

Disrupting Poverty with Mentoring Young Adults

by Monique Linder

The name “Disrupting Poverty” was selected about midway through the impact study that I conducted for Mentoring Young Adults (MYA), a St. Paul-based organization that provides crisis management for vulnerable adults. I was in the midst of a critical discovery period of measuring MYA’s case data and interviewing key funders, service providers, and clients. With all of MYA’s impactful work, the title “Disrupting Poverty” just made sense.

The first phase of the study began as a summer research project, starting with an interview with MYA’s executive director and founder, Dora Jones, who articulated MYA’s history in great detail. When I asked to see the data to support this information, Jones pointed me to a locked storage bin with lots of file boxes. “There it is, every piece of paper from the last nine years, because I do not throw away anything,” she explained. With the help of a student worker, five years of data were organized, entered into a database, checked, and statistically modeled to add intelligence and measurement to the study’s conclusions. Mentoring Young Adults’ work was disruptive, but the organization needed some grounding in process and data; for example, with MYA’s disruption in finding housing for clients who are stabilized in jobs yet left unable to provide a home for their families because of an unlawful detainer on their records, by partnering with independent landlords. This partnership model enabled MYA to reduce the homeless population 272% from 2013 to 2014.

The organization is in the business of giving second chances. The CURA-supported impact study was able to put measurement to Jones’s existing programs to show their impact on the lives MYA helped.

“Disrupting Poverty” focuses on MYA’s impact using qualitative and quantitative data collected over a five-year period. The study shows that leaving the root causes of extreme poverty and inequality unchecked, without social service programs run by strong community leaders, threatens a community’s health and welfare

as a whole. Poverty is extreme when it is concentrated in an area where the poverty rate falls 40% below the national poverty threshold. Ramsey County is the sixth poorest county in

the United States according to the 2013 American Community Survey, with five-year estimates at 16.9%. That’s approximately 90,000 people in this county served by MYA.

The research tells the story of how Minnesota’s key socioeconomic indicators are completely different when viewed from a poverty and racial inequality lens by county. The data collected include first-person interviews with key funders, partners, landlords, youth, MYA’s founder/executive director, clients, program facilitators, and the MYA board chair to provide a broad scope and depth. The study also looks at demand and capacity with a sophisticated data model and statistical analysis, which revealed a 97% increase in MYA’s 2014 cases over 2013 and an additional 63% increase from 2014 to 2015 (see Table 1).

In one of her first in-person interviews, Jones provided deep insight into the reason MYA must bring the family together when managing the organization’s youth cases. “When a homeless youth walks through MYA’s doors for help, almost always there’s a homeless family story attached,” says Jones. The crisis nature of these cases requires an efficient intake process that digs deep into the family’s status in order to help the youth. Often, the circumstances of the case extend beyond the issue of homelessness and include many other scenarios, such as an incarcerated parent, drug and/or alcohol abuse, mental illness, or sexual assault, requiring protection for the child. Data analysis provides a comprehensive view of effectiveness rates of MYA in disrupting poverty, one youth at a time, by mentoring and supporting the whole family.



CURA support helped Mentoring Young Adults comb through and analyze years of data and develop an impact study.

Table 1: Number of Cases and Year-over-year Change in Caseload for Mentoring Young Adults

MYA CASE DATA	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010
Total Applications	540	341	173	108	97	50
YOY Change (%)	63%	97%	60%	11%	90%	

The impact of MYA in Ramsey, Dakota, Washington, and Hennepin Counties is measured by layering American Census Survey data with the data from actual MYA cases. The study gives detailed results of how MYA has successfully generated progress and change in disrupting poverty while operating an extremely underfunded organization for nine years.

The Origins and Importance of MYA

Mentoring Young Adults is a nonprofit organization founded in 2006 just a stone's throw away from the state capitol in St. Paul. The organization positively impacts the community with programs focused on helping young adults in initial crisis situations with training, counseling, and group support. The core programs are:

- ▶ Housing for homeless youth
- ▶ Financial assistance for low-income youth and families
- ▶ Second-chance reentry to support transition back into society from juvenile detention centers or prison, depending on age and circumstance

Mentoring Young Adults seeks to close the extreme inequalities in communities of color on the front lines fighting homelessness, high-school dropout rates, unemployment, and the disproportionate number of young adults caught up in the criminal justice system. The organization serves Ramsey, Dakota, Washington, and Hennepin Counties.

The impact study puts MYA's important history of community-based work into context by examining other studies, such as "Ramsey County's Understanding Areas of Concentrated Poverty" and DEED's Cost of Living Survey 2015 to analyze the relationship with MYA's clients in the top services requested—housing, employment, and youth probation monitoring. For example, the research showed 27% of MYA applicants were homeless and employed, though the research showed a correlation between education level attained and homelessness.

