

AFTER THE STORM

Policy Recommendations to Reconnect Opportunity Youth during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

Established in 2012, the Aspen Institute **Forum for Community Solutions** (AIFCS) seeks to highlight and support communities that successfully engage leaders and advocates across multiple sectors—government, nonprofit, business, and philanthropy—to collectively solve our society’s toughest social and economic challenges. Believing that if communities have more power to lead change, we will create a more just and equitable society, the AIFCS promotes collaborative, community-based efforts that build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity. AIFCS supports communities to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create their own solutions to their most pressing challenges.ⁱ

In 2013, the AIFCS’s **Opportunity Youth Forum** (OYF) began as a group of 21 community collaboratives; it has since grown to a network of almost 40 urban, rural, and tribal communities seeking to scale reconnection and build career pathways for youth and young adults. OYF community collaboratives are home to 660,000 opportunity youth.ⁱⁱ Across the OYF network, communities are engaged in targeted efforts to improve education and employment outcomes for opportunity youth.

OYF collaboratives bring together multiple stakeholders (e.g., schools, community-based programs, postsecondary institutions, employers, youth leaders, government agencies) to remove barriers to education and career success and improve the systems that serve opportunity youth. By creating integrated education and career pathways to reconnect opportunity youth to school and employment, OYF collaboratives are making it possible for young people to get back on track to successful adulthood. In addition, OYF collaboratives are raising awareness of successful strategies, mobilizing stakeholders through knowledge and network development, advocating for effective policy, and catalyzing investments by encouraging funder partnerships. AIFCS functions as an intermediary for OYF, supporting communities with funding, technical assistance, convening, and other learning opportunities to support adoption, scale, and documentation of the most effective and innovative solutions for reconnecting opportunity youth.

CONTEXT

Opportunity youth are young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither enrolled in school nor participating in the labor market. This time frame is essential to youth development; during this phase of life, youth are making meaning of their environment and their role in society. They develop closer relationships with their peers, establish an interest in a career, study or train in higher education or trade school, develop soft and hard skills for the job market, and pursue interests outside of work and school. When services that support these pursuits are unavailable to young people—or are poorly funded or not accessible—we see a rise in school and work disconnection rates. Other barriers, such as poverty, substandard housing, poor health, and lack of education, further contribute to high rates of disconnection. The impacts of disconnection can follow young people for the rest of their lives and, more often than not, can become generational, resulting in profound negative consequences for the economic health and vitality of our communities. There is no single solution to this issue; it requires collective participation from government, systems, community, and other stakeholders to ensure opportunity youth are equipped for the future.

Pre-pandemic, an estimated 4.3 million youth in the United States were opportunity youth, with almost a third living in poverty. Among racial and ethnic categories, Native youth have the highest disconnection rate (23.4 percent), followed by Black youth (17.4 percent), Latino youth (12.8 percent), White youth (9.2 percent), and Asian youth (6.2 percent). Overall, boys and young men are more likely to be disconnected than are girls and young women: 11.5 percent versus 10.8 percent, respectively. However, within racial and ethnic groups, the gender gaps vary. For example, young Latina and Native women have higher disconnection rates compared with those of their male counterparts. Native young women have the highest disconnection rate among race and gender categories, at 24.8 percent.ⁱⁱⁱ

Among disconnected teenage girls and young women, motherhood rates are vastly higher than are those of their connected peers: 25.2 percent versus 6 percent, respectively. Disconnected teen and young adult mothers take care of their own families while struggling to reconnect to education or employment pathways. This added stress is important to consider, as one in four disconnected young women are mothers who need two-generation policies and programs to support both them and their children.^{iv}

Access to high-quality education with appropriate and culturally responsive wraparound supports is crucial to prevent dropout rates early on in middle school. For many opportunity youth, the education system is the first institution to identify warning signs or often initiate disconnection and “push out.” An estimated one in four opportunity youth leave school with no high school diploma. Economic viability in our job market requires more than a high school diploma; with academic inflation and the increased demand for technical skills, a postsecondary credential or trade certification is generally essential to participate in

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today's labor market. For opportunity youth, this means large-scale investment in education—including quality reengagement, job training, and access to work opportunities, especially for youth with disabilities. Opportunity youth are more than three times as likely to have a disability of some kind, which negatively affects their ability to secure and maintain employment if appropriate supports are absent. When schools fail to adequately serve young people, these institutions often serve as the direct pipeline from school to disconnection and the juvenile justice system. Opportunity youth are more than 20 times as likely to be living in “institutionalized group quarters” such as correctional facilities and residential homes or shelters.^v

