Many Paths Forward: The Systems Change Journeys of Opportunity Youth Forum Collaboratives (2019-2022)

EQUAL MEASURE

FINDING PROMISE
FUELING CHANGE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For the past decade, Equal Measure has served as the learning and evaluation partner for the Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions (FCS) and its Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF). To support the network's learning, Equal Measure conducts an annual assessment focusing on collaboratives' values, capacities, and engagement in systems change. 2022 marked the fourth year of implementing the current assessment strategy, which consists of both a self-assessment and reflection interviews with collaborative leaders.

In this year's report, we look, as we have in previous years, at the story of annual systems change engagement collaboratives shared with us through their data. In addition to the 2022 snapshot, we sought to understand the arc of systems change work. **What are the trends over time? And what can we infer from those trends about how community-led systems change occurs?**

> **About the Opportunity Youth Forum**
> The Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions (FCS) launched the OYF in 2012, on the recommendations from President Obama's White House Council on Community Solutions. Since then, FCS has mobilized a national movement, convening and supporting a network of communities dedicated to improving systems so all young people can connect or re-connect to an education or career pathway.

Changes in the OYF Network Over Time, 2019-2022

The OYF network has grown significantly over the last four years from 27 collaboratives in 2019 to 43 collaboratives in 2022 – a 59% increase (Figure 1). As the network has expanded, its characteristics, the communities served, and the backbone organizations that coordinate the OY (Opportunity Youth) efforts have also shifted. Based on self-assessment data, over time, the number of sites who serve rural areas has increased (from 17% in 2019 to 23% in 2022). This is due to the FCS's concerted effort to diversify the network and include collaboratives in rural and tribal areas. Because of this, the years of experience in the network with OY efforts decreased over time (more collaboratives and backbones had fewer than 5 years of experience with OY efforts). These changes have implications for assessing collaborative capacity and systems change trends at the network level.

FIGURE 1. **MAP OF THE OYF NETWORK IN 2022**

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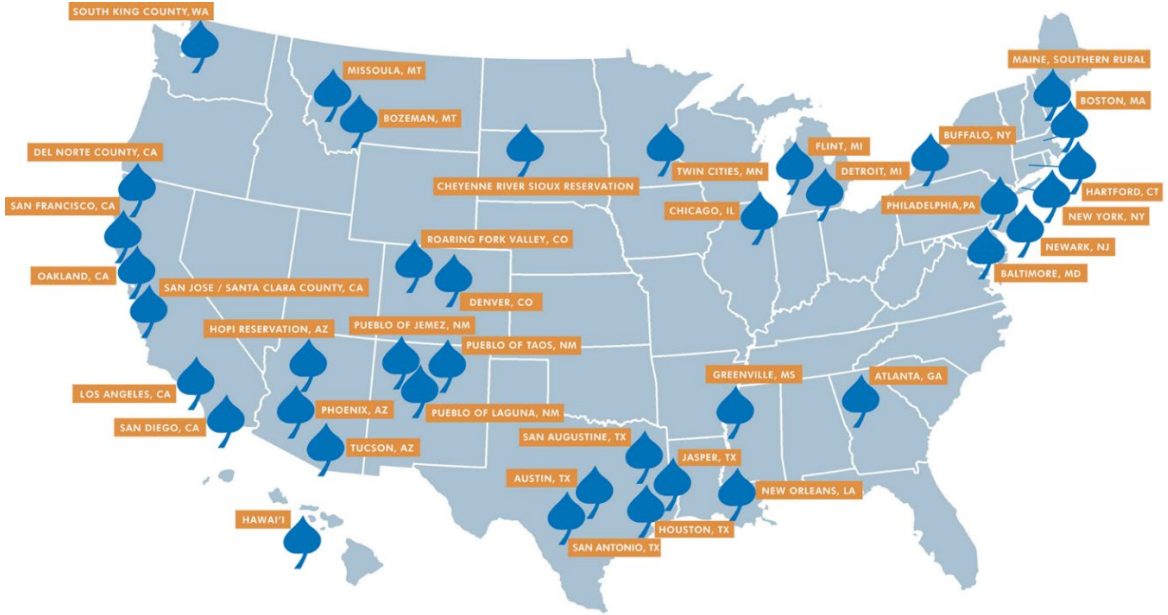
BUILDING COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY, 2019-2022

Each year, collaboratives have rated their capacity, or the structures, processes, and resources needed for cross-sector collaboration and systems change work. Across the network, **collaborative capacity dipped in 2020, rebounded in 2021 and remained fairly steady in 2022** (Figure 2). Almost half of the capacity indicators (48%) were strongly evident in OYF collaboratives in 2022, the highest level in four years — although with continued room for development and growth of vital capacities in the collaboratives.

Year-to-year fluctuations in collaborative capacity at the network level are likely due to a few factors. The composition of the network changed as new collaboratives joined the network, and occasionally, collaboratives stepped back as they underwent transitions. For example, the number of collaboratives in the network (who completed the assessment) grew from 23 in 2019 to 33 in 2020 – a period of significant network expansion. Since newer collaboratives generally have lower capacity, it is not surprising to see a dip across the network in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic also influenced collaborative priorities, partnerships, and implementation. The growth in capacity from 2019 to 2022 is also likely due to continued support and technical assistance from FCS and its partners, particularly the focus on building data capacity.