The impact study tells the story of a Minnesota that does not have a poverty issue when viewed on a national poverty map. However, the view is completely different when poverty is viewed by county and then overlaid with information on communities of color: extremely impoverished areas were predominately communities



Mentoring Young Adults volunteers serve meals to seniors at Rondo Days 2015.

of color. The Center for Urban and Regional Affairs used U.S. census data mapping of the counties served by MYA to illustrate the high poverty rates in communities of color.

The "Wilder Research 2012 Homeless Study" (<http://z.umn.edu/13z8>) showed that children under age five are the most vulnerable of the age cells evaluated. In the counties served by MYA, children under the age of five are 2.6 times more impoverished than the total population of Minnesota.

During the data entry phase of the impact study, MYA's mentoring, support group, and education programs were observed. Interviews were recorded (<http://z.umn.edu/11ys>) that gave life to the data and the belief that MYA's affordable housing partners, youth mentoring, job training, and placement programs positively impact the community and cause disruption to poverty in the extremely impoverished communities it serves.

The study examines youth in the criminal justice system in a candid discussion with Richard McLemore of Ujamaa Place (<http://z.umn.edu/11yu>), who described the "juvenile detention centers" as "pre-incarceration"—essentially a gateway for youth into prison. Mentoring Young Adults' youth programs keep youth off the street and out of the criminal justice system.

Conversations with experts on housing and poverty provided critical fact checking of the research. Following

are a few comments that helped shape the study's research, key findings, and conclusions.

Even though the impact of MYA in crisis management for homeless youth is high, the state of affordable housing is dismal in Minnesota. According to Dr. Ed Goetz, director of CURA:

I'm afraid that I feel that we have not made much progress in meeting affordable housing needs. They seem pretty intractable, whether due to the disincentives for the private sector to build more affordable units, the opposition of communities to more housing opportunities, continued discrimination, lagging wages for lower- and working-class people, etc. The challenges are as great now as they have ever been.

Jerry Timian (<http://z.umn.edu/11yv>), program manager for the St. Paul Foundation, discussed the reasons the foundation supports MYA:

The Northend neighborhood of Saint Paul is not rich in services. Many of our neighborhoods have services organizations available in the community to get their needs met. In the Northend, we don't have as many service organizations helping out the community. We don't have that deep underground organization touching people that other people struggle serving. Dora Jones, MYA, does a great job with helping the hardest to serve population, serving

them in a way that helps them find their own human dignity again. That's a really big part of why we support MYA.

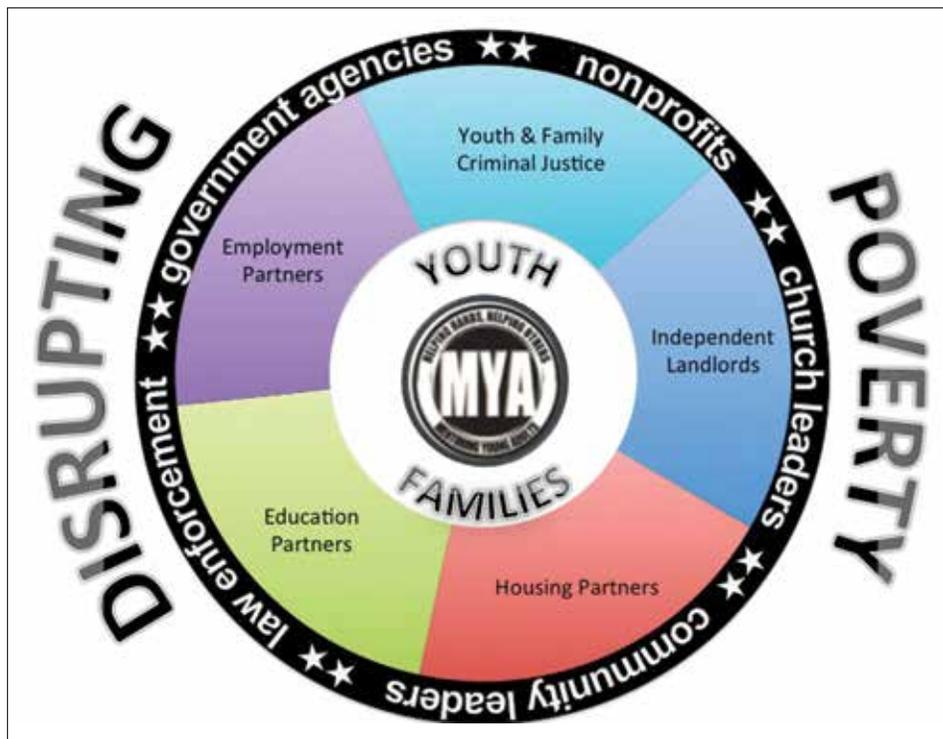
Timian further explained that MYA is a powerful network led by a strong leader. The organization is a network where resources are shared in an effort to help one another climb out of poverty together, in a way that causes disruption to poverty.