Youth disconnection has been an issue for decades, but crises like the COVID-19 pandemic have brought the staggering scale of the problem to the forefront. The Great Recession of 2008 brought much-needed attention to the struggles of opportunity youth, and meaningful work has been done since then to improve the circumstances of opportunity youth and decrease disconnection rates from 6.7 million in 2008^{vi} to 4.3 million in 2019. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has likely erased much of this progress. Measure of America, a leading expert on national youth disconnection rates, estimates that as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the total number of opportunity youth more than doubled to 9 million in May 2020.^{vii} The likely magnitude of the challenge that opportunity youth will face in the near future can be gleaned in unemployment rates among young workers. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, almost 22 million jobs were lost between February and April 2020, with the largest loss of jobs in the leisure and hospitality industries.^{viii} Unemployment rate for workers ages 16-24 went up to 24 percent, an increase of almost 16 percent from the fourth quarter of 2019, likely due to the high representation of young adult workers in these industries.^{ix}

With continued national attention and momentum focused on jobs recovery and economic growth after the pandemic, it is imperative that we recommit to advancing policies and interventions that support improved education, career, and life outcomes for opportunity youth. Moving forward, policymakers, system leaders, organizations, and individuals must work in the opportunity youth space to establish measurable, time-bound goals for reducing disconnection, and they must follow realistic processes for achieving them. Reaching ambitious goals requires engaging in a collaborative approach. To avoid future setbacks, the methods must also be strong enough to withstand future economic downturns and pandemics.

This report outlines by issue area the policy priorities that have the potential to improve education, career, and other life outcomes of opportunity youth. Through a series of feedback and input sessions, former and current opportunity youth ranked and selected the following recommendations from a curated list of local, state, and federal policy proposals from leading national and local partners in the youth advocacy space. To ensure that opportunity youth are not left behind during and after this global pandemic, young people narrowed down their top policy priorities to give elected officials, policymakers, youth advocates, and community stakeholders a starting point to address the most pressing needs. We conclude by presenting funding opportunities and examples of implementing some of these recommendations through the flexible funding in pivotal legislation such as the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2021 passed by the 117th Congress and signed into law by President Biden.

OPPORTUNITY YOUTH POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS, BY ISSUE AREA

Education Strategies Recommendations

Crucial to gaining and maintaining employment, education provides a primary path to family-sustaining wages, stability and success. With significant learning loss due to the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring all students have the support they need as they advance along their education pathways is now more important than ever.

- **K-12 Dropout Prevention and Reengagement Strategies Recommendations**
 - Support school districts with technical assistance and grants that provide extra counselors, trauma-informed care, and wraparound services to families to ensure that students have access to high-quality academic instruction; a safe, healthy, and respectful environment based on the science of learning; and dropout prevention support.
 - Provide positive school supports that contribute to a safe, just, and welcoming climate for all students. This includes maintaining the American School Counselor Association's recommended ratio of 250 students to 1 counselor. This ratio ensures that school counselors meet with every student and thus have a greater chance of recognizing early signs of potential disconnection.^x Additional priorities should include yearly staff training, restorative practices, culturally responsive positive behavioral interventions and supports, and mental health services for students in crisis.
 - Incorporate truancy prevention programs and services into the Safe and Supportive Schools framework in school districts with the highest drop-out and truancy rates. Led by school officials and community members, truancy programs must reflect the range of students who are most affected; the services must respect ethnic and cultural diversity and language differences; and wraparound supports must focus on the family, not just the student. Instead of law enforcement, an anchoring community-based organization should conduct wellness checks with families of truant students.

TEXAS SPOTLIGHT

Recognizing that Texas plays a crucial role in supporting 10 percent of the total U.S. opportunity youth population, the OYF recently launched the Texas Opportunity Youth Network, which seeks to advance the work of communities statewide committed to reengaging and supporting opportunity youth as they achieve their personal, education, and employment goals.

Assisting students who disconnected from school during COVID-19 in reconnecting to education options to overcome large-scale learning losses in the state is a top priority for these communities. They are leveraging a state policy that allows young people who have dropped out to go back to high school until age 26. Several communities, especially those in rural areas of Texas are working toward improving internet and technology access, which emerged as a critical need during transition to remote learning. Further, establishing comprehensive career pathways in healthcare and energy can provide many opportunity youth with well-paying, fulfilling careers in Texas's largest industries.

- o Champion the Counseling not Criminalization in Schools Act and other school climate legislation to divest federal funding from school resource officers and law enforcement and provide schools with grants to improve their mental health services and ban police from being stationed at schools, which is a direct contributor to the school-to-prison pipeline.^{xi}
- o Prohibit arrests, summonses/tickets, and any criminal charges for school-based disciplinary behavior.
- o End the Department of Defense 1033 program,^{xii} including its transfer of excess military equipment to educational institutions such as colleges, universities, and K-12 police departments.
- o Invest in secondary education reengagement strategies that support students with disabilities. Opportunity youth are three times more likely to report a disability. Every year, only 65 percent of youth with disabilities graduate from high school, compared with 86 percent of their counterparts.^{xiii} To address this issue, school superintendents should invest in reengagement strategies for over-age and under-credited students, to facilitate reconnection to quality secondary attainment pathways with the support of American Disability Act resources.