FIGURE 2. **NETWORK CAPACITY SCORES BY YEAR**
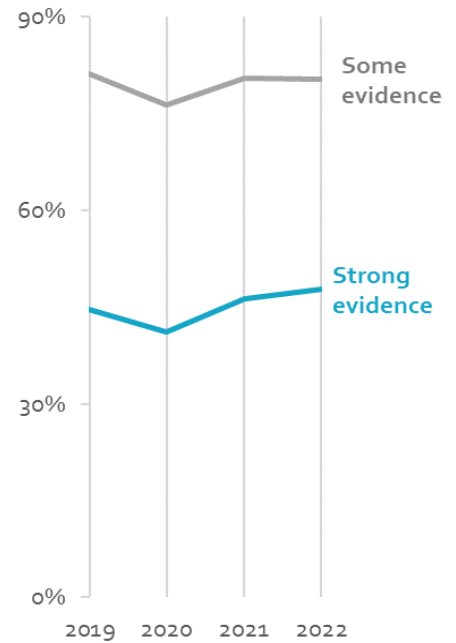
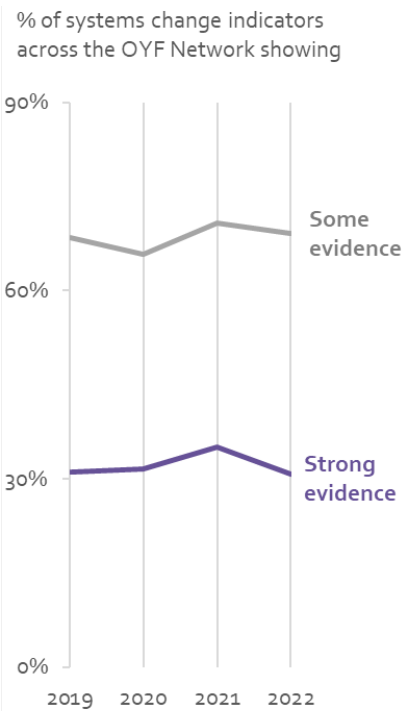% of capacity indicators across the OYF Network showing

CHANGING SYSTEMS, 2019-2022

Each year, the collaboratives assessed the state of systems in their communities – namely, shifts in public policies at different levels, availability of public and private funding for opportunity youth, using data across systems, narratives about opportunity youth and public awareness, and education to career pathway alignment and scaling. From 2019 to 2022, **systems change in the OYF network has been steady**, even as new collaboratives joined the network. Systems change in the network was steady from 2019 to 2020, increased in 2021, and then declined in 2022 (Figure 3). Overall, systems change stayed the same from 2019 to 2022 with about one-third of indicators (31%) strongly present in communities.

As with capacity, year-over-year fluctuations in systems changes can be influenced by the composition of the network, which has changed over time. Collaboratives may choose to focus only on certain types of systems change. In addition, the context of the community is a significant factor in the ability to make changes; for example, we've consistently seen established urban communities with higher systems change scores than newer or rural collaboratives.

FIGURE 3. **NETWORK SYSTEMS CHANGE SCORES BY YEAR**

% of systems change indicators across the OYF Network showing

Collaboratives' Systems Change Journeys 2019-2022

Trends at the network level tell the broad story of systems change for a diverse and changing group of OY collaboratives over time. Looking at how *individual* collaboratives begin to shift systems over several years as part of the OYF network provides a more nuanced story of the different types of paths collaboratives take to changing systems to improve outcomes for opportunity youth. **Overall, there is no one common journey towards systems change for collaboratives in the OYF network.** Among collaboratives with at least three years of self-assessment data, 14 of 25 collaboratives (56%) improved systems change from 2019 to 2022. However, the year-to-year journeys were varied, with the majority of collaboratives experiencing some variation of "ups and downs" (growth and declines) over time, such as a zigzag pattern, u-shape pattern, or growth followed by decline.

Steady growth. About a quarter of collaboratives (24%, 6 collaboratives) demonstrated steady growth in systems changes in their communities, indicating that for some, there is a more linear progression in the work and community impact.

Zigzag. Slightly more than a quarter of collaboratives (28%, 7 collaboratives) exhibited a "zigzag" pattern of systems change scores, with yearly changes from 2019 to 2022.

U-shape. About a quarter of collaboratives (24%, 6 collaboratives) followed a "u-shape" pattern of declines, followed by rebounds or a period of growth.

