



YOUTH JUSTICE:

Ensuring Vulnerable Youth Successfully
Transition into Adulthood & out of Poverty

Executive Summary

Research on adolescent brain development has shown that although youth transitioning to adulthood share many competencies and attributes of fully formed adults, they remain fundamentally different. Yet, this recognition is not reflected in policies that treat youth and adults the same. As a result, Philadelphia's youth experience high rates of poverty, unemployment, and negative physical and mental health outcomes, including high rates of depression and domestic violence. The Youth Justice Project, a collaboration between **Philadelphia Legal Assistance** and **Community Legal Services**, has come together to offer resources and legal services to improve outcomes for our most vulnerable youth.

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Why a special focus on youth?

Everyone from neuroscientists to Supreme Court justices to parents of teenagers understands one simple truth: youth transitioning to adulthood share many competencies and attributes of fully formed adults, and yet remain fundamentally different.

Decades of research tell us that the adolescent brain continues to develop and mature until around age 25. During that development, the adolescent brain is not equal to that of an adult. Yet many of our systems, policies, and laws begin treating youth as adults at age 18. This leads to a gap during which vulnerable young people are disconnected from supportive structures and services often available to children, and yet are often not prepared to live as independent adults.

This is especially true for young people growing up in poverty who are far more likely to experience multiple traumas in their young lives. The effect of trauma on brain development means that vulnerable low-income youth are likely to need additional support as they make their way from childhood to adulthood, but they often have fewer resources.

This truth is borne out by looking at how youth in Philadelphia are faring. The poverty rate for youth between the ages of 16 and 24 is the highest rate for any age group. The unemployment rate for youth is at least double that of adults, and is even higher for black youth. In 2014, 76% of young clients who came to CLS for legal help had zero source of income.

Many youth in Philadelphia have also spent large portions of their adolescence enmeshed in the child welfare system, the juvenile and criminal justice systems, and the shelter system. In 2014, the City of Philadelphia released a report confirming

Vulnerable Youth: Rose

Rose is a young mother who struggled with drug addiction in her teens as a response to sexual abuse she experienced as a child. She was admitted to a program for first time drug offenders and got help. However, she was afraid to tell her probation officer she could not afford to make payments on the court debt she owed and stopped reporting, not fully appreciating the consequences of that decision. A bench warrant was issued for her arrest, and she and her children faced eviction from the homeless shelter where they were living. Rose feared her children would be taken away and put in the foster care system – which is exactly what happened to her as a child. Only a coordinated and holistic legal response could help stabilize Rose and her family.

that nearly 1 in 5 Philadelphia public school students have been involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems.

The particular challenges low-income youth face as they transition to adulthood require a distinct and tailored approach by policy makers, system actors, and advocates alike to ensure that youth are able to successfully develop into self-sufficient adults.

What is so different about the adolescent brain?

Over time, our understanding of when adolescence begins and ends has evolved. Thanks to advancements in technology, neuroscientists have made great strides in understanding how and when the brain develops, and the implications of ongoing brain development for behavior.

There are several main areas of behavior that are affected by ongoing brain development in adolescence.

Decision Making & Impulsivity

- **Main Area of the Brain:** The frontal lobe of the brain is primarily responsible for higher-level functioning and decision-making. This area develops greatly during adolescence, but does not fully form until around age 25, making it one of the last areas of the brain to fully develop.
- **Result:** Adolescents and young adults are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors and make decisions based on immediate rewards rather than long-term consequences.

Vulnerable Youth: Keisha

Keisha, a 17-year-old young woman, had left DHS care to live with the mother of her boyfriend; the same boyfriend who had impregnated her when she was just 14 years old. One day after an explosive argument (common for Keisha, who had extreme difficulty controlling her emotions), Keisha was ordered out of the house. She left her daughter behind. Keisha incorrectly believed that as a minor, she had no right to have her own child in her care, or to receive benefits that could enable her to care for herself and her child. Her poorly-informed decision put her in the position of having to fight to get her daughter back.