- **Postsecondary Completion Strategies Recommendations**

- o Reauthorize the Higher Education Act to improve and update the following services:

Increase funding for Federal Work-Study to give institutions the necessary resources to expand work-based learning opportunities for low-income students in their fields of study.^{xiv}

Strengthen connections across Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language, correctional education, and postsecondary education opportunities.

Establish emergency grant programs that help students address unexpected expenses that threaten enrollment.

- o Support postsecondary graduates as they transition to employment through mentorship, training, accountability partners, academic preparation, transition planning, career planning, placement, and personal and professional development.^{xv}
- o Provide students with realistic pathways to employment and education that are clearly defined, achievable, and in line with individual goals.^{xvi}
- o Promote stackable credentials and Prior Learning Assessment policies to increase economic success for those who move in and out of education and employment.

KING COUNTY, WA, SPOTLIGHT

In King County, Washington—home to the city of Seattle and companies like Amazon, Facebook, and Microsoft—most opportunity youth graduate from high school but not college, and they struggle to find meaningful work in the knowledge-based economy. Therefore, the local OYF collaborative, the Road Map Project, focuses much of its efforts toward helping as many students as possible transition from high school to college, by building a local reengagement network of community-based organizations, community partners, and private funders. Specifically, the collaborative is working to expand the Seattle Promise program, which currently offers only Seattle-based high school graduates free tuition to Seattle-based colleges, to the rest of South King County, as most opportunity youth in the county are living outside of Seattle city limits and therefore don't qualify for the program. The collaborative has also been heavily involved in Best Start for Kids, a King County voter-approved initiative that funds comprehensive supports from prenatal development to adulthood and aims to promote positive outcomes; intervene early when children, youth, and families need support; and build on community strengths.

- o Expand Prior Learning Assessment eligibility of acceptable learning credits to recognize social justice work-based learning experiences, registered apprenticeships, civic engagement, and community service learning. These learning experiences could directly benefit students with low incomes, students of color, and immigrant students by providing them with a complementary real-world application of their learning and foster a sense of belonging and meaning in their place in society.^{xvii}
- o Support higher livable wages and family-sustaining jobs and careers by leveraging employment outcomes data to evaluate and promote successful career counseling and job placement strategies.
- o Encourage and support state-level efforts to offer to low-income students paid work-based learning opportunities that connect them to employers, internships, fellowships, and other opportunities in their fields of study and in their communities.
- o Design debt-free college and free community college proposals that focus on low-income students, students of color, rural students, part-time students, older and returning students, student parents, and undocumented immigrant students.
- o Increase the types of degrees and programs eligible for federal student aid, such as high-quality short-term credentials, competency-based education, credit for prior learning, and noncredit-to-credit articulation.
- o Allow parents in postsecondary education to qualify for childcare assistance without imposing additional work requirements.^{xviii}
- o Permanently expand eligibility for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for workers without dependent children who are 19 years or older and make sure students can receive the EITC credit if they are Pell Grant eligible or if they meet another indicator that denotes financial need.^{xix}
- o Suspend Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) work participation rates time limits while students are enrolled in an approved program and use TANF funds to expand Federal Work-Study opportunities.^{xx}
- o Encourage institutions to connect eligible students to public benefits such as Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program to address health and food insecurity among college students, with waivers that provide more flexibility for students to become eligible.^{xxi}

Economic Opportunity Strategies Recommendations

Employment remains one of the most significant ways that opportunity youth can engage with and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Supporting and expanding quality workforce development programs and services that provide training and preparation for success in the 21st century workplace not only directly benefits opportunity youth but ensures the economic growth and vitality of our communities.

• Employment Strategies Recommendations

- o Prioritize career pathways over low-wage, low-skill jobs by helping opportunity youth develop in-demand technical skills for the modern economy.^{xxii}
- o Address practical barriers to reconnection by supporting state workforce boards, community-based organizations, and youth direct-service nonprofits with adequate funding to provide holistic wraparound

supports that help workers keep and maintain livable-wage jobs. Supports include, but are not limited to, transportation stipends, access to technology such as phones and laptops, childcare, and health insurance, as well as more practical career support services like creating a hard-copy résumé, covering fees for government identification and paperwork, and providing work-ready outfits.^{xxiii}

- o Ensure fair treatment and a safe work environment for youth with disabilities and LGBTQ+ youth by, for example, ending subminimum wages for youth with disabilities and enforcing anti-discrimination laws.^{xxiv}
- o Incentivize corporations as well as private and local businesses to hire local youth and invest in the economic revitalization of communities, through the passage of a national subsidized youth jobs program.

