

# Using Brain Science to Transform Human Services

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We can use emerging scientific findings on the ways poverty affects behavior and decisionmaking to help people living in poverty achieve dramatic gains in mobility. We can revolutionize human services delivery by moving away from strategies that seek modest gains and instead designing interventions that create pathways to the middle class and beyond.

## The Problem

Getting out of poverty has always been tough, but it has become even harder over the past generation. The increasing costs of housing, health care, and child care, coupled with stagnant wages and rising education requirements, have made today's pathway out of poverty a journey that fewer than one in four people complete. Poverty and its associated stress affect how our brains develop and function and the mental resources we can devote to getting ahead.

- Poverty and the stress, trauma, and oppression that accompany it change how our brains develop and work throughout our lives.

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## New discoveries in brain science are transforming human service delivery

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- These changes can impede executive function skills, which influence parenting, education, work, and many other arenas crucial to upward mobility.
- The more extreme the causes, the longer stress lasts; the earlier in childhood the exposure begins, the greater the impact on executive function skills.

## The Solution

Organizations are applying what we know about poverty, stress, and the brain in three progressively more comprehensive ways:

1. **Environment and process improvement informed by brain science.** Science provides clues about how to improve human cognition, behavior, and health outcomes. Using this information, human services providers are creating environments and processes that decrease stress, improve focus and concentration, promote self-regulation, and increase self-efficacy and well-being.
2. **Case-management approaches enhanced by brain science.** Workers are trained to better understand how program participants' behavior can be affected by trauma and stress and to use techniques that promote program engagement and mitigate the challenges to cognition and self-regulation that poverty creates.
3. **Coach-navigator interventions.** The most comprehensive of these approaches, coach-navigator programs help participants chart a course out of poverty using many different, often

siloed resources. Coach-navigators help participants make their own decisions and set their own goals. Along the way, participants strengthen the decisionmaking and self-regulation skills that poverty, trauma, and stress so seriously strain.

Families taking part in coach-navigator programs achieve higher employment and income and lower poverty rates than similar families not enrolled. Demonstrated gains include families attaining full economic independence (defined as 80 percent or more of area median income).

#### WHAT PHILANTHROPY AND GOVERNMENT CAN DO

Philanthropy and government can create a strong foundation of knowledge and support to build the field of brain science-informed human services and expand coach-navigator programs with four approaches:

1. **Expand coach-navigator interventions.** Help existing programs add capacity, and create new programs.
2. **Educate the field.** Educate nonprofit organizations and government agencies on how poverty affects human development, decisionmaking, and behavior, and how brain science-based strategies can help.
3. **Strengthen existing providers.** Develop centers of excellence to technically assist organizations on incorporating brain science-based strategies into their work.
4. **Evaluate and share best practices.** Support evaluations of new brain science-informed interventions, and disseminate key findings.

#### WHAT DOES “MOBILITY” FROM POVERTY MEAN?

The US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty’s definition of mobility has three core principles: economic success, power and autonomy, and being valued in community. These principles drive five mutually reinforcing strategies:

- Change the narrative
- Create access to good jobs
- Ensure zip code is not destiny
- Provide support that empowers
- Transform data use

Using brain science to transform human services is part of the strategy to provide support that empowers.

#### HOW BRAIN SCIENCE-INFORMED HUMAN SERVICES CAN IMPROVE MOBILITY

- **Economic success:** As more human services agencies adopt practices informed by brain science, families will see increased employment, higher earnings, and more stable housing.
- **Power and autonomy:** Families served by coach-navigator programs will experience better health, show increased self-efficacy, and increasingly adopt a growth mindset.
- **Being valued in community:** Participants in coach-navigator programs will expand their social networks and report greater social inclusion.

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This brief summarizes the paper *Using Brain Science to Transform Human Services and Increase Personal Mobility from Poverty*. The paper lists sources for the research summarized here.

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With funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Urban Institute is supporting the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty, 24 leading voices representing academia, practice, the faith community, philanthropy, and the private sector. The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of all Partnership members.