Supporting Youth and Young Parents in Their Economic Mobility Journeys

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EMPath
Economic Mobility Pathways

About EMPath

Economic Mobility Pathways (EMPath) is a national nonprofit that dramatically improves the lives of people living in poverty. Because creating economic opportunity is multifaceted, our approach is too. We offer a unique combination of direct service, learning exchange, and research and advocacy for what works. This "virtuous circle" allows each part of our work to inform what we know, do, and share with others to seed systemic change.

Using our **research-backed method for one-on-one support**, we work directly with people living in poverty to help them climb the economic ladder.
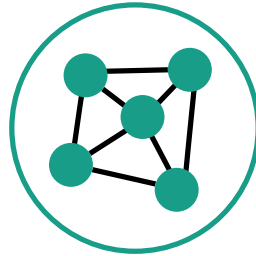
We lead a **global network** of human service organizations (the Economic Mobility Exchange™, or the Exchange) to help them get better results and re-envision the systems that serve people experiencing poverty.

We do **research** to inform our practice and **advocate** to take what works to scale.

Want Help Improving Outcomes in Your Organization?

EMPath's Exchange can provide:

- Training on Mobility Mentoring and goal setting for staff
- Technical assistance on transforming the goal setting culture at your organization
- Peer support and learning from over **160+ organizations** from across the country—and beyond
- And much more

Location of Exchange member organizations
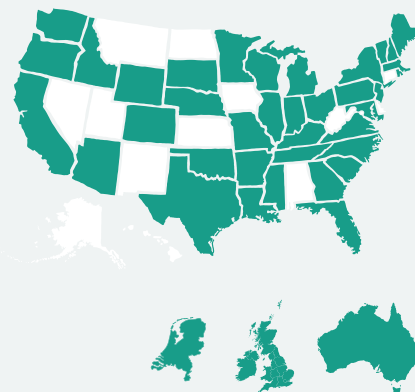
Fill out this form to learn more.

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Acknowledgements

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> There is an urgent need to support solutions that work for all youth experiencing poverty – creating effective pathways to enhanced well-being, continued economic opportunity, and beyond.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief provides an overview of the evidence surrounding the impacts of poverty on youth (up to age 25) and young families, and the benefits of promoting family economic stability and mobility for these populations. It highlights the work that a cohort of youth-serving organizations are doing to effectively engage and serve their participants with an economic mobility coaching model.
Four main areas of interest are covered:

The unique strengths of, and challenges faced by, young people experiencing poverty

* While adolescence and young adulthood is a time of self-discovery and investment in one's future, young people living in poverty sometimes suffer from so much stress that personal growth and planning for the future becomes much more challenging.

* Youth executive functioning skills are still in development, and they benefit from an approach that takes this into consideration.

* Youth are less likely to have experienced certain issues that can make planning for the future more difficult, such as incarceration and severe debt. There is an opportunity to intervene before things like this happen.

* Youth have higher rates of mental health issues and homelessness, compared to other older adults.

* Young people show incredible eagerness for economic mobility coaching, especially goal setting. When engaged, they display a lot of passion and energy.

Important differences between parenting and non-parenting youth

* Many young parents need to be more present-focused in their goal setting and tend to set more goals focused on their child and their immediate situation, sometimes to the detriment of their long-term education and career goals.

* Non-parenting youth are more likely to set long-term goals, but may have less urgency about goal completion.

Recruitment and engagement strategies for young participants

★ Key points include the critical need for prioritizing personal connection, flexibility, and care for both program participants and the coaches who work with them.

★ Youth need to be regularly asked about what technology works best for engaging them.

★ Offices are often not the best place to build rapport with young people. They prefer places where they feel more comfortable, such as cafes, parks, or simply taking walks.

Implementation/adaption of EMPath's specific economic mobility coaching tools (the Bridge to Self-Sufficiency™ and Goal Action Plans)

★ Staff need to frame the Bridge properly, in order to prevent young people – who are still at the beginning of their economic mobility journeys – from experiencing stress and judgment.

★ While many youth want to focus on academic goals, it is also important to explore a variety of Bridge pillars with them.

★ Like adults, youth need to feel autonomy in goal setting and benefit from having goals broken down.

We provide implications for both practitioners and future research.

Introduction

Poverty has pervasive and persistent effects across the lifespan. Research clearly demonstrates that youth—and particularly young parents—experience poverty at a disproportionate rate with severe consequences to not only their current and future well-being (mental, physical, and financial), but also for the overall health of the family unit.[1]

For a variety of reasons, human service organizations sometimes struggle to effectively connect with and support young people experiencing poverty. Most human service organizations are set up with adults as the default consumer, and although the organization may serve a large number of young people, they may not have the tools necessary to engage them. Organizations specifically designed to serve youth—which may excel at youth engagement—often aren't equipped to utilize a consistent, evidence-informed approach.