Mentoring Young Adults' "Disrupting Poverty" impact study serves as a call to action to support community-based organizations with the funding necessary to provide critical services that educate and provide housing and jobs for communities of color living in extreme poverty. Dora Jones discussed the importance of the impact study:

This study is critical for activating emergency crisis management in Ramsey County to increase capacity for community-based organizations like MYA serving youth and families who are located in the extreme concentrated poverty zones. MYA is located a stone's throw away from the state capitol and this county is in crisis when it comes to serving the poor. The hope is that this study raises the awareness of policy makers, funders, local, state and national government entities that we exist in the poverty war zone with programs in place to disrupt poverty.

As economist Thomas Piketty wrote in his book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, poverty and inequality left unchecked will cause harm to America's economic system as a whole. Bill Gates wrote a blog on "Why Inequality Matters" (<http://z.umn.edu/13za>) after reading Piketty's book and had the following response:

Extreme inequality should not be ignored—or worse, celebrated as a sign that we have a high-performing economy and healthy society. Yes, some level of inequality is built into capitalism. As Piketty argues, it is inherent to the system. The question is, what level of inequality is acceptable? And when does inequality start doing more harm than good? That's something we should have a public discussion about, and it's great that Piketty helped advance that discussion in such a serious way.



The Mentoring Young Adults model for disrupting poverty.

Community action plan for "Disrupting Poverty" based on MYA's model:

- ▶ **Action:** Education is the key to disrupting poverty. Education reduces homelessness and increases low wages. Affordable housing and education programs are top priorities.
- ▶ **Basis:** MYA developed strong cooperation from independent landlords who trust Dora Jones and work with MYA clients who may not have a perfect record. The organization's tenant training class educates the client on tenant rights and responsibilities and care of the home, and how to develop and maintain a good relationship with the landlord.
- ▶ **Action:** Community leaders should be identified to develop a strategic network and sharing of data that promotes collaboration and innovation.
- ▶ **Basis:** MYA joined Sprockets, a secure database network of information input by education providers, to aggregate data that will be used to manage and evaluate performance for youth after-school programs and paid internships. Sprockets will enable MYA to make critical decisions and enhancements to its programs, as often as necessary. MYA took advantage of an opportunity provided by Salesforce to set up a cloud-based account, at no charge, to approve 501(c)3s nonprofits to manage their client cases.
- ▶ **Action:** A strategic business model that promotes process and creates change. Poverty research is useless without a conclusion and an action plan to create change and promote progress. Partners in mental health, education, and technology are essential to disrupting poverty by providing valuable education and training for youth and staff.
- ▶ **Basis:** MYA has partnered with other community leaders to support youth mentoring and is looking forward to focusing on building an expanded network of mental health, education, and technology partners.

Conclusion

The goal of this study is to spur a discussion in every community in the United States. "Disrupting Poverty" cannot wait. Job creation, affordable housing, and education programs are needed to keep youth off the street and out of the criminal justice system. "Disrupting Poverty" serves as a resource for opening discussion and educating the public, as well as a template for supporting community-based organizations with the funding necessary to provide services for youth who are homeless and jobless.

An enormous amount of data are available that show the extreme poverty and race inequality that exists in the communities served by MYA, but what is lacking is an action plan. This study is meant to engage communities in the creation of an action plan that empowers them with the concept of

"climbing one's self out of poverty," resulting in extreme disruption to poverty.

A network of access to jobs, affordable housing, education, and resources that support a population's climb out of poverty is needed for the well-being of the community at large.

This study provides a conclusion based on qualitative and quantitative data that recommends supporting community-based social services agencies such as MYA that promote progress and change by causing major disruption to poverty on the front lines of communities, where positive change must be led by the people themselves. Putting these recommendations in place with measurable goals and outcomes will best serve the health and well-being of the entire population in communities of color.

The most efficient and effective path to change is to empower the community leaders who have a proven track record of results in delivering the critical services that reduce poverty. These agencies must monitor performance and have sound accountability practices that are "for the people they serve." They must be resilient, fearless, and unapologetic when it comes to serving the people.

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