• Green Economy Strategies Recommendations

- o Create access to “green jobs” for low-income youth and adults, to ensure that we do not leave low-income communities behind as our economy and energy usage shifts. A great example is the Civilian Conservation Corps, the original green jobs initiative that provided direct training and employment to more than 3 million young adults. They planted more than a billion trees and built over 800 parks—the largest reforestation effort in our nation’s history. By reestablishing the Civilian Conservation Corps, we can provide green jobs to a diverse group of young adults.
- o Establish equitable community solutions that mitigate exposure to air pollution, hazardous waste sites, lead poisoning, and water contamination in low-income communities and communities of color.
- o Prioritize marginalized low-income communities when creating climate policies for job access, education, health, housing, transportation, and sustainable infrastructure development.^{xxv} Well-intentioned policies like a carbon tax without gradual steps or exemptions for low-income communities can have negative outcomes and add additional barriers to already tax-strained communities. The last thing we want to do is tax people into poverty through additional green taxes. Corporations should bear the larger brunt of carbon tax penalties before low-income communities are expected to foot the bill.^{xxvi}

• Workforce Development Strategies Recommendations

- o Support paid internship positions with long-term hiring potential. Incentivize the private sector to create opportunities through the establishment of a corporate tax credit for those firms offering paid internships to low-income young adults.
- o Promote military service as a viable career path for interested opportunity youth. Grant military eligibility waivers to individuals with prior criminal convictions, disabilities, and individuals who have unfinished educational requirements that could be completed as part of their military training. At

ECONOMIC JUSTICE SPOTLIGHT

In the San Francisco Bay area, the MyPath program is advancing economic justice by providing financial mentorship to opportunity youth who are enrolled in a basic income pilot program as well as those youth receiving their first paychecks. Financial mentorship often takes place at participating credit unions and teaches the basics of banking, savings, and building credit.

MyPath worked with a group of youth advocates for economic justice, who drafted the Youth Economic Bill of RYTS (Real Youth Troubles and Solutions) meant to ensure the economic freedom and stability of disadvantaged youth in the United States. The Bill of RYTS suggests that youth would benefit greatly from policies such as universal basic income with financial mentorship, refundable tax credits for youth workers, easy access to credit reports, and the federal poverty level being raised to \$38,000 per person.

the same time, it is critical to ensure that military recruitment does not track or disproportionately target low-income communities as the only option for economic advancement.^{xxvii}

- o Establish a national, user-friendly career navigation digital platform with quick links to local resources and services, to support workers and learners in navigating the career landscape and making informed decisions on employment and education pathways available to them. The federal government’s job website (Office of Personnel Management, or USAJOBS) is difficult to navigate and is not centralized for all available government employment opportunities.
- o Invest in projects such as broadband deployments, public health initiatives, and infrastructure improvements as part of a larger, post-pandemic relief strategy aimed to revitalize inclusive regional economies. Integrate financing to distressed communities with family-supportive employment and skills development opportunities.^{xxviii}
- o Vastly increase funding for the Minority Business Development Agency, the only federal agency specifically created to facilitate the growth of minority-owned businesses, to create a minority-serving institution business center initiative. These business centers would be placed within historically Black colleges and universities and in other minority-serving institutions across the nation, to provide grants for business incubators, start-up capital, technical and legal assistance, and additional support for students and community members interested in starting or growing a business.^{xxix}
- o Pass the Raise the Wage Act, ensuring the removal of the federal subminimum wage for youth and people with disabilities. Strengthen the Equal Pay Act to provide a livable wage for individuals and families earning poverty wages.
- o Encourage workforce boards to invest in long-term support and mentorship in addition to Summer Youth Employment Programs, which often result in only short-term benefits. The 2021 Connecting Youth to Jobs legislation, if passed, can provide this year-round support for subsidized jobs for youth of color and low-income youth.^{xxx}
- o Support and incentivize government programs to offer young adults real jobs with wages rather than unpaid internships, token living allowances, or stipends.^{xxxi,xxxii}
- o Reauthorize and significantly fund the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and National Apprenticeship Act commensurate to the youth income and employment challenge scale. WIOA reauthorization must also include a new vision with research-backed effective strategies to connect youth to school and work. For example, strategies could include the following: (1) co-creating programming with young people to prioritize their voice, foster empowerment, and agency; and (2) adapting lessons from other disciplines like trauma-informed care, research in adolescent brain development, and a restorative justice framework.^{xxxiii}

CALIFORNIA OPPORTUNITY YOUTH NETWORK SPOTLIGHT

The California Opportunity Youth Network has been advancing priorities at the intersection of education and workforce policy, with a specific focus on how to leverage funding from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). In 2021, California Opportunity Youth Network worked with the California Workforce Development Board (CWDB) to develop and receive federal approval for a waiver that increases access for systems-involved youth (homeless, justice system, and foster youth) to programs and services funded through WIOA. Despite a short turnaround to opt into the waiver in the current program year, 17 CWDBs are currently leveraging their flexibility to increase the number of in-school systems-involved youth they are serving—rather than waiting for these at-risk young people to become disconnected from school. Most of the other CWDBs are expected to opt in beginning in summer 2022.

Health and Wellness Strategies Recommendations

Considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ever-increasing need for mental health support, opportunity youth require free and accessible healthcare now more than ever.