They may lack the tools needed to effectively support economic mobility, and they may not have access to continued learning and cross-sector sharing of proven intervention methods.

For human service organizations, policymakers, and funders interested in engaging and supporting young people living in poverty and promoting their economic mobility, this brief details the experience of a cohort of youth-serving organizations that have successfully implemented an economic mobility coaching model with youth and young parents. It highlights the unique strengths and challenges of this population, delves into important ways in which young parents differ from their childless peers, reviews successful recruitment and engagement strategies, and identifies places where existing tools may need to be adapted for the population. In addition to the findings of EMPath's primary

research, further implications for research and practice will be discussed for organizations exploring economic mobility coaching in their youth-serving programs.

Economic mobility coaching has been shown to improve outcomes for those living in poverty[2], including increased income, increases in higher education attainment, and decreases in debt. Economic Mobility Pathways (EMPath) has provided economic mobility coaching to adults and young people for almost 15 years, utilizing the Mobility Mentoring® model to help families move their way up the economic ladder and out of poverty.

Tools, such as EMPath's Bridge to Self Sufficiency™, provide a structure to assist coaches to work across a variety of domains in a participant's life, including housing, family, physical and mental wellbeing, social networks, finances, education and training, and career (see illustration p. 10). Coaches work in partnership with participants to strengthen their ability to prioritize, work toward future goals, and think through solutions when issues arise. In so doing, coaches scaffold the building of key skills, mindsets, and networks necessary for the complex task of moving sustainably out of poverty.

EMPath leads a network of 160+ human service organizations that learn about and adapt Mobility Mentoring in their own programs. This network, called the Economic Mobility Exchange™ (the Exchange), regularly comes together to share best practice and resources, tackle common issues, and consider the needs of specific sub-populations served.

BRIDGE TO SELF-SUFFICIENCY®

EMPath — Economic Mobility Pathways

FAMILY STABILITY		WELL-BEING		FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT		EDUCATION & TRAINING	EMPLOYMENT & CAREER
Housing	**Family**	**Physical & Mental Health**	**Networks**	**Debts**	**Savings**	**Educational Attainment**	**Earnings Levels***
No subsidy, housing costs 1/3 or less of household gross pay	Fully able to engage in work, school, and family life; children or family needs don't get in the way (OR) No children or dependent family members	Fully able to engage in work, school, and family life; health and mental health needs don't get in the way	Can always rely on networks to provide useful advice, guidance, and support; advocates for others	No debt other than mortgage, education, and/or car loans, and current in all debts	Savings of 3 months' expenses or more	Bachelor's degree or higher complete	Earnings ≥ 80% AMI (Family-Sustaining Wage) Household Size of: 1: ≥ $82,950 2: ≥ $94,800 3: ≥ $106,650 4: ≥ $118,450
No subsidy, housing costs exceed 1/3 household gross pay	Mostly able to engage in work, school, and family life; children or family needs rarely get in the way	Mostly able to engage in work, school, and family life; health or mental health needs rarely get in the way	Can often rely on networks to provide useful advice, guidance, and support	Current in all debts and making more than minimum payments on one or more debts	Savings of more than 2 months' expenses, but less than 3 months' expenses	Associate's degree or professional certification complete	Earnings = 50% - 79% AMI Household Size of: 1: $51,950 - $82,949 2: $59,400 - $94,799 3: $66,800 - $106,649 4: $74,200 - $118,449
Subsidized Housing - pays $300+ towards rent	Somewhat able to engage in work, school, and family life because of children or family needs	Somewhat able to engage in work, school, and family life because of health or mental health needs	Can sometimes rely on networks to provide useful advice, guidance, and support	Making minimum payments on all debts	Savings of at least one month's and up to 2 months' expenses	Job training or certificate complete (beyond high school)	Earnings = 30% - 49% AMI Household Size of: 1: $31,150 - $51,949 2: $35,600 - $59,399 3: $40,050 - $66,799 4: $44,500 - $74,199
Subsidized Housing - pays $0 - $299 towards rent	Barely able to engage in work, school, and family life because of children or family needs	Barely able to engage in work, school, and family life because of health or mental health needs	Can rarely rely on networks to provide useful advice, guidance, and support	Behind in payments of 1 or more debts and making payments on at least 1 debt	Savings of less than one month's expenses	High School Diploma or GED/HiSET complete	Earnings < 30% AMI Household Size of 1: < $31,150 2: < $35,600 3: < $40,050 4: < $44,500
Not permanently housed	Not able to engage in work, school, and family life because of children or family needs	Not able to engage in work, school, and family life because of health or mental health needs	Can never rely on networks to provide useful advice, guidance, and support	Has debts; currently not making any payments	No savings	Less than High School Diploma or GED/HiSET	Not currently employed

