A Time to Listen:
Youth Perspectives on Poverty & Prosperity

A Report Prepared for The Declaration Initiative
September 2013
The Declaration Initiative is a movement that inspires members of American communities to invest together in assuring access to the promises of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all by July 4th, 2026. Learn more at declarationinitiative.org.

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A Message from
The Declaration Initiative
Co-Leaders:

One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say.
—Bryant H. McGill

Dear Readers,

Over the past two and a half years a small team of social entrepreneurs has been attempting to better understand persistent poverty in the U.S. During that time, we have met with government leaders, administrators, social and economic researchers, philanthropic staff, think tanks, and local nonprofits. We have studied the literature related to various social policies regarding the poverty trap. In each case, well-meaning people have shared their understandings of how American people and their communities are affected by long-term poverty.

A Time to Listen is a brief report that represents the actual voices of youth and young adults that are the present and potentially the future of the American poverty conundrum. TDI felt it necessary to devote time and resources to hear directly from these young people. We engaged Frontline Solutions, a company owned and operated by young adults, to begin conversations with young people in five communities about their aspirations for the future.

The report is not conclusive of all of the issues, hopes, and plans of America’s youth. It does, however, represent examples of the earnest commitment of members of this generation to improve opportunities for themselves and others in their lifetime. TDI urges each community—individuals, agencies and organizations—to use listening to those experiencing poverty as a key device in dismantling the complex American poverty trap.

Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness can be realized for all Americans by 2026!

Claire Gaudiani & Linetta J. Gilbert
The Declaration Initiative
September 2013
Introduction: The TDI Mission

The Declaration Initiative is committed to eradicating poverty in the U.S. and *making life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness a reality for the poorest Americans by 2026*. We work on the national level to inspire a movement and at the local level to support community leaders and members dismantling poverty.

The struggles of our country’s poorest residents rarely make news headlines or stir local or national policymakers to action. Our leaders have failed to respond to poverty in the United States even though more than 20.5 million Americans live on less than $11,000 a year for a family of four—half of the federally defined poverty level. Their quality of life resembles that of people in the world’s least developed countries.

However, in the face of this inaction we believe that poverty is curable. We recognize the urgency of our mission at a time when persistent poverty is only deepening and low-wage jobs continue to proliferate. Between 2011 and 2012, the number of people living below twice the poverty line—less than about $36,000 for a family of three—rose from 103 million to 106 million Americans.¹ *That number represents more than 1 in 3 Americans*. We also recognize that children are shouldering the largest burden, with an estimated 16.1 million, 22 percent of all children, living in poverty.²

At this stage in our development, TDI has organized a series of learning tours through the country to figure out the best way to dismantle the complex set of triggers that traps Americans in poverty. Through this process, we have identified pilot sites led by local agencies with whom we want to partner in community-led solutions. We’re committed first and foremost to listening to residents affected by poverty. It has been our experience that programs serving low-income communities often miss this crucial step. TDI believes that by listening to poor families and engaging them with other community leaders, we can develop solutions together that permanently improve people’s lives.

This report covers a learning tour we conducted in the summer of 2013. We visited five TDI pilot communities located in the West Coast, the Gulf Region, the Mississippi Delta, and in Appalachian Ohio. Working with our local allies who served as hosts, we held a series of focus groups designed specifically for youth and young adults. As a central part of the fabric of any community, youth and young adults feel the impact of poverty in their communities. Therefore, we wanted to hear from them directly to learn about their experiences and perspectives, in a way that recognized them as critical assets in their community.

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² Ibid.
A Learning Tour Overview

In June–July 2013, we conducted eight focus group discussions with a total of more than 70 youth and young adults ranging in age from 13 to 29. Two facilitators led the discussions, which lasted between 2 and 2½ hours and typically consisted of 10–14 participants. Following each focus group, the facilitators conducted personal interviews with the youth who attended.

The discussion format was geared toward open-ended conversation, using an informal approach centered on questioning and listening. Facilitators modeled the format in a way that encouraged youth to hold similar discussions on their own.

