted their strategies to create an effective developmental approach.

- Appropriate approaches to data collection and analysis about young parent families and their needs, resources for rigorous evaluation of programs and services, and acceptable assessment tools to help identify issues such as depression among young parents are extremely difficult to find. Until steps are taken to fill these information gaps, creating and sustaining effective supports for this population will continue to be difficult and rare.
- The scarcity of adequate Internet service in rural areas and the lack of information about social media and other platforms that can provide information, parenting advice and connection among young families adds to the isolation and knowledge gap. Strategies to increase availability, work with service providers, develop and disseminate new technology need to be developed especially for rural areas that lack these resources.

The challenges of instituting new policies and practices that will make our country a good place to raise a family once again, in all areas of the country, are significant. But as this report shows, action is underway even when we can't see it. Innovations are developing, analysis and careful program development are underway, and most importantly, local leaders are stepping up to find local pathways for young-parent families to navigate their own development and their children's development at the same time. It's time for funders, policy-makers and advocates to give them a hand.





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<sup>2</sup> The number of babies born to teens younger than 15 is very small, thus we focus on the population age 15 and older.

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