*Income ranges from HUD's FY2023 Income Limits for the Boston-Cambridge-Quincy, MA-NH HUD Metro FMR Area

THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE ↑

MAKING DECISIONS IN CONTEXT ←→

Mobility Mentoring's Effectiveness with Youth

EMPath rigorously evaluates our programs, in order to glean information about how they work and to improve practice. One important question for us during this learning cohort was whether Mobility Mentoring works in similar ways for youth and for older participants. Looking at data from participants in EMPath's shelter programs over the past seven years, we saw that youth heads of household (under age 25) have similarly strong outcomes to their older adult peers. Note that all participants in our shelter programs have children, so all the youth in this case would be young parents.

Youth goal setting looks remarkably similar to that of older adults in our programs: youth set a similar number of goals per year in our programs (7.5 compared to 7.4 for older adults), and set goals across all Bridge pillars in a similar way to older adults. While their goal achievement rate was slightly lower (62% compared to 67% for older adults) it was still very

strong, and their goals took about the same amount of time from creation to closing of the goal (just over three months for both groups).

Youth actually had better outcomes than older adults in some areas: they were more likely to report working (72% vs. 59%) and participating in education/training (48% vs. 36%) during their time in our programs.

All of this data, coupled with qualitative reports from the learning cohort about how well youth respond to the approach, make us confident in recommending Mobility Mentoring to youth- and youth parent-serving organizations.

What is Mobility Mentoring? 4 Essential Elements
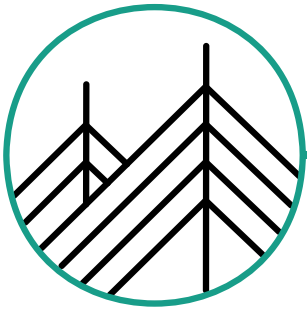
The Bridge to Self-Sufficiency™ Framework

The Bridge serves as both a theory of change and a self-assessment tool for participants. This tool helps them to understand where they are currently, where they want to go, and how different domains of their lives impact each other. Importantly, the Bridge helps participants to look at all five important domains pertaining to economic well-being in their lives at once: family stability, which includes housing and family; well-being, which includes physical and mental health, along with social networks; financial management, which includes debts and savings; education and training, and employment and career (see illustration p. 10)

Coaching for Economic Mobility

EMPath approaches coaching as a participant-directed one-on-one partnership. Coaches work with participants to strengthen their decision-making, persistence, and resilience over time. Coaching staff (known at EMPath as Mobility Mentors) act as "human scaffolding" for building the skills and mindsets necessary for the complex task of moving out of poverty. Coaching builds skills over time through interaction between coaches and participants, ultimately preparing the participant to tackle future goals independently.

Goal Setting

The Bridge to Self-Sufficiency acts as a blueprint for participants to determine and set their own goals. Mentors support participants in prioritizing what they'd like to work on, strategizing around potential barriers and challenges, and thinking through options for additional resources and support. Mentors offer encouragement, facilitate reflection, and, if necessary, help participants refocus. As participants achieve goals, they move up the Bridge closer to economic self-sufficiency.

Recognition

Recognition acknowledges and celebrates a participant when they are working toward and when they accomplish a goal. Types of recognition may include cash or cash-equivalent incentives, along with celebrations of success, certificates, and supportive messages.

The Learning Cohort

Methodology

For this project, EMPath collected qualitative data from a cohort of six youth-serving agencies that are members of the Exchange, plus EMPath. The full cohort had a focus group on the topic, which was followed by a round of one-on-one interviews with certain cohort members. These organizations were selected for their established work with youth experiencing poverty in their respective locales, as well as their existing successes in implementing EMPath's Mobility Mentoring model with young participants. Finally, a second focus group was held, serving to validate, amend, and otherwise provide additional context to the project's preliminary conclusions. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative analysis software. This software was used to identify recurring themes between, and within, groups of interest across organizations, with thematic findings helping to inform the interview protocol for the organizational interviews to follow.

Learning Cohort Findings

The findings from the focus groups and interviews are grouped according to four main areas of interest:

The unique strengths of, and challenges faced by, young people experiencing poverty;

Important differences between parenting and non-parenting youth;

Recruitment and engagement strategies for young participants; and

Implementation/adaption of EMPath's economic mobility coaching tools (the "Bridge" and Goal Action Plans)

Before considering how to work with young people experiencing poverty, it was important for this cohort to discuss and come to some consensus around general characteristics that define that population. While there are no absolutes—every individual is an individual, and has their own unique history, passions, strengths, and interests—there are some general things to keep in mind when working with the population.