The following list of discussion sites includes the local organizations and individuals serving as focus group partners:

- **Greenville/Washington County, MS** — Mississippi Action for Community Education, Inc. (MACE)
- **Richmond, CA** — RYSE Youth Center
- **San Diego, CA** — International Rescue Committee
- **Gloster, OH** — Hocking Athens Perry Community Program (HAPCAP)
- **New Orleans, LA** — Central City Renaissance Alliance & Café Reconcile; Institute for Behavioral Science/CeaseFire; a former resident of C.J. Peete; a current resident of Harmony Oaks

Each discussion was designed for participants to share how they felt about their communities, what motivated them, and the changes or improvements they would like to see. The discussion’s facilitators led open-ended conversations and encouraged the youth to speak freely. The focus groups had two main objectives:

1. Model authentic community engagement by ensuring the voices and leadership of youth and young adults are heard and recognized.

2. Gather feedback from youth and young adults in these communities to inform TDI’s analysis; broaden the base of leaders that TDI supports; connect young leaders with TDI’s local partners; and infuse young adult voices into the national “poverty to prosperity” movement.
What We Heard

We requested to hear directly from youth and young adults how they feel about their communities and the changes they want to see. Our questions prompted far-ranging responses. As we had hoped, the focus group participants were open and frank about their hopes, dreams, doubts, and critiques. From the feedback, we’ve identified common viewpoints as well as differences in opinion and perspective. >>
“We don’t feel safe.”

For the youth we spoke with, the threat of violence cannot be understated. They said they simply don’t feel safe in their communities. In their experience, violence is an inescapable fact of American life.

The group in Appalachian Ohio stood as the exception to this finding only in the sense that they do not face assaults by gun or other deadly weapons, at least not to the degree that the other communities suffer them. Nonetheless, a different kind of violence—online bullying—is a serious problem in Glouster that has led to fights and even suicide.

In the other four communities, violence is random and deeply pervasive. Gun violence is more prevalent in some places than others, but in each community someone can become a victim anytime and anywhere. In one Greenville focus group, 9 of the 12 people in the room knew someone who was recently murdered. “Folks are just wild out here,” said one respondent from New Orleans.

In response to the daily threats that their communities pose, youth have no choice but to actively ensure their personal safety. One participant talked about sticking closely to the city’s bus routes to avoid being assaulted or robbed. Another talked about getting jumped by a group that wanted his skateboard. Many are paralyzed by fear. They hesitate to venture from their home, and when they do they are hyper-alert with their guard always up. “You can’t even step on somebody’s feet without fear of getting shot,” said one New Orleans teenager.
The feedback from the groups covered the ways in which gangs contribute to the epidemic of violence. A few youth talked about their gang affiliations and how they take part in what they call “gangbanging.” Many feel an internal tension about gangs; there is a strong pull to join them despite the obvious dangers they pose. This feeling was expressed in different ways. One male teenager said that in a community other than Richmond, he could imagine an alternative to gangbanging. But if he stays in Richmond, “I plan on being a dope boy (drug dealer).” One teenage girl said she pretends gangs simply aren’t there. “There is a lot of gangbanging bullshit, but I try to turn my back to it,” she said. Another male from San Diego shared being powerless in the face of peer pressure. “I’ve seen guys get robbed right in front of me by my friends, and I wasn’t sure what to do,” he said.

There was a strong sense that gangs are deeply entrenched in the culture and history of their neighborhoods, a harsh reality that the youth felt would likely not change in their lifetime:

“They always trying to prove whose hood is the hardest. . . .
Generation after generation they pass down the beef,” said one member of the New Orleans focus group.

Given the pervasive threat of violence in these communities, law enforcement has a crucial role to fill. However, the general sense among participants was that rather than offer protection, local law enforcement agencies at best were ineffective and at worst were part of the problem. Instead of protecting the community, law enforcement was described as corrupt, racist, and guilty of police brutality. This was particularly the experience of low-income people of color. Even the younger participants had negative feelings about the police. The police brutality, in tandem with the murders, assaults, and robberies, have led to a general distrust of people and authority figures.
“We want to be independent.”

We asked all the focus groups what success meant for them. The question yielded a wide range of answers, but at minimum, all youth expressed their wish to be financially independent. For them, independence meant being able to pay your bills, own a car, and afford your own apartment or house. Some participants, particularly those with children, said providing a comfortable life for their family was integral to their financial independence.

