



The Effects of Toxic Stress on Youth and the Economy

A Conversation with Charles Cox
Summarized by Dionissi Aliprantis

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—Charles Cox

The Program on Economic Inclusion was created to increase the Cleveland Fed’s understanding of the obstacles to economic inclusion for communities in our District, as well as approaches to overcome those obstacles. We hold Conversations on Economic Inclusion for this purpose, allowing researchers, practitioners, policy makers, and community members to learn from one another about economic inclusion.

We recently had a *Conversation on Economic Inclusion* with Charles Cox, a family support specialist with Say Yes to Education Cleveland at The Ginn Academy, a high school in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. Mr. Cox has a wide-ranging set of experiences working in education, having previously worked in the field of social work for Children and Family Services; having previously taught general science in a normal high school; and having previously taught general science and GED science prep at a high school for youth who are incarcerated.

We discussed with Mr. Cox a range of issues tied to supporting students dealing with toxic stress, trying to learn about his perspective on how to support positive youth development that will lead to labor market success in adulthood. What stuck with me after my conversation with Mr. Cox is how a few causes can have very severe negative effects on his students’ trajectories: a lack of access to basic resources, as well as exposure to violence and the toxic stress it generates. What also stuck with me is the description of his attempts at forming safe, supportive, nurturing relationships with his students. Those attempts were characterized by patience, individualized attention, and trying to connect with students over their passions.

Mr. Cox’s comments have been condensed and edited for clarity.

[Say Yes to Education is working to set up kids for success in the workforce](#)

Mr. Cox described the work that Say Yes to Education Cleveland is doing in schools to support students. An important component of Say Yes to Education is the provision of a full college scholarship for all

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qualifying students. I asked Mr. Cox whether the financial barriers overcome by a college scholarship are the only barriers faced by the students with which he works. He told me that in fact that is his job – to help remove those additional obstacles to students achieving success in education and the labor market.

Say Yes was founded in 1987 and its mission is to work with disadvantaged youth to give them better educational opportunities through the various services that we offer, as well as through paying actual scholarship dollars to help youth expand their educational goals or hopefully have a career.

We want to see kids go for higher education degrees and et cetera, but in Say Yes, we will also support a child who wants to get a skilled trade or go into other sectors. **We just really want to see kids who are coming from disadvantaged backgrounds be able to have the opportunities to go out and have success in the workforce.**

So when I think about Say Yes, I know that the college scholarship is one big part of it, but it's not as simple as just putting that money out there for students. It's not just a matter of, we have this big scholarship and that's on its own going to change everything. So can you tell me about all of the other services you all provide?

Yeah. So you led me to a key thing that we do at Say Yes. You're absolutely right that you can't just throw money at a situation and hope that solves everything. You actually have to help the youth be able to graduate and take advantage of scholarships and opportunities of that nature. And that's where a person like myself comes into the picture. Through Say Yes, in each school building in Cleveland, we have what's called a Family Support Specialist. And that's my role – I am a family support specialist for The Ginn Academy family. We understand when we're dealing with at-risk or disadvantaged families.

One of the main reasons why youth do not take advantage of scholarships or higher education opportunities is because they lack resources or there are other barriers in place. And so that's why they put an individual like myself in place to coordinate those resources and walk with and support those families, so that we can all ultimately help this student A, first of all, graduate. And then B, hopefully take advantage of the scholarship dollars, so that they can open up other economic opportunities.

Access to basic resources can have a major effect on kids' education and labor market trajectories

I asked Mr. Cox about what is different student by student, but he instead spoke of the similarity in the origins of many of the obstacles faced by the students with which he works.

Well for our population, what unfortunately is very similar with all of our students is the lack of resources. And often times with our student population, certain things that you or I may take for granted, are a struggle for a lot of our students. I'm talking even food, access to healthcare. I'll give you an example. We had a kid who in my building was just very mean, and we really couldn't understand what was going on with this kid, but to make a long story short, his teeth were hurting. What he understood about his family dynamic was, "What, am I going to go ask my mother about my teeth? Nobody has money around here, so I just have to deal with it." So just to be able to get him aligned with a dentist is a big deal. I have no idea what they did, but whatever they did, the kid's not as mean as he was. So I think that was pretty good.

So it could be as simple as that. **I think we don't really understand how our kids in certain communities really do not have the basics.** I remember when I sat down and I spoke with the kid, already in his mind, he just kind of knew, "Well, this is just what I have to deal with, and that's just the way it is." And so that's where my role, I feel, is very important, to be able to reach out and connect to a family.

Toxic stress is another obstacle to education and labor market success

I saw a similarity between Mr. Cox's description of access to basic resources and his description of exposure to the types of trauma that can generate toxic stress. Just as it is hard to concentrate on school when your tooth is aching, it is hard to concentrate on school when you are feeling the stress resulting from exposure to violence.