Many young people—whether living in poverty or not—understand that they are in or entering a time where they are laying the groundwork for the rest of their lives. They understand that they need to invest in their success, academically and otherwise. The basic developmental task of adolescence and young adulthood is figuring out who you are, who you want to become, and what you will make of your life. This is a time of significant opportunity when young people are creating and shaping identities about themselves.

However, as reported by cohort members, youth experiencing poverty are often living in "survival mode," which makes this kind of future orientation and self-reflection more difficult. Like adults experiencing poverty, these youth may be constantly bombarded by the stresses of hunger, violence, oppression, and uncertainty. This can cause a certain "tunnel vision" that makes looking toward the future more difficult, and disrupts the ability to consider "who am I and what do I want to become." Their attention is often focused on what needs to be done now.

We want to encourage all young people to think about their futures, to dream big, and to set goals that will enable them to have the kinds of futures they want. At the same time, we need to make sure that we are paying attention to the young person's immediate needs. For coaches working with young people living in poverty, this is an important balance to strike for effective engagement. Whether they have children or not, young people experiencing poverty often have adult concerns around basic food, shelter, and safety, and we need to make sure these needs are met.

At the same time, all youth function with still-developing executive functioning skills. Because these skills aren't fully developed until age 25 or so, youth may need additional support in the skills of planning, flexibility/adaptation, strategizing, and organization. For youth experiencing poverty, the stresses associated with their day-to-day existence can cause additional strains on these key skills. When working with this age group, using an approach that is built upon an understanding of how best to support these skills, like Mobility Mentoring's approach can make all the difference.

Another major strength of all young people, compared to older adults, is that they simply have had less time to experience the kinds of issues that can seriously derail economic mobility. For example, they are less likely to be deeply in debt[3] or have experiences with the criminal justice system[4]. Compared to older adults, they have had fewer of the negative life experiences that can make a better future seem unattainable. For coaches there is a huge opportunity to educate and intervene before major issues arise.

An unfortunate challenge faced by many of the young participants in this specific cohort, both parents and non-parenting youth, is a lack of traditional family supports. Many of the youth served in the programs in the cohort have experienced traumatic upbringings, homelessness, or have grown up in foster care without as much guidance as they would like. The population served in programs like these is less likely to have had a consistent, supportive adult in their lives. As such, extra follow-up and flexibility in a mentor's schedule are essential. While program mentors can never fill the shoes of a parental figure, they can be trusted, consistent, and supportive adults for young participants.

Finally, in the United State, youth as a whole are more likely to have mental health issues and are less likely than adults to get treatment[5]. Also, compared to adults, they are at greater risk of experiencing homelessness[6]. It is important for coaches working with young people to understand these risks, and to have connections to resources for mental-health counseling and shelter.

Despite the challenges, cohort members report that young participants show up excited and resilient. Young participants indeed tend to show more excitement than their adult counterparts at the prospect of setting goals. This may be the first instance for many youth in which they are encouraged to set goals independent of an adult's moderating influence. Participants deeply appreciate the freedom that Mobility Mentoring allows them to explore what is important to them, and how the various aspects of their lives can intertwine and affect other aspects of their lives. Because such a big part of young adulthood is the development of autonomy, nurturing independence in our programs is key.

While all youth share certain similarities, there are key differences between parenting and non-parenting youth. In our work, we consider how these differences impact their engagement in economic mobility coaching programs, and how our can programs adapt to better support both groups. Most cohort members worked with at least a fraction of young parents, usually mothers, and some worked almost exclusively with them. While non-parents account for the majority of the youth population aged 16-22, young parents are disproportionately more likely to be involved in human service programs, either by enrollment in government assistance programs or connection with supportive nonprofits.

No matter what age you are, having a baby puts new demands on your body, mind, and finances. Even in the best circumstances, having a child represents a major disruption to "normal" life. For a young parent, once the baby comes, there is an added element of having to grow up very fast. The responsibility for a baby can be a major motivator—nothing makes people want to change their lives for the better like a new baby. But the stress of having to take care of a baby with few resources and little support can be overwhelming.

Because of all of the demands placed on them, parenting youth tend to be much more intensely crisis-focused compared to their peers without children. Such a mindset is a common side effect of experiencing long-term, chronic, and/or generational adversity, and is more likely to be present in young parents. Further compounding the effects of living in "crisis mode," chronic stress can plummet the executive functioning skills necessary to achieve long-term goals.

Mobility Mentoring provides a trauma-informed, strengths-focused model to support young parents, prioritizing unconditional positive regard for the young person. It is specifically structured to help people create space to build the skills of planning, organization, and decision-making that will be key for their future success.

Differences in Goal Setting

Cohort members report that the parenting youth they work with are often caught in an unfortunate push-and-pull between the expectations to invest in long-term success and those to prioritize their child in the here and now. They also often lack positive role models from which to draw advice or experience. This complex and extremely stressful environment in which young parents have children who rely on them, while having very few people to turn to for support, provides a significant challenge for young parents, and their goals can often reflect their more urgent needs.

