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# Introduction

## Background and Rationale

Today, there are 1.5 billion people between the ages of 12 and 24 worldwide, with 1.3 billion of them living in developing countries—making the young the largest segment of developing country population in recorded history. More important, young people constitute a disproportionately large part of the world’s poor. While they represent 50 percent of the developing country population, they represent nearly 60 percent of the poor in those countries.<sup>1</sup> Young people can be a source of growth and development for their countries, but a subset of young people—those known as youth at risk—are a source of the inequality, poverty, exclusion, and much of the crime and violence that plagues every region in the world, thereby imposing enormous costs on themselves, their families, and society at large.

The World Bank has produced this Policy Toolkit in response to a growing demand from our government clients and partners for advice on how to create and implement effective policies for at-risk youth. We have highlighted 22 policies (six core policies, nine promising policies, and seven general policies) that have been effective in addressing the following five key risk areas for young people around the world:

- i) youth unemployment, underemployment, and lack of formal sector employment
- ii) early school leaving
- iii) risky sexual behavior leading to early childbearing and HIV/AIDS
- iv) crime and violence
- v) substance abuse

The objective of this Toolkit is to serve as a practical guide for policy makers in middle-income countries—as well as professionals working within the area of youth development—on how to develop and implement an effective policy portfolio to foster healthy and positive youth development.

## Definitions and Conceptual Framework

**Youth at risk** can be defined as individuals between the ages of 12 and 24 who face “environmental, social, and family conditions that hinder their personal development and their successful integration into society as productive citizens.”<sup>2</sup> They have a greater propensity than their peers to engage in or be subject to *risky behavior*, including school absenteeism, risky sexual behavior, delinquency, violence, and substance use and abuse. The consequences of these risky kinds of behavior are extremely costly to young people in terms of their ability to make a successful transition to adulthood and include such *negative outcomes* as school dropout, unemployment, adolescent pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, addiction, incarceration, and social exclusion.

## Risk Factors and Protective Factors

- **Risk factors** are those that increase the likelihood that a young person will experience negative outcomes.
- **Protective factors** are those that have been associated with reducing negative outcomes or that increase the likelihood that a young person will make a positive transition into adulthood.

## Risky Behavior and Negative Outcomes

- **Risky behavior** consists of those actions that hinder the development of a young person’s human capital and impede his or her successful integration into society. Risky kinds of behavior include the following, among others: not attending school, poor academic performance, working in settings that are damaging to a young person’s development (including premature entry into the labor market or working in illicit activities against one’s will), having unprotected or unsafe sex, participating in criminal or violent activities, drug dealing, and substance use and abuse (including alcohol).
- For the unfortunate, risky behavior leads to **negative outcomes**, such as school dropout, adolescent pregnancy, addiction to drugs or alcohol, or incarceration. Because of the enormous costs of these outcomes—both to the individual and to society—this is where the key concerns of policy makers lie. Yet, once a young person has experienced these outcomes, his or her return to a positive path of development is often costly. Therefore, it is usually more beneficial to youth and more cost-effective for societies to promote the healthy development of young people through limiting their exposure to risk and equipping them with the skills and coping mechanisms they need to resist engaging in risky behavior.

## Types of At-Risk Youth

During the crucial transition from dependence to independence, disadvantaged young people become more vulnerable to environmental factors that may qualify them as “at risk.” It is important to distinguish among the levels of risk that young people face at various stages of their development to formulate the most appropriate policies accordingly. Young people tend to fall into one of the following three types:

- **Type I**—Young people who face risk factors in their lives but who have not yet engaged in risky behavior (for example, those living in disadvantaged situations who are at risk of dropping out of school or of being unemployed).
- **Type II**—Young people who engage in risky behavior but have not yet suffered severe negative consequences (for example, youth who are often absent from school but have not yet dropped out, youth who are engaged in risky sexual behavior but have not yet acquired a sexually transmitted disease (STD), or youth who are involved in delinquent activities but have not yet been arrested).
- **Type III**—Young people who are experiencing severe negative consequences as a result of risky behavior (for example, youth who have dropped out of school, youth who have experienced unplanned pregnancies or have contracted HIV/AIDS, youth who are incarcerated, and youth who are addicted to alcohol or drugs).