The youth in Greenville talked about managing “side hustles” that were inspired by Jay-Z and other rappers . . .

While becoming self-sufficient was a near-universal goal, the groups we spoke with imagined different paths toward their self-sufficiency. For example, in Appalachian Ohio youth described a limited range of employment options. They provided a short list of available occupations composed of home health care aid, corrections officer, and coal miner. They were also resigned to the many sacrifices that an occupation like mining demanded—both
the physical strains and the long hours away from family. Finally, nearly all of these positions were not located far from their homes. The potential of landing a job outside Ohio or perhaps even Athens County was not part of their future plans.

Youth living in the urban settings like San Diego and Richmond had a much broader perspective on their career paths. They foresaw graduating from college, owning a business, and entering a professional track in fields like social work, entertainment, medicine, professional sports, engineering, and fashion. For them, moving to a different city or even a different country was possible. Perhaps their perspective could be attributed to the immigrant background of the participants, which historically offers more idealistic notions of opportunity in America than non-immigrant youth of color may have.

A deep interest in skilled manual work distinguished the participants in Greenville. Many individuals had talents and proficiency in areas like welding, cell phone repair, barbering, and tattoo design, and they believed that the right mix of guidance and training was a direct path toward financial independence.

**A majority of the participants aspired to be entrepreneurs, attracted to the idea of being their own bosses and creating jobs in their community.**

Entrepreneurship was a popular topic in nearly all the focus groups. Tellingly, most of the role models whom the participants identified were hip-hop moguls/artists. A rap star like Jay-Z looms large in their minds—both as a CEO and a musical artist—and they were drawn to the entrepreneurial aspects of his rags-to-riches story. The youth in Greenville talked about managing “side hustles” that were inspired by Jay-Z and other rappers who have started and grown their own enterprises. The hunger that youth have for more guidance in this area presents a clear opportunity to engage further.
“We want more stability.”

The need for stability is universal, and for most of us it begins and ends in the home. In nearly all of our conversations, several participants described family units that lacked stability or were incomplete. In several situations, youths felt as though they were taking care of themselves.

The absence of fathers was a common theme. “Growing up, my mom was my dad,” said one participant, a description that resonated with four others in that particular focus group. Typically, mothers, grandmothers, and aunts topped the list of personal role models but male family members did not. Research elsewhere has documented the strong correlation between poverty and responsible fatherhood, but we still want to bring up this pressing issue and how it posed serious challenges in the journey toward adulthood.

We observed how that desire for greater stability fans out from the household out into the neighborhood. In the focus group discussions, youths consistently lamented the rundown state of their community’s streets and parks, abandoned buildings and homes, and educational supplies. Asked what they would do if they had $1 million to spend on their communities, the participants regularly said that they would first repave the streets, rehab the abandoned houses, fix the playgrounds, and build new recreation centers.

The feedback indicated that the product of failing infrastructure is a general lack of pride among most community residents. In the minds of most of the youth, their teachers perform their job as if they were there merely collecting a check. We detected an attitude among students that if their teachers are not making an effort, why should they? Many had no problem “opting out” of their learning, perhaps a conscious effort to spite their schools for letting them down. Others felt they had to take on the burden of learning without their instructors’ assistance, teaching themselves in the same way that they are raising themselves at home.
We want to be more connected.

One widely held view of youth and young adults is that they are self-involved and intentionally disconnected from their communities. But across the board, the feedback suggested that this is a myth, that youth crave a deeper connection but are obstructed by a perceived or real lack of empathy for them as teenagers and young adults. In their experience, there simply aren’t enough people listening to them.

We need more things to do.

Many youth also feel unfairly judged by society and their peers, and feel that misunderstanding stems from bias regarding their race, gender, or class—or perhaps all three. Fortunately, our conversations demonstrated that a willingness to listen to youth yields positive results. The participants embraced the invitation to share, and they also voiced their appreciation for initiatives like CeaseFire in New Orleans that prioritized youth input in the planning process.
“They weren’t talking; they were listening,” said one New Orleans participant about CeaseFire. “And they try to help you come up with a plan.”

