# ISSUE BRIEF

# A Framework for Advancing the Well-Being and Self-Sufficiency of At-Risk Youth

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*For many youth, the path to economic self-suffi-ciency in adulthood is challenging. For those who lack stable family support, have grown up in deep poverty, or have been exposed to repeated violence and abuse as children, the path can seem insur-mountable.[1] Such youth, and youth who are severely disadvantaged in other ways, are at high risk of dropping out of school, engaging in delinquent or criminal behavior, becoming homeless, abusing drugs or alcohol, or becoming teen parents—further limiting their prospects for labor market success).[2]*

*Programs to help at-risk youth take a wide range of approaches. Although we know a lot about the needs of such youth, we often lack solid scientific evidence about what approaches work. This brief summarizes a research-based framework that can serve as the foundation for efforts to move at-risk youth toward positive social, emotional and eco-nomic functioning in adulthood. The framework suggests the possibility of using evidence-informed interventions to address two primary areas: youth's resilience and human capital development, and reflects existing knowledge from research and practice across many fields.[3]*

## Theoretical Perspectives

The framework draws on two lines of research: the theory of risk and resilience and the theory of capital development. Resilience refers to the ability to withstand adverse circumstances. It can be developed by promoting protective factors or by reducing risk

### About This Series

The Youth Demonstration Development issue brief series provides information for organizations that serve at-risk youth transitioning to adulthood. Funded by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation in the Administra-tion for Children and Families, the three-brief series is part of a larger project that developed a framework for promoting the well-being and self-sufficiency of at-risk youth. This brief summarizes the conceptual framework. Another brief explores occupations in health care and construction that hold promise for at-risk youth in search of employment that does not require extensive educa-tion or training. A third brief describes differences in economic well-being between youth who self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) and youth who self-identify as heterosexual. For more information about the Youth Demonstration Development project, please see http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/index.html.

factors that threaten healthy development.[4] Decades of research have identified a wide range of risk and protective factors at the level of the individual, family, and community that predict adult outcomes. Social isolation and exposure to traumatic events are two examples of risk factors at the individual level. At the family level, examples include frequent conflict, parental substance abuse, and child maltreatment. Risk factors at the community level include violent and distressed or resource-deprived neigh-borhoods. Protective factors, in contrast, include such strengths and assets as cognitive ability, social skills, positive relationships with role models, and neighborhood resources.

The capital development perspective suggests that youth need specific knowledge, connections, skills, and resources to succeed in school and the workplace. Four types of capi-tal have been identified—human capital (for example, skills and knowledge), social capital (examples include opportuni-ties to make connections through social networks), cultural capital (such as the knowledge and practice of behaviors and values that are needed for success in academic and employ-ment settings), and economic capital (for example, the financial resources necessary to invest in self-development).[5] At-risk youth often lack one or more of these types of capital, limiting

their ability to pursue the education and training needed to improve their prospects for labor market success.