I'm glad that we are now speaking about and doing the research on and really, really looking at toxic stress because I think as far as the African American community is concerned, that's been a key factor in our early mortality rates, because now we do totally understand if the body is under a lot of stress, often and for years, that has a toll on your health. So I am not surprised when I look at our school population or other schools in inner city settings and see the high incidence of depression and anxiety. **I think you and I were talking and I was letting you know that we had lost in our school five kids to gun violence, right?**

And then I shared with you how I was going on a home visit because this particular child had not been in school. **So I was just going to try to reach out to the family to see what I could do to assist the family, and I ended up driving right in the middle of a shootout. And this was broad daylight and these were real bullets.** It wasn't a movie set, this was a real shootout. When I finally got to a safe area and I reflected on what the heck just happened, it made me remember that these students, they deal with this type of stuff every day. This kid, the kid I was looking for, that's that kid's street, right? And these were assault weapons.

That kid understands, "This is my environment." And you have to say, "Well, what do I do about this?" **I don't think people understand the effects when you're living under that type of stress.**

If I'm a kid and I'm living under a situation like that, I'm living under conditions where there's this violence all around me. And Lord knows what's going on within the house, right, because we know that when you have to deal with stuff like that, we as humans tend to take things out on the people closest to us.

So there is a lot of widespread anxiety and depression. I was talking to a kid and I asked if he had ever talked to someone about possibly being depressed? And he snapped at me, "What do you talk about, et cetera, et cetera? I said I'm angry. I don't want to kill myself." I said, "Yes but did you know that anger could be a big sign if you're ..." And he had no idea. **So, what am I saying? Our kids deal with more, sometimes within a seven-day week, as far as stress and trauma, than you and I may deal with in six months or six years.**

There is a critical human element when responding to kids experiencing toxic stress

I asked Mr. Cox how he thinks about supporting kids dealing with this kind of toxic stress. What are the levers we can pull individually, as groups, as organizations, or as an entire society? What can you and I do for that kid on that street? His response was less about the specific levers we can pull and more about

how we pull those levers. He mentioned how important it is to find service providers who know how to communicate and who know how to empathize with the students' experiences.

I think that those of us who have attained at least a certain level of education, a certain level of success for ourselves, we have to understand different notions of nurturing. Your definition of nurture, and maybe one of my students' definition of nurture, that's two totally different things. And I think we all need to have a baseline.

Let's all agree that we're not the experts on things we don't know anything about. We don't live in their shoes. So one thing I try to not do, is to act like I'm the expert on their life. I have to understand their life experience. So, meeting people where they are, because we could go and try to push some things on them saying "Oh no, look, I want to give you this nurture. I want to give you this and that." And the kids will say "Man, that's corny. I don't need it. What are you talking about?"

So any time you're writing a program or anything of that nature, you really do need to have people who can assist you, who know how to meet people where they are. And if you don't get that, I don't care how much money you put into a program. I don't care how many shiny glossy brochures and how cute it looks. If you're not meeting people right where they are, and if you do not know how to communicate with the people that you're working with, you're going to be frustrated and wondering "What are we doing wrong?"

Getting kids exposure to different possibilities for connecting their passions to career paths

I asked Mr. Cox how he tries to help his students find a successful career path. His response was that many students are not aware of what possibilities are out there in the labor market, nor how those possibilities might align with their own passions.

A lot of kids think that it's college or bust. Thank goodness we have just started four new programs for skilled trades. You're going to need more skilled tradesmen than you're going to need people with four-year degrees. And sometimes our kids don't make that connection. A lot of them, believe it or not, don't even see that a skilled trade is a viable career move. So there's that level of just not knowing within the community. They just don't know. They don't know what's out there for them.

So the pitch that I try to use with my kids is, first things first, you have a right to look at "What are you interested in?" And do you know, I get the blankest looks sometimes. **Do you know, I sit across from 16-, 17-year-olds and I go, "Well, what do you want to do?" And they'll give me this blank look and say, "I don't know."** "So well, have you ever thought about it?" "No." And they're not lying. This is the honest to goodness truth that they have no idea.

And then what I say to them is "Alright, I'm going to give you a small homework assignment. It's not major." Because at the end of the day, the good thing about their generation, from their phones and laptops and even from their watches now, you can Google anything. And I say, "Pick five things that you think you're good at, or five things you think you might be interested in. And I want you to report back to me. Don't report back to me with just the names of the careers. I want you to give me a little bit about each one."

So one thing I try to sell them on is, even if you weren't the best student in school, you still have the right. You still should look at what is important to you and "What would you like to learn more about? What would you like to do?" **So my pitch to a lot of them is, "Do something that you feel you can do in your heart. You have a talent, you have a skill, let's tap into that." And then it's like I see the light bulb go off.**