- o Focus on advancing systems and policy changes that address the mental health needs of youth and young adults. States and localities must integrate collaboration among adult- and child-serving systems, authentically engage youth for feedback to improve services, and provide culturally responsive care that brings together physical and behavioral healthcare.^{xxxiv}
- o Improve access to and the quality of mental health and substance abuse services in local communities and in public schools.
- o Support nationalized medicine and move away from employer-based healthcare by passing the Medicare for All Act.
- o Maintain and make permanent the additional flexibilities provided during the COVID-19 pandemic that expanded access to telehealth on both video and phone platforms. Expand Medicaid reimbursement for text- and app-based mental health services.
- o Explore telehealth as a tool to reduce barriers and increase accessibility to physicians and mental health providers.
- o Fund hospitals, mental health centers, and community health centers in rural areas and underserved urban centers.
- o Move toward a police-free mental health response that decriminalizes mental health, by implementing youth mobile response services.^{xxxv}
- o Significantly increase funding for youth and young adult mental health services; ensure that these resources reach youth and young adults by designating a percentage of community mental health block grant and substance abuse grant funds for this population and increasing Medicaid match rates for this population.
- o Cultivate youth peer support and community health work as career pathways for opportunity youth, to address shortages in the behavioral health workforce, increase access to mental health support, and generate economic opportunity for youth interested in behavioral health careers.

Criminal Justice Strategies Recommendations

With opportunity youth routinely falling prey to outdated and unfair criminal justice policies that keep them from meaningfully connecting to education and workforce systems, dramatic juvenile justice reform is long overdue.

- o Support homeless youth as a prevention approach by passing the reauthorization of the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act and increase program funding, which provides vital prevention, shelter, long-term housing, and services to runaway, homeless, and disconnected youth.
- o Increase funding and support for the juvenile justice system to include fair and legal representation of all youth in legal court. Congress should support efforts to ensure that states are meeting this constitutional requirement. The presence of properly resourced, competent attorneys is essential to the integrity of the juvenile justice system.^{xxxvi}

- o Increase funding and support for Native youth and Tribal Juvenile Justice Systems so that Indigenous youth are not more likely to end up in the federal prison system, which is not designed or equipped to address their needs.^{xxxvii, xxxviii}
- o Pass legislation to ensure system-involved immigrant youth have access to defense counsel and immigration attorneys who understand the immigration consequences of juvenile justice involvement. Congress should also support outreach programs and support services that work to keep immigrant youth connected to their communities.^{xxxix}
- o Incentivize states to eliminate juvenile justice fines and fees, especially since many opportunity youth and their families come from low-income backgrounds. These fines and fees only exacerbate racial disparities, economic distress, and increase recidivism rates. Congress can incentivize states to eliminate these fines and fees by providing grants or making federal funding conditional on their elimination.^{xl}
- o Protect system-involved youth through improving the confidentiality of juvenile justice records. Remove highly sensitive personal information from public access, automatically expunge nonviolent juvenile offenses of children before they turn 15, and immediately seal nonviolent juvenile offenses that occur after a child has reached the age of 15.^{xli}
- o Increase funding for the Department of Labor’s Reintegration of Ex-Offenders Program, which provides access to career pathways and industry-recognized credentials for individuals with a criminal record. Promote awareness in states of existing set-aside funding of \$25 million for targeted youth reentry services for young people in high-poverty, high-crime areas.^{xlii}
- o Dismantle and reverse all harmful policies in the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 and pass a modern 21st century public safety bill that creates a new paradigm for public safety—one that emphasizes noncarceral interventions and programs, not jails and prisons, to keep communities safe. Close youth prisons and divest funds from bloated police budgets.^{xliii}
- o Prohibit profiling based on actual or perceived personal characteristics such as race, gender identity, or sexual orientation by rigorously implementing comprehensive anti-profiling policies and enact legislation such as the End Racial and Religious Profiling Act.
- o End federal programs that provide excessive military equipment (e.g., the U.S. Department of Defense 1033 program) to state and local law enforcement, which is the main reason for the militarization of police officers.
- o End qualified immunity for police officers, a policy that prevents them from being held legally accountable when they break the law, through the passage of the George Floyd Act.

MAINE SPOTLIGHT

The Maine Opportunity Youth Collaborative uses the tools of data, youth-led change, and policy modeling to inform systemic change, and it facilitates collaboration between universities, community-based organizations, and youth-led organizations in the state. The collaborative strives to connect service providers to those in need and to empower youth-led change at the state and local levels. The work of the collaborative spans multiple systems and takes a statewide approach; it has a history of leading change in foster youth policy by connecting foster youth to career pathways, postsecondary opportunities and financial assistance, and additional support services. The collaborative has also enabled youth to lead change on juvenile justice initiatives, and it has made juvenile justice reform a key objective of its efforts, including legislative goals such as safeguarding juvenile justice records and defunding the expansive private prison complex.