Growth, then decline in 2022. 16% of collaboratives (4 collaboratives) showed growth over three years and then a decline in 2022, likely due to significant internal staff transitions and funding challenges.
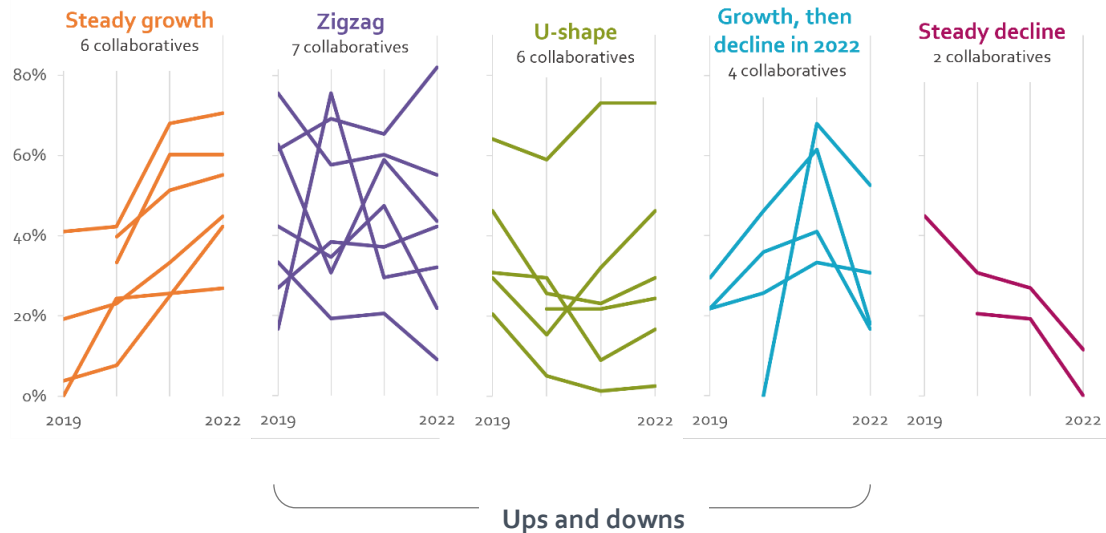
Ups and downs (68%, 17/25 collaboratives)

Steady declines. Only 8% of collaboratives (2 collaboratives) had steady declines in systems change over the three-to-four-year period.

FIGURE 4. **COLLABORATIVES' SYSTEMS CHANGE JOURNEYS, 2019-2022**

% of systems change indicators by OYF collaborative that show **strong evidence**

The range of patterns in systems change scores over time demonstrates that systems change work is not a direct and linear process (Figure 4)*.* Even collaboratives that consistently demonstrate high systems change scores experience ups and downs. All types of collaboratives were found across these five journeys – established urban collaboratives, rural communities, and collaboratives with different types of backbone organizations. For the four collaboratives that experienced growth from 2019 to 2021 followed by a sharp decline in 2002, there seemed to be a significant transition or precipitating factor(s) in that decline, such as a leadership transition or financial instability.

The variety of journeys suggests that many factors can influence a collaborative and a community's ability to shift their local systems in the short-term. Furthermore, collaboratives may intentionally pause their systems change work to prioritize the immediate needs of the community, such as during COVID or other emergencies such as climate disasters.

Understanding the factors that contribute to growth over time, as well as what factors influence backslides, can help us better understand the complex systems change journeys of collaboratives as they aim to change local systems that serve opportunity youth and other young people.

WHAT HELPS ADVANCE AND ACCELERATE SYSTEMS CHANGE AMONG OYF COLLABORATIVES?

Despite the potential for roadblocks to emerge and the fits and starts of systems change, many OYF collaboratives have been able to maintain and improve systems change progress over the years. Through interviews conducted with OYF site leaders, we categorized a set of strategies collaboratives have used to help maintain momentum on their systems change pursuits, "weathering the storm" through the conditions and contexts that can impede progress. These strategies include:

➢ **Shifting public narratives and dispositions on opportunity youth to sustain systems change.** Collaboratives strive to ensure system actors (and their institutions) are brought along with the need for changes in systems and understand why it helps opportunity youth.

➢ **Building relationships to maintain momentum.** Relationships are often key to building coalitions and movements, helping gain the attention of the public, funders, and policy makers.

➢ **Engaging young people as systems change advocates.** Collaboratives seek to both include young people in their advocacy work and develop young people's skills to shape and share their own story.

➢ **Leveraging data to jumpstart systems change.** Over the last decade, FCS has prioritized (through technical assistance, investment, and convening) data capacity and data use by collaboratives. Collaboratives continue to elevate data as a support and enabler of their systems change efforts.

FIGURE 5: **ACCELERANTS AND BARRIERS TO SYSTEMS CHANGE**

WHY IS THE WORK HARD TO MAINTAIN?

Collaboratives working to change systems navigate the ebbs and flows of changing social and political climates. Embracing this complexity means acknowledging that all collaboratives, no matter how well prepared, hit stumbling blocks. As we dug more deeply into collaboratives' experiences over the past four years, we found much to learn from investigating setbacks to changing systems. Four interconnected challenges posed the most issues for collaboratives:

> **The impact of COVID and natural disasters.** COVID had both immediate and long-term impacts on collaboratives' systems change work, including enduring impacts on youth disconnection, the political climate, resource distribution, and leadership and staff turnover which delayed partnership efforts. Natural disasters also divert attention from long-term systems change work toward the immediate needs of the community.

> **Leadership, staffing, and backbone transitions.** Staff turnover, leadership transitions, and shifts in who provides backbone support for the collaborative can all disrupt systems change work.

> **Funding and resources.** Though some collaboratives were able to take advantage of time-limited COVID-related funding over the past few years, funding and resource scarcity continues to impact all facets of a collaborative's work. Collaboratives mentioned the need for backbone support, the challenges navigating programmatic funding restrictions and timelines, and the strong desire for meaningful youth inclusion supported by stipends.

> **Political context and climate.** All OYF collaboratives ground their efforts in the local political, economic, and social realities of their communities. Challenges can emerge and impede progress such as system administration changes in local government and school districts, as well as the local political climate influencing narratives about opportunity youth, particularly related to racial and gender equity.