The two perspectives of resilience and capital development are complementary. Building resilience can create the conditions necessary for developing capital, and developing capital can contribute to greater resilience. Youth who do not have the social or emotional capacity to develop work-related skills or the social connections that could lead to stable employment will not benefit from programs that aim only to increase human capital. Conversely, programs that focus only on resilience are likely to be inadequate for preparing at-risk youth for economic self-sufficiency. Programs that do not already take both perspectives into consideration may be improved by combining the two approaches.
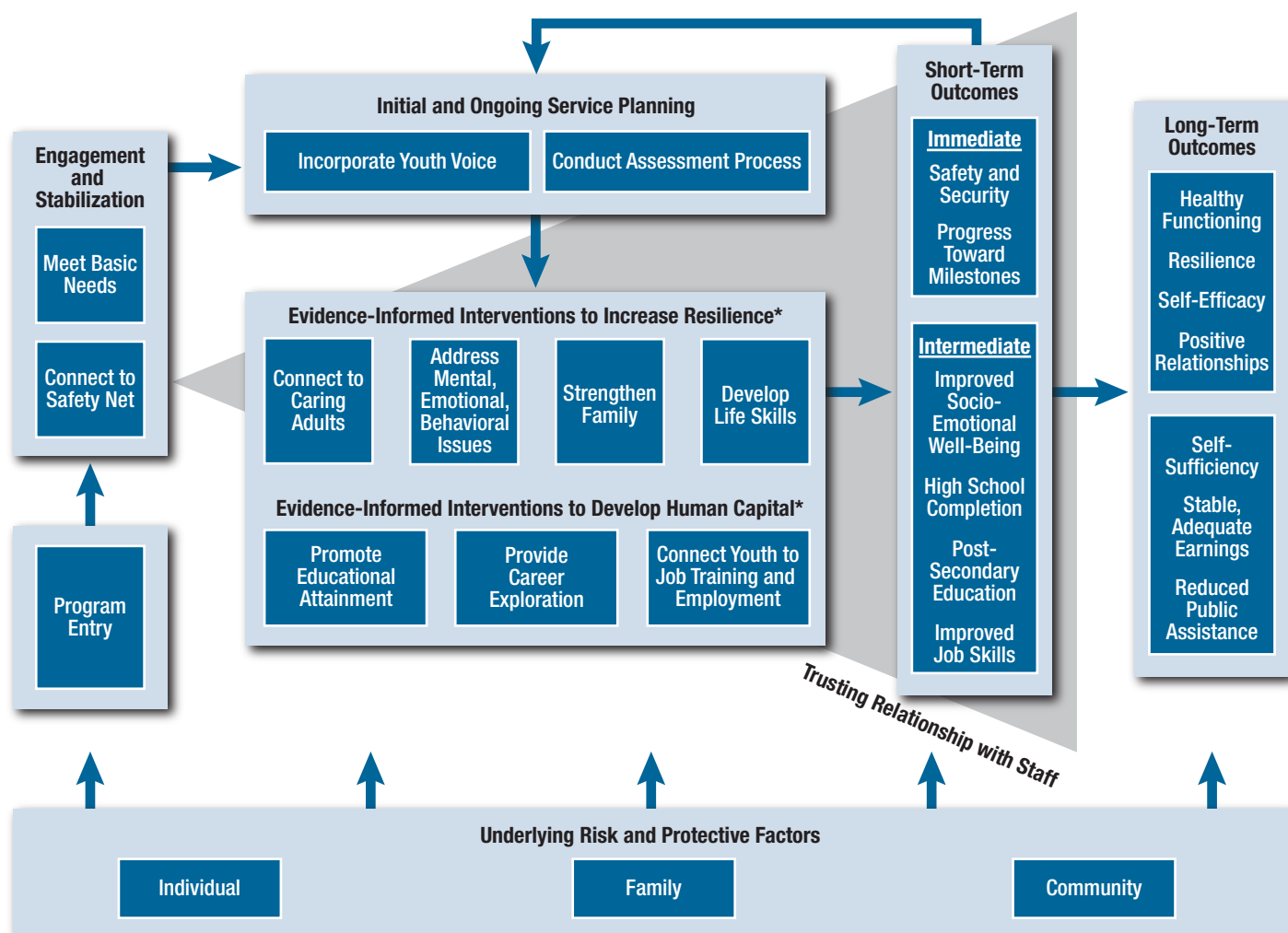
## Framework Overview

Figure 1 displays the core elements of the conceptual framework in the order that they typically occur. Youth enter programs with risk and protective factors that reflect their background and experiences. Their immediate needs are addressed and, as they begin developing a trusting relationship with program staff, they engage in initial service planning that incorporates their voices in assessing their needs. The assessment is then used to match youth with specific interventions to increase resilience and human capital, and they work toward immediate and short-term goals. Because youth are continually developing and encountering new challenges and circumstances, re-assessments are envisioned after each service is completed, as indicated by the arrow in Figure 1 that cycles back from the short-term outcomes to service planning.

## Engagement and Stabilization

All youth transitioning to adulthood have increasing developmental needs for autonomy and a sense of control over their lives. In addition, some at-risk youth have experienced negative events in the past that may cause them to generally distrust institutions and programs, or adults in general. These factors can complicate efforts to identify needs and to engage youth in services. For these reasons, at-risk youth should be approached in a way that is respectful of their past histories; supportive of their development, interests and strengths; and conducive to building a trusting relationship.