- o Dramatically reform sentencing policies by adopting the following: (1) eliminate the use of racially biased “risk assessment” algorithms for making sentencing determinations; and (2) abolish mandatory minimum sentencing, the death penalty, and life without parole. Make these changes retroactive so all currently incarcerated individuals can receive justice. Establish an independent federal agency outside of the Department of Justice to facilitate this process.^{xliv}
- o Pass the Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement Act of 2019 to implement equitable cannabis reform with a racial justice lens. Replace the current system of drug criminalization with a regulatory approach that treats substance abuse as a public health issue rather than a criminal justice matter. Shift federal resources away from harmful drug criminalization policies and instead invest in rebuilding the communities most damaged by the War on Drugs, with a focus on addressing addiction and other behavioral issues.^{xlv}

Family Support Strategies Recommendations

A multigenerational approach must be taken to ensure whole families are provided with the social programs they need to thrive. Service providers and state and local governments, whenever possible, should support and implement two-generation approaches that serve whole families through a systems alignment of federal programs or nongovernmental resources targeted specifically at improving child and parent outcomes.

- o Pass the 2021 version of the Child Care for Working Families Act to address the problem of affordable quality childcare for working families. This legislation would implement a mandatory funding structure for states to make childcare free for low-income working families and affordable for the middle class.^{xlvi}
- o Replicate in other locales the Stockton, California, guaranteed income pilot, or universal basic income, which provided individuals at or below median household incomes with a \$500, no-strings-attached monthly payment. Results from this pilot showed families’ and individual’s employment status and productivity increased in tandem with well-being. Reduction in stress and debt meant this additional income was spent on necessities and did not discourage people from work.^{xlvii}
- o Raise the federal poverty level to adjust for inflation and geography, to provide more families with the social programs they need to make ends meet.
- o Provide mortgage, rent, and utility federal relief to low-income families and young adults who have lost their housing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The eviction moratorium has expired, and there is no sign of extension. States need to accelerate the distribution of rental assistance provided by ARPA and act with urgency to avoid displacement and a rise in homelessness.
- o Permanently enact expansions of the EITC tax credit and Child Tax credit under ARPA to sustain a continued reduction in child poverty post-pandemic.^{xlviii}
- o Pass fair immigration reform and keep families together through the Dream Act and related immigration reform legislation.^{xlix}
- o Support stable housing for families in child welfare by strengthening cross-system collaboration and policy implementation between the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

- o Call on Congress to establish an independent National Technical Assistance Center on Family Engagement to support state and local family engagement programs. Supporting family engagement is crucial to help system-involved youth return successfully to their communities. Incentives should be created for state and local agencies to establish Statewide Family Engagement Centers that integrate support services for families involved in the justice system. Congress should also explicitly call for the inclusion of family members of system-involved youth to serve on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act-established State Advisory Groups. Support family engagement by requiring judges to consider sending incarcerated parents to the prisons closest to their families. Allow and encourage the Bureau of Prisons to let incarcerated parents serve the last 12 months of their sentences at home with their children.¹

PRINCIPLES FOR EQUITY

Youth-Led Systems Change

Youth and young adults are experiencing a shift in consciousness; they are rethinking how we should run our institutions. The history of this country has made young people keenly aware of how current systems of power were designed and operated to cause harm and intergenerational trauma to low-income communities of color. With this knowledge in hand, young people are creating innovative and equitable ways to reform and rebuild these systems to better serve them, their peers, and their successors. For example, the call for divestment of bloated military and police budgets to subsidize wraparound supports for young people's health and well-being is a clear example of this awakening in how young people "do policy."

For this population, enforcement, accountability, and shifting power locally are three critical factors in policymaking. Genuine opportunities for change lie at the local level in our communities, neighborhoods, and towns. Local elections and local policy have the most direct impact on our daily life. For this reason, state and local departments should support, expand, and fund existing local youth-led change efforts. At the same time, funding alone will not solve systemic issues. Direct investments with an accountability framework and enforcement guidelines are key levers to ensure that new, innovative strategies are carried out at the local level. Youth and young adults have a role to play in identifying those strategies and informing local communities and decision makers on how best to allocate funds swiftly and equitably.

Only when we listen to young people will we achieve the change we need for a more equitable and just country.

Business leaders and elected officials can no longer turn a blind eye to the power of youth movements calling for change. A refusal to go back to "normal" is loud and clear. By organizing efforts on the ground and on social media, young people are directly leading efforts to address systemic racism in the United States. Protests have erupted across the nation to demand a new deal—a plea for change. Our partners at the [Center for Law and Social Policy \(CLASP\)](#) are leading a youth campaign with 39 changemakers across the country to demand a [New Deal for Youth](#) that responds to the historic roots and current scale of the crisis. These changemakers will present their policy platforms and list of demands to members of Congress and the Biden

Administration. This process of youth and adult advocates partnering to co-create national youth-focused policy platforms is the future of policymaking and a vital part of enacting systems change. Only by centering the voices of those closest to the problems will policymakers better understand the needs of young people and supports that are required to address them. Only when we listen to young people will we achieve the change we need for a more equitable and just country.