## What Factors Influence Risky Behavior?

- Factors at the **individual level** are related to the cognitive, physiological, and behavioral nature of the individual, much of which is determined in early childhood.<sup>3</sup> While some individual risk factors are biological—such as race, sex, ethnicity, and mental or physical disabilities—many are strongly influenced by a person’s environment and by the interaction between this environment and the individual’s inherited traits. For example, the existence and intensity of rage and violence among children and youth often vary depending on the level of violence to which these youth have been exposed, both within the family and through society.<sup>4</sup> In a nonsupportive environment, children and youth can also be led to believe that they are worthless, which may prompt them to drop out of school or engage in risky sexual behavior. By contrast, protective factors at the individual level include strong self-esteem and social skills, a positive self-image, and spiritual beliefs.
- The **micro level** refers to the institutions and individuals with which a young person interacts on a personal basis, generally at the community level, including families, peers, schools, teachers,

neighborhoods, the police, and health personnel. *Interpersonal relationships* such as these play a crucial role in influencing a young person's choice to engage in risky behavior. Of these relationships, the family seems to be the primary source of both risk and protective factors. Key risk factors include abuse and violence in the household, parental substance abuse, or general violence including corporal punishment, and household poverty.<sup>5</sup>

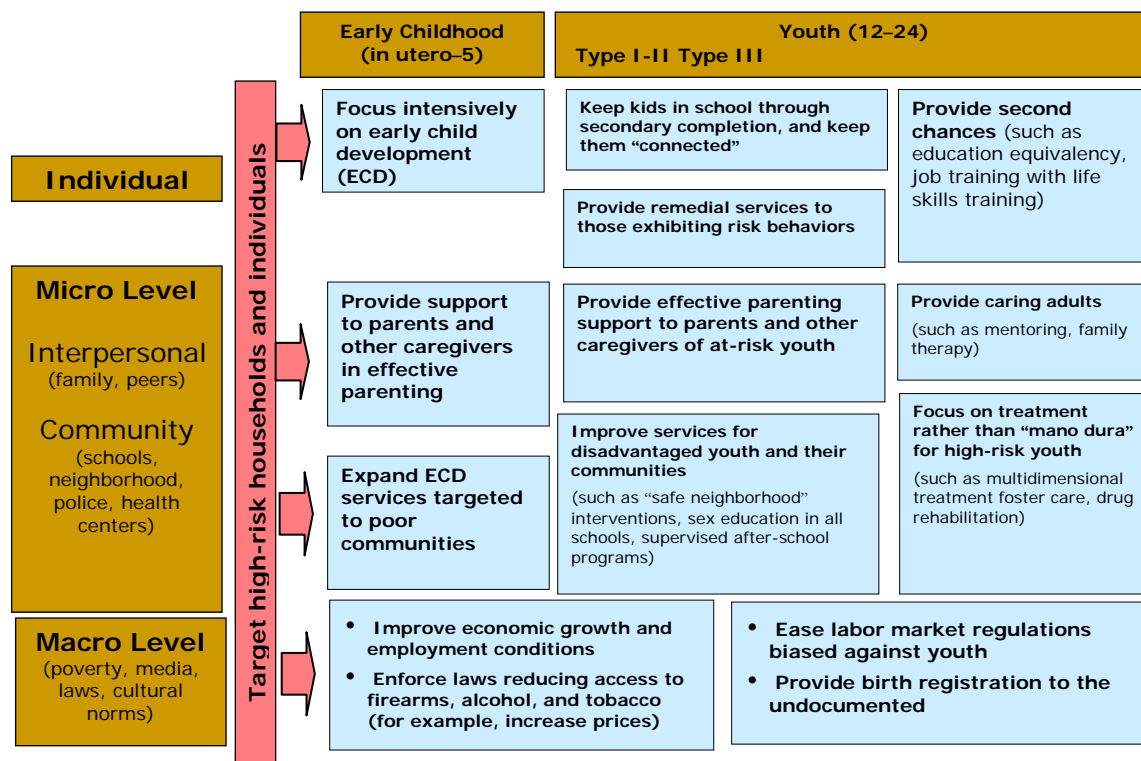
*Communities* also have an important influence on risky youth behavior through such factors as the availability and quality of schools, neighborhood safety, police presence, and what relationships a young person has with other young people in the community. As with families, schools and school connectedness play a central protective role in the lives of young people, especially during the secondary school years when young people are most likely to engage in risky behavior, particularly if they have dropped out of school.<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that young people rely more or less heavily on certain types of micro-level factors at different stages of their development. For example, their peers become increasingly influential in their early teens, although family continues to play an important role.

- ***The macro level*** refers to the systems and institutions that affect an individual but with which he or she has no direct contact, such as overall economic conditions, income inequality, the media, laws, and cultural norms. For example, macro-level factors that contribute to youth violence include economic and social policies that maintain socioeconomic inequalities, the availability of weapons, and a weak judicial system. They also include social norms such as those relating to male dominance over females or parental dominance over children, as well as cultural norms that endorse violence as an acceptable method for resolving conflicts.<sup>7</sup>

### **Relationship among Levels of Influence, Risk Factors, Risky Behavior, and Negative Outcomes**

To formulate and implement an effective set of policies regarding interventions targeted to youth at risk, it is first necessary to identify the cause-and-effect relationship among environmental factors, risky behavior, and negative youth outcomes (figure 1).

Figure 1. Prevention of Negative Youth Outcomes



### Endnotes

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