

Promoting Resilience for Underserved Youth: Mobilizing Protective Factors Using a Positive Youth Development (PYD) Framework

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How do we promote positive developmental outcomes for today's youth and young adult populations? Changing political and social landscapes provide increased risks to the health and well-being of young people in the United States. These threats include limited access to health care services, the proliferation of gun violence and deaths impacting youth populations, and the reality of poverty and family economic hardship in this post-COVID-19 era. Recent data describe the situation as a "mental health crisis," with Black youth especially at risk for suicide ideation, substance use, and depression [1]. Social media presents new challenges for youth, including exposure to inappropriate content, misinformation, exploitation, and cyberbullying [2].

Despite the multitude of risk factors for today's youth, the Positive Youth Development Framework (PYD) provides a useful strategy for promoting resilience. The PYD Framework is an evidence-based approach for enabling youth—particularly those in underserved and under-resourced communities—to overcome adversity and thrive in challenging situations. Put simply, PYD focuses on the talents, interests, and strengths of young people that provide the potential for a successful future [3]. In order to operationalize this perspective into effective strategies that promote resilience, it is critical to focus on the positive aspects of youth development. Focusing on *protective factors*, or what works in promoting positive outcomes, is

a critical first step in addressing resilience among today's youth and young adult populations. PYD is a useful framework for implementing this idea.

Next, *consider how resilience is being defined*. Indicators, such as high school completion, not reoffending (or recidivating), or employment status, are often used to define resilience for at-risk young people in the traditional developmental research literature. Although these variables provide some perspective on youth outcomes, they do not provide an understanding of mental health, social connectedness, or other indicators of well-being. We recommend the use of qualitative research methods to provide these critical insights on what resilience means. Mixed-method approaches that include both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used effectively to study resilience among system-involved youth [4], allowing the voices of the youth themselves to inform how resilience is defined. Such context is especially helpful for designing interventions that capture the actual strengths and talents of this population, consistent with the tenets of PYD.

Finally, it is important to *meet young people where they are*. Lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the different ways that today's youth access information and learn. Understanding the role of technology in the promotion of resilience for youth is critical for reaching young people who are digital natives using mobile devices as their primary method of accessing

information. Resilience-building efforts that fail to take into account the use of technology are likely to miss the mark. This consideration requires an acknowledgment that today's young people may have sophisticated frameworks for informal learning through their engagement with online activities, so resilience-promotion strategies should reflect this perspective [5]. In addition, consideration must be given to how youth without access to technology may be at special risk. For example, youth in rural communities who have limited access to internet service or fewer media options may require technology support as a major feature of any resilience-promotion intervention strategies. Meeting youth where they are in order to mobilize a PYD approach requires open-mindedness and a willingness to embrace technology. One intervention that demonstrates this is a virtual youth sports program based on PYD that was implemented in Los Angeles, California, during the COVID-19 pandemic [6]. This program used a mixed-methods approach and is an excellent example of resilience promotion that meets the needs of today's youth.

Although there is no shortage of risk factors that negatively impact the development of young people today, the PYD Framework is a useful tool for promoting resilience. We recommend identifying protective factors, going beyond simple metrics, and meeting youth where they are. At its core, resilience is about overcoming adversity and thriving in the face of challenges. This applies to youth and young adult populations as well as to communities and systems. To truly foster resilience, the socio-ecological systems in which youth live must be acknowledged and understood. This approach to understanding resilience has been supported in the research literature, showing it to be an effective prevention model for disadvantaged youth. Resilience requires looking beyond simple metrics

and embracing the many gifts of this generation as a collective, as well as the unique strengths and talents of individual youth. NCMJ

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