Authentic Youth Engagement

As mentioned elsewhere in this paper, the period of development between ages 16 and 24 is critical; it is when youth and young adults strive to make meaning of the world around them and to understand their place in it. This time is a critical opportunity for adults to help foster belonging, to practice identity

affirmation, and to support young people in developing a sense of purpose. Research in youth brain development and youth psychology from the University of Southern California and North Carolina State University is catching up to these critical notions of making meaning and belonging for positive youth development and leading a full, successful life.

In their work, researchers Dr. Deleon Gray and Dr. Mary Helen Immordino-Yang emphasize the importance of belonging and making meaning. When young people are in environments that prevent them from engaging in deep reflection and personal meaning-making—including in stories, messaging, and news coverage about their communities—they are kept from constructing their own narratives and envisioning the full potential of their selves and their future. And yet, this is precisely how our education system is designed. We all have a role to play in nourishing and cultivating both meaning-making and belonging in opportunity youth and in all young people. Creating spaces for reflection, healing, and meaning-making when engaging youth is critical to fostering an environment of belonging and trust.

Policy is personal. It directly impacts our daily lives, and it can create or prevent access to resources and opportunities. As opportunity youth navigate life and experience the systemic issues in their communities, they, more than anyone, understand our communities' most pressing challenges—and the solutions. Opportunity youth can and should inform our decisions about the ways public services can be developed, enhanced, reformed, or removed to pave a true path to reconnection.

To tackle barriers to reconnection, policymakers, advocates, and stakeholders must center the voices and lived experience of opportunity youth as a baseline and create youth engagement strategies to incorporate youth and young adults' participation beyond panel discussions and sharing their stories. Intentional integration in meetings, advisory roles, leadership boards, and organizations should be compensated and accompanied by youth leadership training and development. Authentic youth engagement, when appropriately done, allows both parties—adults and youth—to learn from one another. It provides young people with the social capital, leadership, and mentoring needed to pursue potential career pathways and civic engagement opportunities at the state, local, and national levels. It creates pipelines of opportunity for young people to advocate for themselves and their communities and create lasting systems change.

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The [Reconnecting Youth Campaign](#), which calls on Congress to fund 1 million pathways to education and careers for opportunity youth, is a perfect example of what shared power between youth and caring adults can look like at the state, local, and national levels. The campaign is co-led by several national policy organizations—including the Forum for Youth Investment, the National Youth Employment Coalition, and CLASP—and [Opportunity Youth United \(OYU\)](#), a national movement of young leaders who advocate for policies that increase opportunity and decrease poverty in communities. OYU supports a network of local youth-led [Community Action Teams](#) that organize around opportunity youth issues in their communities. This dual focus on local community issues and national policy enables OYU to infuse all Reconnecting Youth Campaign activities with lived experience and policy and advocacy expertise of opportunity youth. This type of youth engagement is critical to ensure that COVID-19 relief funding and resources made available through legislation like ARPA and the American Families Plan, are swiftly and equitably channeled to where they are needed most.

PHOENIX SPOTLIGHT

Community Action Teams in Arizona have worked overtime during the COVID-19 pandemic to connect opportunity youth with much-needed relief services. In many cases they have been able to provide students with internet access and laptops so they could continue their studies and limit learning loss.

The Opportunities for Youth collaborative in Phoenix benefits from a unique data-sharing agreement with Arizona State University. This agreement allows for youth outreach across the state via text, phone, and email in conjunction with Arizona State University. The collaborative has also developed data-driven accountability processes that allow its partners to work more efficiently toward a common goal.

their communities to organize and provide mutual aid; however, there is no “silver bullet” to community revitalization—each community carries its own history, culture, and unique assets and challenges. The foundation for a healthy community is high-quality education, a robust local economy with pathways to employment and entrepreneurship, and a strong sense of belonging—especially for young people.

High-poverty, under-resourced communities with a lack of economic opportunity tend to offer fewer resources, community centers, or second chances to local youth. As a result, youth and young adults sometimes choose to withdraw from community life and to self-isolate. Although this might seem like a safe strategy, as recent scholars have shown, this isolation runs counter to the assets that come from social capital, which is essential to life success. Self-isolation, in fact, further disconnects a young person from potential mentors, supportive neighbors, and community resources for reconnection. To curb this type of voluntary community isolation, we must focus on addressing the more significant issue at hand: the lack of investment in young people in our communities.

Supporting programs and organizations that focus on youth development, cultural and artistic expression, belonging, and mentorship is vital in engaging young people as active members in our communities. It is essential to cultivate this sense of belonging because young people are often the first community members to initiate the revitalization process through art, storytelling, and youth culture. These qualities, although often overlooked, are necessary to ensure the success and sustainability of evidence-based practices and programs.

Data-Informed Change

Opportunity youth across the country share common challenges, yet they also face their own unique struggles. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of these struggles. It is now more critical than ever that programs be tailored to meet the distinct needs of different groups of young people. Regardless of the group or challenge, data-sharing and integration across systems are crucial for understanding how best to help these diverse young people overcome their specific challenges. Priority and focus must be placed on integrating, analyzing, and acting on the various data being shared across systems.