Generally, non-parenting youth are more likely to focus on long-term goals and are better able to hold space to "trust the process" in long-term goal setting. Cohort members report that non-parenting youth tend to focus on goals in the Education or Career pillars of the Bridge, using their time with mentors to explore opportunities, identify supportive resources, and otherwise gain support in long-term planning. This can contrast with parenting youth, who may have more pressing needs and therefore "push back" if encouraged to focus on longer-term goals. Whereas non-parenting youth are better able to take their time to achieve larger goals while making short-term sacrifices, parenting youth are often shouldered with an increased burden to make more money as quickly as possible so they can meet the increased costs of housing and childcare.

Many young parents served by cohort members were more focused on technical degrees and certifications that can increase their earning potential in the short term, as opposed to their non-parenting counterparts who may be more likely to invest in traditional, longer-term higher education. While the challenges faced by non-parenting youth

are by no means easy, their lack of dependents can mean that they have more time and energy to focus on themselves.

Coaches can support parenting youth by connecting them with the necessary concrete resources and by helping them manage competing priorities within the controlled context of the mentoring relationship. Prioritizing the use of the mentoring space as a place where parenting youth have valuable time to think on a broader scale can help them strategize for success in the long term while also building up critical executive functioning skills such as task management, metacognition, and prioritization.

Coaches also have an important role to play in helping youth — and especially parenting youth — learn to take care of themselves. Mental burnout and physical exhaustion are real concerns for these youth. Coaches can help reinforce the importance of "putting on your own mask first;" that is, making sure their own needs are met so that they are better able to care for others.

Recruitment and Engagement Strategies

The main focus of this study was to explore how exactly organizations recruit and engage young participants experiencing poverty. What methods do established organizations utilize to target young people who may benefit from an economic mobility coaching program? What processes have proven successful in recruiting and enrolling these participants, and how are organizations crafting service provision in a way that is meaningful enough to keep young people engaged in self-improvement?

Using Technology to Recruit and Engage Youth

The use of social media in programs is often key to engaging youth, although the ever-changing nature of what apps youth are using and what is out of fashion requires constant updating. For instance, cohort members reported that public Facebook groups used to be an extremely effective way of engaging youth on social media. However, the drop in Facebook's popularity with youth has meant that programs have lost these groups as an engagement tool. Young people served by programs in this cohort favor Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram — none of which have the same public group feature as Facebook's.

Programs have found that direct messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Slack, or Facebook Messenger can be a good starting place for building online communities in today's environment. By "direct messaging app," we mean any app in which users can send text messages over the internet directly to an individual or in a group chat. Having an official program group chat can provide a casual, 24-hour space for the participant cohort to connect and communicate. These apps can also have uses beyond community engagement: coaches can use them to have a separate line of communication with participants or quickly disseminate event and program information. And while email, text, or a simple call can also achieve these goals, youth seem much more likely to read and respond if communicated with via app.

It should be noted that by the time of publication, this advice may already be out-of-date – tastes change very quickly, and asking youth participants themselves what online communities they use is the best strategy to make an informed and relevant decision.

Cohort members reported a variety of recruitment methods they use to connect with youth in need, including foster and group homes, academic partnerships, parental referral, targeted outreach, referrals from children's services agencies, juvenile justice offices including truancy court and juvenile detention centers, referrals from community partners, word of mouth, and hosting community events like baby showers. School-aged participants are recruited primarily through academic institutions (partnerships with local schools, social worker/guidance counselor referrals, etc.).

For young parents, recruitment strategies are largely the same as those for youth in general but are expanded to include doctor's offices, Head Start programs, childcare partners, teen parenting programs (including housing for teen parents), child welfare placements, and referrals through other state agencies such as Health and Human Services. Reported engagement strategies for all groups are largely centered around keeping services attuned to each young participant's needs and building community within programs.

Recruitment by Referral

One recruitment strategy highlighted by cohort members is partnering with other local youth-serving organizations to advertise or provide awareness for wrap-around coaching supports. Medical practices including mental health offices, youth-serving governmental agencies, including the foster system, and parallel youth programs such as family planning agencies, were all referenced as successful referral sources for EMPath's partner organizations.

This strategy could prove even more effective in recruiting young parents, as participants from this population are more likely to already be involved in supportive programs and/or to be in regular communication with health professionals such as doctors or therapists. In addition to strengthening supports for youth and young parents experiencing poverty, this approach also has the added effect of keeping coaching programs connected with, and engaged in, their local communities on a larger scale.