The majority of youth we heard from suffer acutely from a lack of positive activities in their lives. “We need more things to do” was a common refrain. As a point of reference, the Glouster group discussed their town’s skateboarding park. At first glance, the park represents good intentions and a youth-friendly public site. In reality, say the Glouster youth, there was no demand for skateboarding in the first place. No one had asked the youth in the community what they wanted. Perhaps it is no coincidence the park has become a site for underage drinking and illegal drugs instead of any organized activity.

In any community where “Walmart is the only kick-it spot,” for the young, as the Greenville residents shared, there is clearly a dearth of constructive activity. The feedback we got suggested that juvenile delinquency stems more from simple boredom than from the criminal inclinations of any population segment. The youth in Greenville were explicit that they wanted more job skills and experience. Expanded training opportunities could not only jumpstart the local economy, but also provide more ways for youth to connect and engage with their communities.
What We’ve Learned

After gathering observations and feedback from eight focus groups and identifying common themes, we came up with a few conclusions about what we’ve learned. We should note that the findings below in no way represent the final word on youth and young adults in these low-income communities. Nor do they represent a formal plan for how The Declaration Initiative and its allies should work with younger generations to eradicate poverty. We believe that a plan of action of that nature is only possible through deeper forms of engagement with the youth we spoke with and their peers. To put it plainly, the conversation has just begun. >>
Safer communities have unlimited potential.

We’ve laid out how pervasive the violence is in these communities and the negative ways it has affected youth. The feedback we’ve collected has begun to shed light on the multiple dimensions of the epidemic. Even as we recognize the huge obstacles that anti-violence and public safety efforts face, we are compelled to ask, what would these communities look like if youth were safer? What doors would open for them?

Safer communities would make community schools and surrounding areas more inviting to youth. As a result, school truancy would likely decrease, paving the way for increases in higher school attendance, higher graduation rates, and higher college acceptance rates.

Safer conditions would foster youth’s trust in law enforcement officers and other figures of authority. A more peaceful climate in which youth and their families are less guarded would inspire a sense of community pride that seems so absent in the sites we visited.

Finally, effective anti-violence measures and initiatives could persuade more youth to remain in their communities into adulthood. A stronger inclination to stay in one’s community, find a permanent job, and establish stronger community roots would significantly offset the brain drain that plagues too many low-income communities.

Build from the entrepreneurial passion of youth.

As indicated earlier, we met many young aspiring entrepreneurs with a strong drive to achieve their financial independence. Several participants we spoke with defined their future success in terms of “being their own bosses” and becoming job creators. In some cases, they have already identified personal interests, industry trades, or what they call “side hustles.” This spirit of self-determination is an ideal that TDI and its allies should take note of. Through the right training and support for youth and young adults, perhaps many of these “side hustles” can become profitable enterprises.

It is important to note that this self-reliance is integral to the hip-hop culture that influences many youth in these communities. We have an opportunity to engage with this culture by focusing on the aspirational nature of hip-hop and acknowledging the ambition that youth see in their role models. Traditionalists may make the mistake of emphasizing the negative messages some detect in hip-hop music, but from the youth perspective—particular for those living in a low-income community—many hip-hop artists represent the success that comes with beating the odds and overcoming a disadvantaged background.

For now, let’s keep the conversation going.

We set the stage for our focus groups by making a point of really listening. As a result, the youth in these select communities seemed to have let their guards down. This was a big first step in building trust and establishing a connection. Several participants shared a strong interest in participating in more focus groups if they had the opportunity.

In these select communities, a door is now open to us to engage further with youth. However, that is not to say we have set the stage for a national youth-led campaign. We’ve received honest feedback from youth on what it’s like to live in their communities as well as their personal hopes and aspirations, but frankly we have not yet heard many concrete ideas on poverty-fighting strategies or seen hands raised representing a committed army of community advocates and leaders.

Social change takes time, and in the case of these youth, it seems like the biggest challenge is overcoming their cynicism and distrust. For many, especially those who lack a support system, taking care of themselves is still a top priority, and for good reason. Enlisting in a community improvement program or a broad anti-poverty campaign like TDI represents a commitment that they would not easily make. While we’ve got every reason to keep the conversation going, it seems in our best interest to meet these youth where they are and appeal to their personal ideas of safety, stability, connectedness, and financial independence.