OYF communities' systems change journeys are as varied and diverse as the network itself. Systems change work, by its nature, is complicated. It responds to local and national politics. It reacts to shifts and transitions in relationships and leadership. It speeds up and slows down with shifts in the public's interests and discourse. Importantly, these journeys are neither linear nor predictable.

Short-term (i.e., annual) advances and declines are typical in systems change efforts and should be expected for complex, multi-actor, multi-step processes. And while we can learn about these efforts, including what facilitates and stalls changes in the short term, we should consider a longer-term window for understanding their progress and success.

INTRODUCTION

For the past decade, Equal Measure has served as the learning and evaluation partner for the Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions (FCS) and its Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF). Launched in 2012 and based on the recommendations of President Obama's White House Council on Community Solutions, FCS seeks to mobilize a movement: a national network of communities committed to upending and improving systems so that all young people, regardless of race, gender, or income, have equitable access to education and career pathways.

Core to the OYF network is an understanding that *systems* – not young people – cause disparities in outcomes among population groups. Our nation's systems, including K-12 and postsecondary education, workforce, housing, child welfare, and justice systems, are broken and not designed for all young people – particularly young people of color and those experiencing poverty – to succeed. Instead, these systems, built on a foundation of outdated and racist public policies and historical narratives, create and uphold obstacles that keep too many young people from accessing the same opportunities as their peers from more privileged backgrounds. For the last decade, it's been the mission of FCS – and the 45[1] community-based collaboratives that make up the OYF network – to change the institutions, policies, narratives, and systems that fail our nation's young people.

FIGURE 1. **MAP OF THE OYF NETWORK IN 2022**

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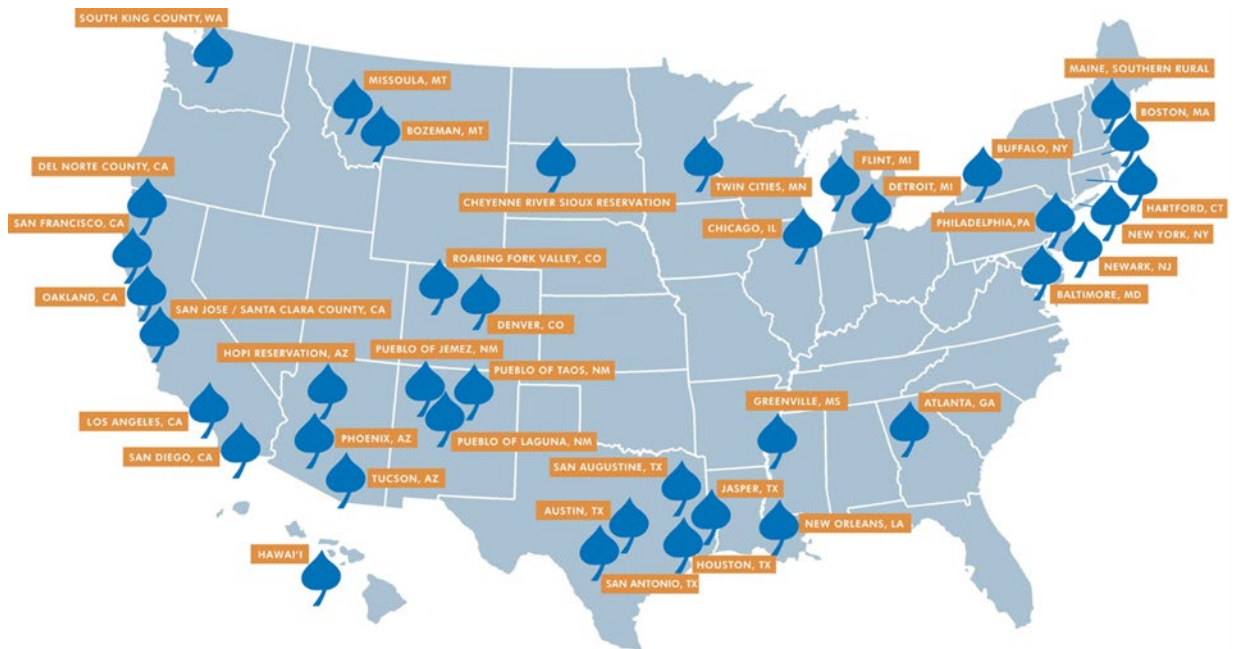
[1] The map indicates 43 collaboratives in the OYF network in 2022 (New York City has four collaboratives). Of these, 40 collaboratives completed the 2022 self-assessment.

Assessing Community-led Systems Change

To support the network's learning, Equal Measure conducts an annual assessment focusing on collaboratives' values, capacities, and engagement in systems change. 2022 marked the fourth year of implementing the current assessment strategy, which consists of both a self-assessment and reflection interviews with collaborative leaders. Each assessment offers an opportunity for the network to reflect on new learning, ideas, successes, and challenges as experienced by the collaboratives. In this year's report, we look, as we have in previous years, at the story of annual systems change engagement collaboratives shared with us through their data. In addition to the current year snapshot, we sought to understand the arc of systems change work. What are the trends over time? And what can we infer from those trends about how community-led systems change occurs?