Engagement Strategies

Keeping young participants engaged in economic mobility coaching programs is a universally reported challenge for cohort members, yet the long-term benefits of a program aimed at building participants' executive functioning skills and economic mobility are apparent.

Life Skills

EMPath's focus on developing executive functioning skills runs in tidy parallel with youth and coaches' desire to develop so-called "life skills." For young participants, some of whom may not have had a strong parental figure in their lives, learning how to perform basic life and household tasks such as cooking, cleaning/doing laundry, learning how to find an apartment, filing their taxes, etc., on a regular basis are made easier with strong executive functioning skills. Many adolescents understand that essential life skills such as schedule management, personal hygiene, and general organization will further serve them as they seek degrees, certificates, and/or sustainable careers. Coaches and program managers reported these

general life skills as a widespread necessity for young participants, even using this approach as an "on-ramp" to the Bridge that helps participants plan for bigger professional goals. Cohort members have already implemented inventive methods to engage young participants in these areas, including hosting cooking classes, grocery shopping with participants, and teaching table manners at "family lunches."

Academics

According to practitioners, it is important to maintain an academic aspect in their programs because youth are motivated to engage in programs that can support them in their academic pursuits such as applying for college, enrolling in certificate programs, or maintaining their grades. For younger participants, this draw often involves gaining support to finish high school or attain their GED. Thus, partnering with local schools to get the message out about programs that can support adolescents and young adults in their academic pursuits has proven an organic starting point for many economic mobility programs.

Goal Setting

A major function of Mobility Mentoring is its capacity to build a participant's motivation, confidence, and self-efficacy in order to equip participants with the tools they need to accomplish goals on their own. Many cohort members reported that the goal setting process has been a useful tool and a motivating force for young participants who might be setting goals for the first time in their lives. As many young participants, and especially minors, have never held autonomy in the decision-making aspect of their lives, emphasizing their agency in the goal setting process not only allows them to explore what it is they actually want but can also allow them to bolster their intrinsic motivation to get things done. Coaches can then leverage that motivation to help participants set goals more quickly and effectively.

Supportive Community

One of the paramount ways for organizations to keep young participants engaged in programs is to provide a healthy and supportive community within the program. This speaks to not only the provision of a safe and welcoming space by staff but also the fostering of strong peer support networks among the participants themselves. The importance of professional networking is often touted as critical for a young person's long-term success and building informal spaces for youth to network with each other, especially for youth who are housed together, can pave the way for professional networking while allowing them to garner stronger social supports along the way. Programs report catalyzing these connections by offering regular social events (food always helps here!), focus groups or group mentoring sessions, and peer-to-peer buddy programs. Communities of support, then, have not just the benefit of keeping participants engaged in-program, but also serve to help them build critical networking skills for the long term.

Getting Out of the Office

The office environment has never been well-known for being a relaxing or warm setting, but this fact may be doubly true for youth. One of the key recommendations from the cohort was that youth tend to feel stifled and inauthentic in offices, which may have major implications when a coach is trying to honestly and genuinely connect with them during sessions. While the office setting might be the ideal place for coaches to set up a safe, consistent, and trauma-informed space for their older adult participants, youth can sometimes find that same environment "fake" and oppressive. Cohort members recommend keeping the option open to have a mentoring session outside of the office to circumvent this discomfort.

While programs have traditionally performed off-site visits at participants' homes, that does not necessarily need to be the case with youth; some might find it even more uncomfortable to meet at their homes, for a variety of reasons. Cohort mentors report taking youth out for coffee or lunch at a café, going grocery shopping, or even taking a

walk to a nearby park – any space that takes them out of the office and into a space youth might have more familiarity with can help them open up and be honest about their situation and their goals for their life. Youth also may also feel more comfortable opening up about deeper issues or challenges in these settings than in a sterile office environment.

Cohort members still recommend that staff meet with participants in the office for more formal sessions like goal setting meetings or filling out paperwork. In these settings, the formal office environment can lend weight to the conversation and help participants concentrate. However, meeting outside of the office is generally an excellent way to build more authentic and more meaningful relationships between mentors and participants.

Underpinning EMPath's success in implementing the Mobility Mentoring model among adults are the Bridge to Self-Sufficiency and Goal Action Plan tools. Over the course of our interview series, cohort members were questioned on how they used the tools with young participants, what (if any) adaptations they made, and how successful or challenging these approaches were for them. This section outlines the major themes that arose in our analysis of their responses.

Contextualizing the Bridge

The Bridge to Self-Sufficiency is one of the essential elements of Mobility Mentoring, which helps coaches and participants get a snapshot of where a participant is in their economic mobility journey, helps participants see how different aspects of their lives interconnect to influence their economic mobility, and helps prime them to think of goals to work toward in the future.