Vulnerability

- **Main Area of the Brain:** The limbic system is the area of the brain responsible for regulating emotions and is highly active during late adolescence, making it less likely to be controlled by the underdeveloped frontal lobe.
- **Result:** Adolescents are more likely to make decisions based on emotion and the influence of peers, and have less of a sense of their own individual identities and goals.
 - Chronic exposure to stress and trauma can make it more difficult for adolescents to regulate their emotions.

Ability to Change

- Adolescence is by its nature a transitory period. Though that period stretches longer than previously understood, it does eventually end.
- Therefore, youth are particularly amenable to change, and policies that seek to “punish” youth into adulthood for mistakes of judgment made during adolescence are unwise.

Implications of Ongoing Adolescent Brain Development

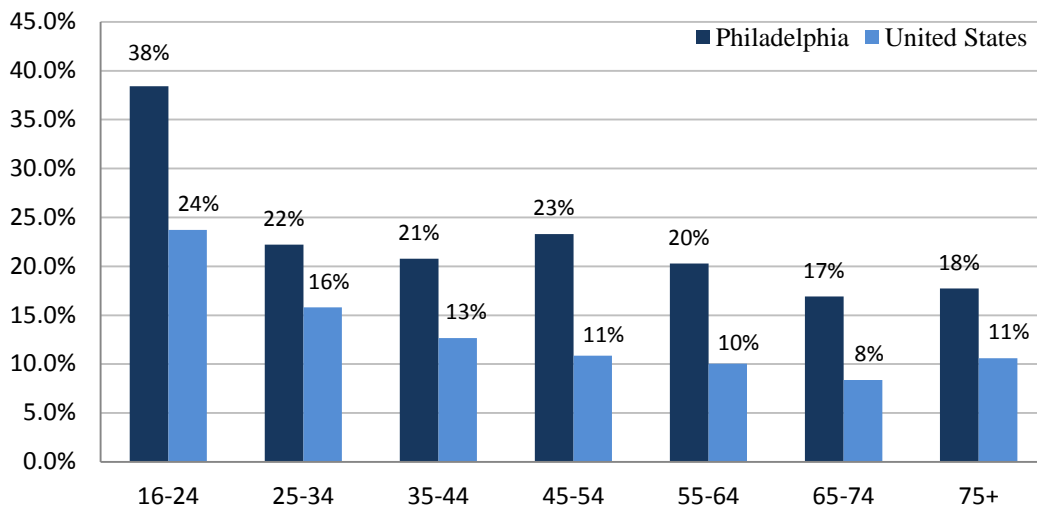
- **Legal Advancements**
 - Over the past decade, the Supreme Court has ruled that adolescents are inherently different than adults when it comes to culpability. Children under 18 can no longer be sentenced to death or face mandatory life without parole sentences. Here in Pennsylvania, our Supreme Court has also found that juveniles cannot be placed on sex offender registries for life. These cases all rest on the developments in neuroscience described above, as courts have recognized that youth are less culpable and more amenable to change than fully formed adults.
- **Policy Advancements**
 - Policies have been slower to change in recognition of the realities of adolescent development. In many areas, we still treat 18 as the dividing line when youth become adults. As we learn more about development, it is essential that the systems and laws interacting with youth recognize that development is ongoing into the mid-twenties.

What happens to youth transitioning to adulthood when ongoing supports and services are not provided?

Poverty

Youth who have experienced trauma or are growing up with the chronic stress created by poverty not only suffer from developmental challenges, but also from the reality of trying to become a self-sufficient adult without the necessary support or resources. The result is that in Philadelphia and around the country, the poverty rate for youth aged 16 to 24 is drastically higher than it is for any other age group.

Poverty Rate by Age Group (2009-13)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, December 2014.

Racial and Ethnic Inequities

Racial inequality permeates many aspects of young people's lives, and greatly impacts access to resources and opportunity for youth of color.