- **Develop Trusting Relationships Between Youth and Staff.** As depicted by the triangle in Figure 1, a trusting relationship between the youth and program staff will help in assessing

**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Advancing the Self-Sufficiency and Well-Being of At-Risk Youth**



**Engagement and Stabilization**
- Meet Basic Needs
- Connect to Safety Net

**Program Entry**

**Initial and Ongoing Service Planning**
- Incorporate Youth Voice
- Conduct Assessment Process

**Evidence-Informed Interventions to Increase Resilience***
- Connect to Caring Adults
- Address Mental, Emotional, Behavioral Issues
- Strengthen Family
- Develop Life Skills

**Evidence-Informed Interventions to Develop Human Capital***
- Promote Educational Attainment
- Provide Career Exploration
- Connect Youth to Job Training and Employment

**Short-Term Outcomes**

Immediate
- Safety and Security
- Progress Toward Milestones

Intermediate
- Improved Socio-Emotional Well-Being
- High School Completion
- Post-Secondary Education
- Improved Job Skills

**Long-Term Outcomes**
- Healthy Functioning
- Resilience
- Self-Efficacy
- Positive Relationships

- Self-Sufficiency
- Stable, Adequate Earnings
- Reduced Public Assistance

Trusting Relationship with Staff

**Underlying Risk and Protective Factors**
- Individual
- Family
- Community

*Interventions are selected based on each youth's assessment results.

needs and delivering program services effectively.[6] Developing trusting relationships should be an organic, gradual process. Giving youth some freedom to choose which staff members they will work with may help this process. Once a relationship begins to form, staff continuity can help the relationship develop into a trusting bond.

- **Meet Basic Needs.** Some youth may come to the attention of youth-serving organizations when they are in a state of crisis, needing food, clothing, health care, or a safe place to sleep. Others may be experiencing an emotional crisis; they may lack safety or security or feel threatened, abandoned, or alienated. When youth are in crisis, responding to these immediate needs before attempting to engage them in lengthy assessments or long-term services is likely to reduce their immediate stress and make them receptive to engaging with staff.

- **Connect to Safety Net.** Meeting immediate needs is only a first step in what can be a long journey from crisis to economic self-sufficiency. To allow youth the time to participate in program services and build their resilience and capital, they may need to be connected to the public safety net, which can serve as a bridge toward self-sufficiency. Staff can help youth understand what benefits are available to them, access services, and navigate the sometimes challenging world of public assistance. Stable youth are in a better position to avoid risky behavior and unsafe circumstances and focus on their future.

## Service Planning

Since each young person entering a program has a unique constellation of risk and protective factors, a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be effective. Engaging youth in services that are most likely to strengthen their specific protective factors and reduce their specific risk factors is a more strategic way of targeting interventions. Two factors to consider in service planning include:

- **Youth Voice.** Actively engaging in their own service planning may be particularly beneficial for vulnerable youth. When youth feel they have a voice, they have the opportunity to develop agency, confidence, and self-efficacy.[7] Moreover, research suggests that youth are more likely to be active program participants when they feel they have both a powerful voice in program decision making and supportive relationships with adult staff.[8]

- **Assessment.** To best match youth with appropriate services, the framework includes a comprehensive and ongoing assessment process that reflects the complex and developing nature of the youths' lives. Early assessments can focus on basic needs; more sensitive topics can be addressed once youth have developed a trusting relationship with staff. Periodically reassessing youth will ensure that they continue to be matched to services that reflect the changing goals, growth, skills, and exposure to risks that are part of a young adult's life course. Key areas to consider are (1) risk and protective factors, (2) life skills, (3) career readiness, and (4) mental, emotional, and behavioral health. There are numerous research-based instruments to assess youth for the purpose of tailoring services.