We found that the OYF communities' systems change journeys are as varied and diverse as the network itself. Systems change work, by its nature, is complicated. It responds to local and national politics. It reacts to shifts and transitions in relationships and leadership. It speeds up and slows down with shifts in the public's interests and discourse. Importantly, these journeys are neither linear nor predictable. There is not a singular, expected path to follow. Progress made one year might pause in the next. New policies enacted and funding streams accessed can jumpstart work that was previously dormant. We learned from the COVID-19 pandemic that OYF collaboratives have tremendous capacity to mobilize and prioritize their work based on the specific – and timely – needs of their communities. From this lens, a community's decision to both advance and pause various systems change efforts may be intentional. And while we can measure and learn from a community's annual progress, a more realistic understanding of progress towards changing systems may best come from a longer-term time horizon.

In writing this report, we hope that those interested in community-backed systems change recognize not only the skills, resources, and dispositions collaboratives leverage to advance the work, but also gain an appreciation of the complexity of systems change work. We – the collective group of research and evaluators, funders, policy makers, and practitioners – must hold this complexity as we try to assess for impact.

ABOUT THE REPORT

In this evaluation report, we detail network-wide findings from data collection among 40 of the collaboratives participating in the OYF network. Quantitative data was collected through a self-assessment administered to OYF network collaboratives in February 2023.[2] We collected qualitative information for this report through the same self-assessment, as well as through interviews with leaders from a sample of collaboratives.[3]

We provide a summary of the current state and trends in the network's collaborative capacity, systems change efforts, and articulation of OYF's core values. In addition, we offer observations on strategies and conditions that both advanced and impeded systems change efforts.

The report is structured as follows:
- ❖ Organizing for Systems Change: 2022 Snapshot
- ❖ Where Collaboratives Focus their Systems Change Efforts
- ❖ Changes in the OYF Network over Time, 2019-2022
- ❖ Collaboratives' Systems Change Journeys, 2019-2022

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[2] See Appendix A and B for background information on the collaboratives in 2022.

[3] Since this year's report focused on systems change trends over the past four years, we interviewed a subset of 17 site leaders from OYF collaboratives with at least three years of self-assessment data.

ORGANIZING FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE: 2022 SNAPSHOT

Since the OYF's inception, collaboratives have used the collective impact approach to connect or re-connect opportunity youth to education and career pathways. Underlying these strategies is the belief that disconnected and inadequate systems push young people out. To successfully engage and re-engage young people, systems of individuals, programs, organizations, policies, and resources must change. By investing in the development, learning, and support of cross-sector collaboratives to change these systems, youth outcomes – connection to education and workforce pathways – will improve.

The OYF evaluation focused on, and measured, two interrelated elements central to the OYF theory of change (Figure 2).

1. **Collaborative capacity**: The infrastructure and processes necessary for the collaborative to carry out its opportunity youth agenda.

2. **Systems change**: "Shifts to the conditions that hold a problem in place"[4] – in this case, the disconnected pathways and inequitable conditions that prevent young people from achieving education and employment outcomes.

In addition, the OYF theory of change is undergirded by a set of **core values** – equity, youth-led change, and community power building – that are embedded in the strategies and efforts to change local systems that affect opportunity youth. These values were also assessed as part of the evaluation.

FIGURE 2. **SIMPLIFIED THEORY OF CHANGE**

High capacity Opportunity Youth collaboratives → Systems change → Fewer Opportunity Youth

CORE VALUES
youth-led change
equity
community power building

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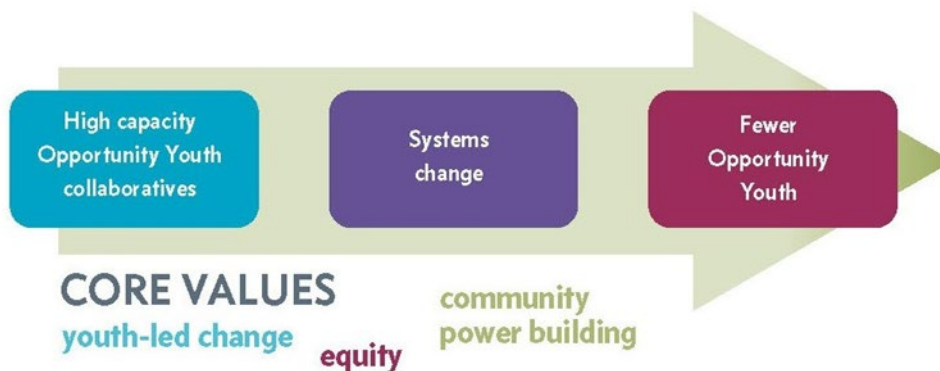
[4] Kania, John, Kramer, Mark and Senge, Peter. (FSG), The Waters of Systems Change, May 2018.

A Note About Methodology

We drew on findings in this report from the 2022 OYF self-assessment and interviews with collaborative leads. The self-assessment focused on five areas: 1) Community and Opportunity Youth Collaborative Characteristics; 2) Collaborative Capacity; 3) Changes in Programs, Organizations, and Systems (i.e., Systems Change); 4) Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing, and Purpose; and 5) Youth Outputs and Outcomes. In 2022, collaboratives were asked to identify their efforts as comprehensive change, sectoral change, or joint program. Those that identified as "joint program" did not complete the systems change questions in the self-assessment, as that is not a goal of their collaborative.[5]

We followed the same methodology as the 2019-2021 OYF reports. In the assessment of collaborative capacity and systems change, we asked collaboratives to rate the presence of several indicators on a scale from 0 to 3 (0=does not describe us, 1=somewhat describes us, 2=describes us well, 3=describes us very well). Using the four-point scale in the assessment allows us to examine indicators with more nuance and detail, as well as set a "quality standard" for capacity and systems change.