Revitalizing Communities

The strength of our nation does not stem from any single office, institution, or person. It lies in the center of our local communities—both big and small. The global pandemic has forced people to turn to

CONCLUSION AND COLLECTIVE CALL TO ACTION

Overall, the pandemic did not create new inequities; rather, it exposed the deep cracks in our failing systems due to corruption, crony capitalism, and systemic racism. We have long failed to adequately fund or modernize our institutions to serve the individual and societal problems of the 21st century. This past year, policymakers exposed the biggest deception in our national narrative: that we cannot afford social welfare programs. On the contrary, taxpayers have funded the largest corporate welfare bailouts ever during the recent recessions—and this pandemic only continues that trend, with corporate bailout strategies evidenced in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. These bailouts ensured that corporations received \$651 billion in tax breaks—breaks that contribute to the ever-widening racial wealth gap.

Meanwhile, legislation largely left unaddressed the issues faced by youth and young adults as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As already mentioned in this report, during the onset of the pandemic, the unemployment rate for young workers went up from 8 percent—which was already double the national average—to 24 percent. As of August 2021, youth unemployment rates were down from last spring, with 10 percent of youth unemployed, which is still 2 percentage points higher than the pre-pandemic rate.^{li} These setbacks are likely to erase 10 years of collective progress in reconnecting opportunity youth to meaningful career and education pathways.

However, there are policy proposals on the table that hold promise for opportunity youth advocates. Passed in March 2021, the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) includes \$350 billion for state and local governments to provide disaster relief from the pandemic through large-scale economic investment, to ensure the nation enters a smooth post-COVID economic recovery.

The following examples illustrate how ARPA funds are being utilized to directly benefit youth and young adults.

- **New Albany, Indiana**, is expanding its health services for young families with children (newborn to 19 years old) by offering new free community classes on nutrition, functional medicine, breastfeeding, and parenting. Investments in wraparound programs like mental health and addiction, food and rent/utility insecurity, family services, and education have been set in place thanks to ARPA funds.^{lii}
- **Minnesota** has been working hard over the past year to engage a cohort of educators, school administrators, students, and families to launch the [Due North Education Plan](#). The plan aims to ensure that every child in the state receives a high-quality education regardless of race or ZIP code. Learning loss from the pandemic has deepened disparities across the state and has widened the opportunity gap. This plan aims to close that gap and not only invest in but transform the education system for future students. Due North includes actions to support students during and after the pandemic, reform the school finance system, expand opportunities for students across Minnesota, and recruit and train a qualified diverse teaching workforce.^{liii}

- **Columbus, Ohio**, has seen a spike in crime since the pandemic began and is allocating its ARPA funds across various youth initiatives to keep young people “learning, earning, and safe.”^{iv} The city council has prioritized investing in youth; it is working with community partners to “bridge the COVID-19 graduation gap,” expand employment opportunities, support families who have lost their loved ones due to violence through community renewal efforts, and invest in violence intervention programs.

Now is the time to leverage this once-in-a-lifetime large-scale federal funding to invest and support our youth and young adults. Furthermore, adult advocates must be vigilant in including and centering the voices of youth and young adults in these discussions, to ensure that the policies and funding priorities that are being advanced are responsive to the real needs of young people in our communities. Later, when we look back on this pivotal moment, we hope that we can say that in our nation’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were able to advance not just a short-term stimulus but a direct, long-term investment in our young people and communities—and that we centered their lived experience and needs to set a new trajectory of inclusive and equitable revitalization and growth.

ENDNOTES

- i AIFCS works with many different communities. The following set of core values informs these partnerships:
- **Community and Constituent Centered:** We believe in the power of community and in the central role of community members to lead the change and advance individual and community change—particularly those most impacted by issues and historically furthest from influence and decision making.
 - **Equity:** Equity is just and fair inclusion in a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential. We believe that solutions are not successful if they don't produce greater equity for groups that have historically been excluded from opportunities.
 - **Justice:** There is no equity without justice, and no justice without equity. We must courageously create a fair society that provides opportunity to all; to accomplish this, we must shift balances of power to increase the influence of those who have traditionally been denied power.
 - **Collaboration:** We believe we can go further together than apart. Only through genuine, trust-based collaboration can significant community and systems challenges be addressed and resolved.
 - **Respect:** We are humbled by the strength and courage of the communities we seek to support and do our work with the deepest respect. Only through earning their respect and building trust can we be successful in our work.
 - **Love:** We believe that long-lasting, sustained change of some of our society's most difficult problems is based in having a deeper love of humanity—a greater compassion, empathy, and understanding for all people that is bigger than any one of us.
 - **Accountable Impact:** We are results-oriented; we seek to ensure that solutions produce real, equitable results that meaningfully improve people's lives. We seek to get to impact with a deep sense of organizational responsibility and with accountability to the communities we serve.
 - **Learning Together:** We believe in the power of learning and knowledge as an engine for change, and that learning together, with and across communities, can only happen where there is mutual respect.
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