A few members reported, though, that some youth participants can be discouraged by looking at their Bridges. The Bridge was designed for adults at various points in their economic mobility journeys, and in many of the domains such as career, education, or debts and savings, youth will be at the "bottom" of the pillar. Without proper framing, this can make participants feel that they've failed right out of the gate. However, through contextualization and honest discussion with participants, coaches can help them understand that this is a normal starting place.

For youth, it's difficult, if not impossible, for them to not be on the bottom of some Bridge pillars: they simply haven't had enough time in their economic mobility journey to attain higher education credentials, get jobs that pay family-sustaining wages, or save significant amounts of money. Making sure that young participants understand that they are not failures for being at the start of their economic mobility journey has been a key

factor in the long-term success of youth-facing programs. Additional time needs to be spent on training staff to properly frame the Bridge for young participants so that coaches and participants have a positive experience with the tool. Coaches should talk about the Bridge as a snapshot in time and use it in a future-oriented way to help participants feel motivated for the next step in their journeys.

The Bridge is an important tool that can help coaches work with participants to identify strengths and dreams. By paying attention to all of the pillars, coaches can identify areas where youth are doing really well. And they can stress the idea of moving up each pillar, identifying places where the young person is most motivated to climb.

The Importance of Education and Educational Goal Setting

All programs interviewed reported that youth often focus on their education and set goals to acquire certifications and/or degrees. Pursuing higher education can often seem like a natural continuation for youth after years in school, as societal expectations tend to revolve around attaining qualifications for higher-paying, long-term careers. As mentioned previously, incorporating support for young participants pursuing academics is a useful tool in keeping participants more engaged, and for longer — for both young parents and non-parents.

Additionally, however, it is important for coaches to pay attention to all of the pillars of the Bridge, and to actively listen for "goal talk" in all domains. While education may be the young person's primary interest, so many things can overlap with that: for example, mental health issues, if left unattended, can derail academic progress. In addition, without proper planning, education can quickly lead to overwhelming debt. It is important for coaches to explore all domains of a young participant's life, and not focus solely on education.

Breaking Down Goals

When setting education goals, cohort members report that young participants can seem "daunted" by the scope of accomplishing such large tasks, and rightfully so. Setting a goal to "get a bachelor's degree," for instance, can feel instantly overwhelming and thus unattainable; luckily, coaches report greater success in helping participants break down big education goals into smaller, more actionable steps. Using the example of getting a bachelor's degree, a coach might break down the goal to first "get into a bachelor's program," with the following action steps:

✱ Research programs in the fields I'm interested in

✱ Fill out my FAFSA application

✱ Apply to my top 5 college choices

Once this goal is achieved, the coach can help the participant with the next step in the journey, such as successfully completing a semester. Progressive goal setting means that the goals a participant sets build on each other so that a much larger goal can be achieved. Taking this simple approach can help participants take on larger, multi-year goals while still recognizing their progress in the short term.

Autonomy

To build a foundation of intrinsic motivation, young participants should also be supported and encouraged to explore what it is they want for themselves, as opposed to what they feel they "should" do. Because youth are often inundated by parental and societal expectations and have spent most of their lives following orders from elders and authority figures, it is important to encourage a sense of autonomy as a way to support young participants on their journey to adulthood.

These recommendations are especially true for youth in historically underserved populations such as immigrants, foster and homeless youth, and those from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds. While these youth often understand that higher education is something that would benefit them greatly, they often have not been encouraged as much in academic settings. A coach's duty is to have high expectations for every young person, believe that they can in fact achieve their goals, and encourage and support them to believe the same.

Lessons Learned and Looking Forward

This section will outline specific lessons and strategies that organizations can apply directly to their work with youth experiencing poverty. As always, circumstances will differ widely based on the personal, familial, and community contexts in which participants and programs exist. However, the following lessons and strategies should help interested organizations identify best practices in supporting youth participants in economic mobility programs.

Making Space for Relationships

A critical approach in doing this work is the development of authentic and impactful relationships by allowing participants the time and space to relax and open up organically to their coaches and program staff. Building rapport here is essential and, according to cohort members, young participants can tend to seem uncomfortable and "close up" in more formal settings. As mentioned above, partner organizations have intentionally

crafted approaches in putting youth at ease while maintaining professional boundaries; specific examples given include meeting participants in a coffee shop, going for a walk outside together, visiting a park, or going grocery shopping together. Mentors note that young participants seem more likely to open up about their lives and express vulnerability when they are not in a more formal office setting. This leads to a more authentic and productive relationship. While coaches do recommend meeting in the office for more formal processes such as intake or goal setting sessions, informal out-of-office meetings can strengthen the mentor-mentee relationship and supercharge the trust-building process.