## Evidence-Informed Interventions to Build Resilience and Human Capital

Interventions to increase resilience aim to reduce risk factors and build up protective factors to improve socioemotional well-being. Because the specific mix of risk and protective factors will be different for each youth, a tailored approach is warranted. To address this diversity, a range of interventions to increase resilience are suggested in four key areas:

- **Connect Youth to Caring Adults.** Mentoring programs aim to improve youth outcomes by fostering healthy relationships with caring adults. Studies focused on mentoring have found a range of positive effects, however, youth with histories of abuse or psychological disorders do not appear to benefit from adult mentoring.[9]

- **Address Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Issues.** A host of evidence-informed interventions address emotional or behavioral problems such as depression and anxiety disorders and substance abuse, including programs based on cognitive behavior therapy (CBT). These programs include such techniques as problem-solving, stress inoculation, relaxation, and cognitive restructuring.

- **Strengthen Families When Appropriate.** Although some at-risk youth are not in communication with their families, there are cases where strengthening the youth's family is appropriate and desirable. Some interventions aim to improve youth outcomes by improving family dynamics and increasing parental knowledge and skills. Family-based interventions have been shown to be effective for some of the most at-risk youth.

- **Build Life Skills.** Some interventions help youth develop skills for independent living. They focus on such areas as understanding and managing finances, improving decision making and interpersonal skills, maintaining hygiene and healthy habits, and developing coping skills.

Youth development programs that focus on building capital promote educational achievement, prepare youth for the workplace, and connect them to employment. Many begin during the high school years and help youth complete high school, succeed in post-secondary education and training, and obtain stable, well-paid employment.

- **Education and Job Training.** Programs focus on helping disadvantaged youth acquire the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in high school and help them gain access to college. Some program models integrate education and work experience by offering job skills training and course work as part of earning a high school diploma. "Career pathway" programs, which integrate innovative instructional strategies with learning supports and have strong connections to local employers, are appearing in many communities.

- **Provide Opportunities for Career Exploration.** Programs include specific components to help youth begin to explore vocations, including career development workshops, career-specific training, summer work experiences, and career fairs. These programs may also help students develop their social capital by connecting with adult mentors from the business and professional community.

- **Connect Youth to Employment.** Exposure to work settings and connecting youth to jobs are key components of youth workforce development programs. These programs often provide stipends or other payment for work.

## Outcomes

In this framework, the overarching goal for all youth is to achieve healthy functioning and self-sufficiency in adulthood. Nevertheless, preparing at-risk youth for a successful transition to adulthood can be a lengthy process. Youth may sometimes take two steps forward and one step back. The framework recommends rigorous evaluation of impacts on youth over time: immediately, at an intermediate point, and in the long term.

- **Immediate Outcomes.** The framework assumes that before youth can focus on engaging in a planning process or participating in interventions, they need to achieve a minimum level of safety and security. Additional immediate outcomes include engagement in the program and progress toward milestones established in the service plan.

- **Intermediate Outcomes.** Completion of resilience and capital development interventions should result in intermediate outcomes that put youth on the path to healthier functioning and self-sufficiency. These can include improvements in socioemotional development; gains in human, social, cultural, or economic capital; experience in the

workplace; career exploration; knowledge of how to apply for higher education; and work readiness skills.

- **Long-Term Outcomes.** One key group of long-term outcomes is related to healthy social, emotional, and behavioral functioning. The second group of long-term outcomes is related to economic self-sufficiency in adulthood.

## Conclusions

The framework described in this summary suggests the use of evidence-informed interventions to address two primary areas: youths' resilience and human capital. It implies finding tailored solutions grounded in a trusting relationship between youth and program staff to help move youth toward both healthy functioning and economic self-sufficiency as they transition to adulthood. The framework proposes that programs:

- Take account of youths' underlying risk and protective factors in planning and providing services

- Stabilize youth in crisis and earn their trust by first addressing their basic needs and connecting them to safety net resources when needed

- Engage youth in ongoing assessment and service planning

- Provide evidence-informed interventions to promote resilience

- Increasing human capital by providing evidence-informed services to directly prepare youth for economic self-sufficiency

- Rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of program approaches by examining impacts in the short and long term

## Endnotes

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