In analyzing the data, we looked at: 1) strong evidence of an indicator, meaning the indicator was rated a 2 or 3 ("well" or "very well"); and 2) some evidence of an indicator, where the indicator was rated at least a 1 ("somewhat").

Most percentages reported throughout this report refer to the percentage of collaboratives or indicators that met the highest threshold – at the "strong evidence" level. We use this threshold to establish a standard for determining the extent that a capacity or systems change is fully in place. Occasionally, we provide data on the percentage of communities or indicators that had "some" evidence for additional context or to acknowledge where collaboratives or communities are beginning to make changes.

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[5] *Comprehensive change* is defined as: aiming to improve all outcomes for all opportunity youth in an area. Example: an OY collaborative works with institutions in K-12, colleges, and workforce, and supporting services agencies to comprehensively support opportunity youth success across an entire city. *Sectoral change*: aiming to improve a specific outcome for all opportunity youth who have not attained that outcome, within a specific sector (or for a specific outcome across sectors) in an area. Example: an OY collaborative works with many postsecondary institutions and CBOs focused on postsecondary to attain college success for all opportunity youth across an entire city. *Joint program*: aiming to improve outcomes only for opportunity youth who are part of a specific project or program. Example: a single college and some CBOs join together to run an OY-focused collaborative program at that single college.

Snapshot of Theory of Change Elements in 2022

FIGURE 3. CAPACITY, SYSTEMS CHANGE, AND CORE VALUES IN THE OYF NETWORK IN 2022

% of indicators across the OYF network present within each domain
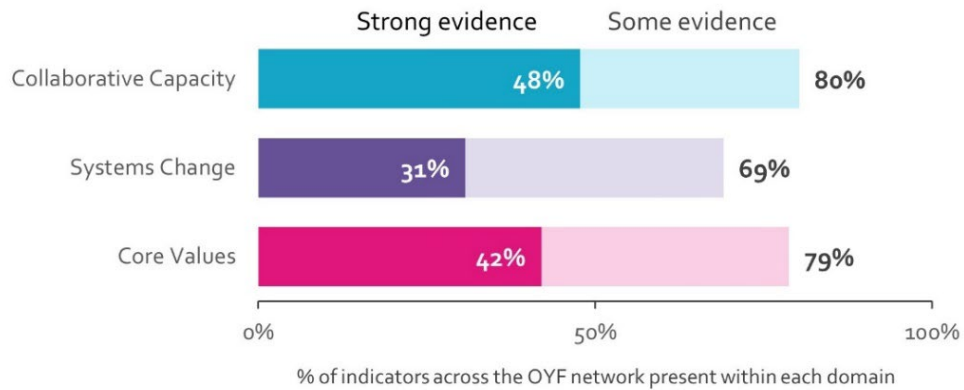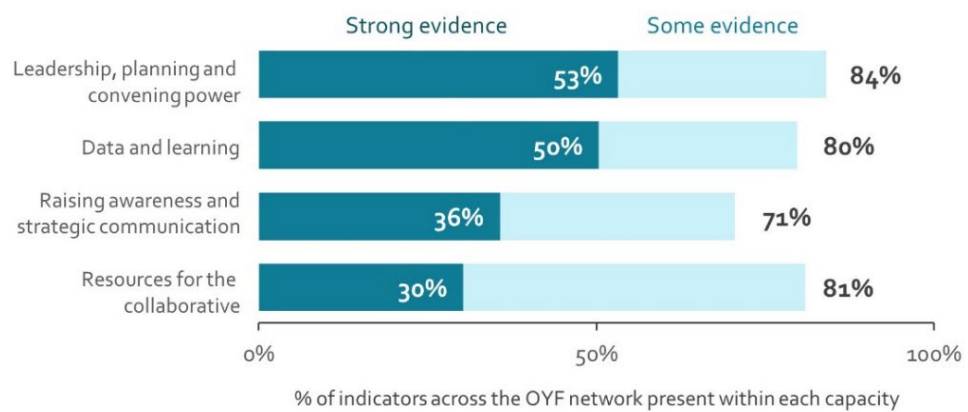
Collaborative Capacity Across the OYF Network in 2022

Overall, collaboratives rated almost half (48%) of the capacity indicators as strongly evident in 2022, with 80 percent of capacity indicators at least somewhat evident in their collaboratives (Figure 3). This is steady from 2021.

As in previous years, collaborative capacity was stronger among established urban collaboratives and those with better resourced backbones, compared to non-urban, newer, and less resourced collaboratives.[6] *Leadership, planning, and convening power* and *data and learning* were the two strongest capacities in 2022 with at least half of the indicators strongly evident in collaboratives (Figure 4). *Raising awareness and strategic communications* grew the most – about six percentage points – from 2021 to 2022 (at the some evidence level). While still the least present capacity (at the strong evidence level), *resources for the collaborative* increased to the highest level in four years.