Flexibility as a Critical Approach

Flexibility is critical for a successful, responsive youth coaching program as young participants may require extra room to maneuver while orienting themselves in an adult world. Younger brains—and

specifically the prefrontal cortex, an important brain structure for executive functioning—are not fully developed until humans are approximately 25 years old[7], meaning young adults are more likely to struggle with tasks older adults may find simple such as scheduling an appointment or being on time to a meeting.

Awareness in a program, then, that youth can be more likely to be late, not pick up a call, or commit other logistical errors is key to maintaining flexibility. When working with older adults, events such as these may signal a participant's disinterest in the program; when working with youth, however, these actions may signal something like social anxiety rather than disengagement, especially in a post-pandemic environment. Cohort members stress that staff have to learn not to take personally things like missed meetings. As mentioned earlier, sometimes it can be beneficial to provide gentle scaffolding with young participants and remind them that logistical details matter. Coaches have to strike a balance, supporting participants while not doing too much for them.

Extra follow-up is often needed with youth participants, especially those in deeper crisis such as young parents, homeless youth, and more. Cohort members recommend that coaches wait longer for a youth participant to arrive, call one more time to re-engage with them, or reach out to friends and family as well if needed.

Protecting Their Peace: Strategies for Minimizing Staff "Burnout"

Coaching youth participants can be emotionally taxing for both youth and staff. The semi-familial relationship that can sometimes develop between adult coaches and their young participants can lead to extremely strong bonds, but it can also mean that coaches are more impacted when a participant is struggling. The risks of secondhand trauma are significant for coaches, which could lead to burnout and other negative mental health impacts if left unchecked. While it is important for any program to include mental health support for its staff, programs working with young people experiencing poverty may require even more support to meet the demands of the more emotionally taxing environment.

★ Programs can support coaches by giving them space, literally and metaphorically. Cohort members recommend several strategies: some offer coaches a number of mental health days to use (no questions asked) if a coach is feeling particularly overwhelmed or has had a particularly difficult session.

★ For meetings with participants outside of the office, allow coaches breathing room to travel to and from sessions, and don't be surprised if regular travel means less time in the office addressing other tasks.

★ Mobility Mentoring coaching as a parallel process is also an effective strategy. One organization recommended having a dedicated time of the week when staff can meet and discuss challenges with the supervisor. Having a space where staff can feel heard and have a space to simply vent is an easy way to improve their ability to serve participants.

★ In addition, having regular "practice" supervision times built in for direct service staff (as well as provided "as needed") is an effective strategy to allow practitioners to reflect on how the work is impacting them personally. It also creates an opportunity to address any concerning changes in staff behavior or to create or modify a plan of care.

Implications for Research

Further research could focus on understanding how additional risk factors may interact and compound the negative effects of poverty on young adults. Some of these additional risk factors include mental health issues and trauma, community and domestic violence, racism and other forms of oppression, and homelessness.

Finally, further research should focus on policy levers for improving the lives of youth who are living in poverty—whether parenting or not. While this hasn't been the focus of this brief, we recognize that there is much that could be done to remedy inequities for young people living in poverty, and especially for youth of color. Cash supports, free public postsecondary education, student debt forgiveness, subsidized child care, and affordable housing are all areas that would benefit from additional societal investment to ensure that all young people have a chance to thrive.

Conclusion

Findings from this project demonstrate that youth and young parents living in poverty require unique considerations that should be intentionally incorporated into coaching programs to effectively support their long-term economic mobility. Our findings also show that, while both parenting and non-parenting youth share many commonalities, it is critical to a program's success to recognize their differences as well.

We have found that economic mobility coaching—specifically EMPath's Mobility Mentoring model—indeed works well with youth and young parents because it:

* prioritizes the coaching relationship,
* provides a holistic and evidence-based approach to goal setting, and
* emphasizes personal agency throughout

Further, the flexibility of EMPath's coaching model creates opportunities to successfully support youth by adapting the approach to incorporate youths' unique developmental tasks, preferences, and challenges.

Although the current Mobility Mentoring model and tools do work well for this population, this cohort has identified certain areas where a refinement of current tools could enhance the overall efficacy of the approach in working with young participants. For example, a next step will be to adapt a conversation guide and training programs for engaging youth on the Bridge to Self Sufficiency.

Mobility Mentoring, as it does with adults, offers youth and young parents a clear pathway to develop necessary life skills in their pursuit of economic mobility. Unlike adults, however, adolescents lack the practical experience of their more mature counterparts. Thus, adolescents experiencing poverty are forced to take on any number of adult-sized challenges at a time when their executive functioning skills are still developing.

The disproportionate number of youth and young parents living in poverty perpetuates detrimental impacts to individuals, families, and communities on a grand and intergenerational scale. There is an urgent need to support solutions that work for all youth experiencing poverty, creating effective pathways to enhanced well-being, continued economic opportunity, and beyond.

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