- From kindergarten through eighth grade, black children are less likely than white children to be identified as having disabilities at the following rates:
 - Learning disabilities: 58%
 - Speech or language impairments: 63%
 - Intellectual disabilities: 57%
 - Health impairments: 77%
 - Emotional disturbance: 64%

- Youth whose disabilities are not identified are not eligible for SSI benefits, special education services, or other protections afforded to youth with disabilities, causing racial disparities that extend beyond the identification stage.
- Black youth in Philadelphia are more than twice as likely as white youth to be disconnected from work and school. Nearly 50% of black youth who are not in school are unemployed.
- Of the approximately 70,000 youth in juvenile correctional facilities in the United States, 40.6% are black, 32.5% are White, and 22.3 % are Latino.
- Youth of color are more likely to experience trauma, which can have life-long health impacts. In Philadelphia, the following racial disparities in Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) were found:
 - Sexual abuse: 12.0% white compared to 20.9% black
 - Household member incarcerated: 6.9% white compared to 15.9% black
 - Witnessed violence: 25.9% white compared to 52.0% black
 - Felt discrimination: 15.8% white compared to 49.5% black
 - Lived in foster care: 1.0% white compared to 4.1% black

Unemployment

- Philadelphia has the highest rate of youth who are disconnected from work or school than any other large city in America.
- The unemployment rate for 16 to 24 year olds who are actively seeking work in Philadelphia is 14.6%, compared to 7.6% for those aged 25 and over.
- Nationwide unemployment for youth more than doubles that for the 25-and-over population.

Physical & Mental Health

- In Philadelphia, 22.4% of 18-24 year-olds are uninsured, compared to 13.3% of other age groups.

Vulnerable Youth: Juan

When Juan turned 18, his SSI benefits were cut off. SSI benefits had been his only source of income, and he lost them just as he was leaving high school and the services and supports it provided. He had a mild intellectual disability, PTSD, and a mood disorder. He could barely leave the house except to see his therapist. He wanted to work and tried going to college, but he couldn't keep up in his classes without the extra help he had received in high school. He dropped out and was left with thousands of dollars in student loan debt.

- Those living below the federal poverty level are more than twice as likely to have depression as those at or above the poverty level.
- In Pennsylvania, 71% of youth are cut off from SSI disability benefits when they turn 18.

Family Challenges

- In Philadelphia each year, 3,500 babies are born to teen mothers, and 70% of the mothers drop out of high school.
- Their children are more likely than others to drop-out of school, become dependent, incarcerated, or teen parents themselves.
- Almost 25% of adolescents have been in a violent relationship, and teen girls who have been abused by an intimate partner are 4-6 times more likely to become pregnant than those who have not.
- Of children whose families were served by DHS in 2014, 44.9% were between the ages of 12 and 20.

Vulnerable Youth: Ana

Ana, a teen mother, was being abused by her boyfriend, who told her that she could leave the home, but could not take their child with her. Ana was afraid to ask for help, because she feared child welfare involvement. Panicked, Ana brandished a knife and tried to take their child out the door. He wrestled the knife from her and called the police. Ana was arrested and charged with several offenses related to the knife, resulting in a loss of custody to her much-older abuser.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The unique challenges vulnerable young people face as they transition to adulthood are complex and intersecting. Advocates working with youth must take into account the specific developmental hallmarks of adolescence, as well as the lack of supportive structures and services available to youth, to develop a more tailored and holistic approach.

New methods for working with youth should take into account the unique challenges they face. Advocates and agency staff should undergo implicit bias training as a first step towards addressing the severe racial and ethnic inequities that youth face. Advocates and service providers should connect with youth in their

communities to increase access to and utilization of services. Additional data should be gathered to ensure that new policies and practices are grounded in evidence. Finally, increased coordination among systems including child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and legal services will help insure that fewer youth fall through the cracks.

Youth advocates must do more to ensure that youth transitioning to adulthood do not fall through the cracks, but rather receive the continued support they need to transition successfully into adulthood and out of poverty.

Resources & Further Reading

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