FIGURE 4. COLLABORATIVE CAPACITIES IN THE OYF NETWORK IN 2022

% of indicators across the OYF network present within each capacity

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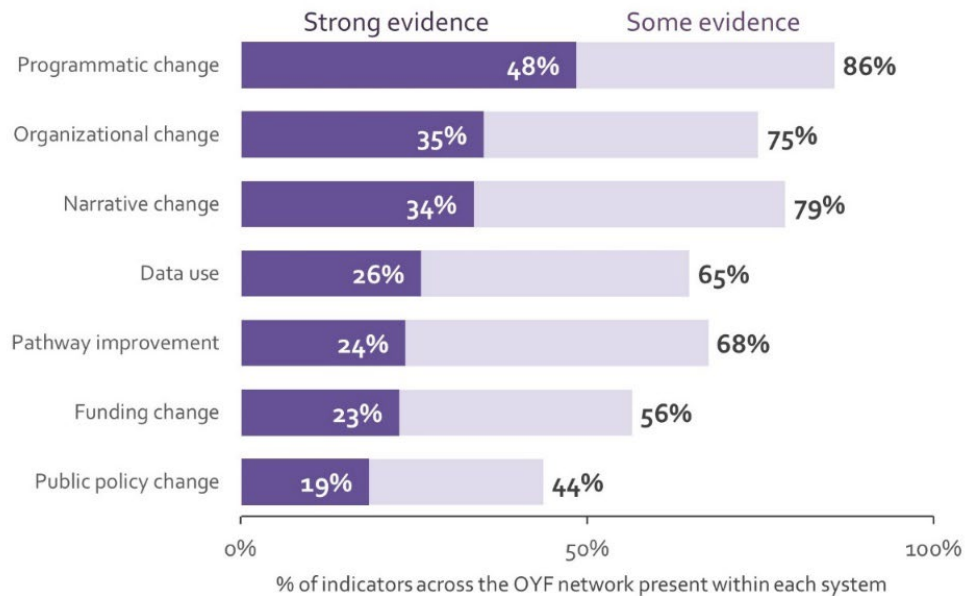[6] OY backbone budget: t-test, p<.01. Peer group: ANOVA, p<.05

Systems Change Across the OYF Network in 2022

Overall, collaboratives rated almost a third (31%) of the systems change indicators as strongly present in their collaboratives and communities in 2022, with over two-thirds (69%) of the systems changes at least somewhat evident (Figure 3). This represents a slight decline from 2021 (about a four-percentage point decrease in strong evidence of systems change).

Systems change was more evident in established urban collaboratives (compared to non-urban and newer collaboratives), and in those with more experienced and better resourced backbone organizations (compared to backbones with less experience and smaller OY budgets).[7] Overall, most of the seven types of systems change decreased slightly from 2021 to 2022 with the exception of *narrative change* which grew by about three percentage points (some evidence) to its highest level in four years (*programmatic change* and *organizational change* also increased slightly for some and strong evidence, respectively). *Programmatic change* and *organizational change* were the most evident in the network in 2022, closely followed by *narrative change* (Figure 5). *Policy change* and *funding change* remain the most challenging to influence, with less than a quarter of the indicators strongly evident in OYF communities.

FIGURE 5. **SYSTEMS CHANGES IN THE OYF NETWORK IN 2022**

% of indicators across the OYF network present within each system

Core Values Across the OYF Network in 2022

Overall, collaboratives rated 42 percent of the indicators representing OYF core values – *equity*, *youth-led change*, and *community power* –as strongly present in their collaboratives and communities in 2022, with over three-quarters (79%) at least somewhat evident (Figure 3). This represents slight growth from 2021 – an increase of 2.5 percentage points at the some evidence level (no change at the strong evidence level).

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[7] OY backbone budget: t-test, p<.10. Peer group: ANOVA, p<.05. Collaborative age: ANOVA, p<.05.

Equity was the most evident core value across the network in 2022 (Figure 6). *Youth-led change* increased by six percentage points (some evidence) from 2021 to 2022 to the highest levels in four years. *Community power* also increased from 2021 to 2022.

FIGURE 6. **CORE VALUES IN THE OYF NETWORK IN 2022**

Strong evidence   Some evidence

Equity	47%	83%
Youth-led change	40%	73%
Community power	35%	69%

0%   50%   100%

% of indicators across the OYF Network present within each value
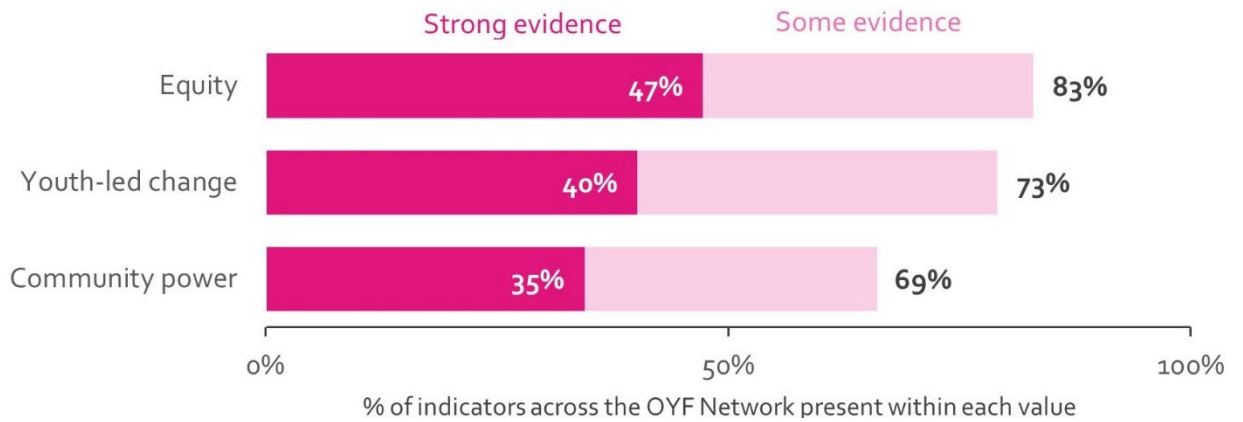
Moving Together: Capacity and Systems Change

The relationship between collaborative capacity and systems change was consistent with prior years, where collaboratives with greater capacity are statistically more likely to see greater evidence of systems changes necessary for opportunity youth to succeed.[8] Figure 7 illustrates the relationship between each OYF community's collaborative capacity and evidence of systems change, as measured on the 2022 self-assessment. These findings reinforce the need to invest in and build the "collaborative muscle" necessary for creating systems that promote success for opportunity youth.

FIGURE 7.
**RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN
COLLABORATIVE
CAPACITY AND
SYSTEMS CHANGE**

SYSTEMS CHANGE

Greater **collaborative capacity** is associated with greater evidence of **systems change**

COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY

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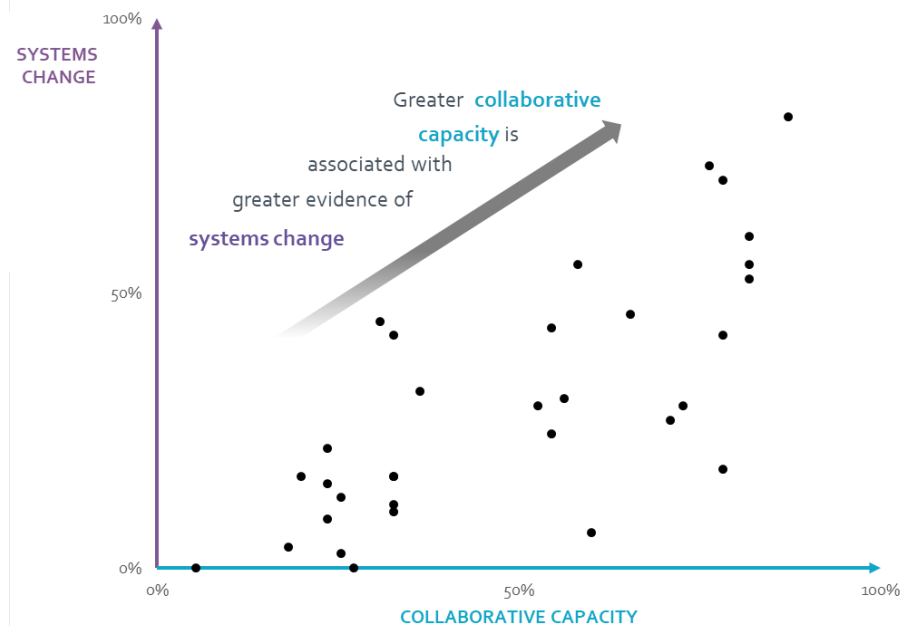
[8] Correlation between capacity and systems change in 2022: r=0.66, p<.001

WHERE COLLABORATIVES FOCUS THEIR SYSTEMS CHANGE EFFORTS

Across the OYF, collaboratives understand that the systems serving opportunity youth are fundamentally broken. They work to ensure that systems – child welfare, education, juvenile justice, and workforce, among others – support young people who come from historically marginalized communities. This year, we asked collaborative leads to reflect on where they have focused their efforts to change systems in the past few years. They described the focus of their systems changes efforts across policy and funding, narratives, and pathway creation.

POLICIES AND FUNDING[9]

Public policies and funding structures have contributed to inequitable outcomes for people served through society's education, workforce, and other systems. By advancing new or modifying existing public policies, collaboratives attempt to address barriers encountered by opportunity youth at their structural and historical roots. This work to change policy and funding streams requires sustained effort over many years. Collaboratives described their multi-year journeys and identified how they helped advance **institutional, local, and state policies** to improve opportunity youth's experiences and outcomes. These changes may remove specific barriers that opportunity youth face or increase available supports. Policy and funding changes are often linked, as many policies that collaboratives supported involved increasing available funding for opportunity youth. While not a comprehensive list of all changes that collaboratives described, the examples below show how new and changed policies supported opportunity youth by:

Removing barriers to educational attainment	Over 10+ years of partnership with **Bronx Opportunity Network,** City University of New York replaced all non-credit bearing remedial courses with credit bearing courses. In **Maine,** advocacy by justice-involved youth resulted in the University of Maine system removing questions about criminal record from applications.
Improving coordination across systems	**The Newark Opportunity Youth Network** has been named to the taskforce created by a disconnection prevention bill to study disconnection in New Jersey.
Creating funding streams for pilots and established programs	With the California Opportunity Youth Network, **San Diego, Los Angeles**, **Del Norte and Tribal Lands,** and other collaboratives secured state funding for apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs for opportunity youth and youth involved with the child welfare or justice systems.
Increasing funding for jobs, education, childcare, and housing support	**Houston** increased work-based learning wages from $10 to $15/hour, ensuring these jobs were competitive with other available jobs. **Buffalo** and rural **Jasper TX** provided childcare vouchers and subsidies to help parents looking to return to school or the workforce. Buffalo raised the childcare subsidy for parents making up to 300% of the federal poverty threshold and raised the subsidy rate to ensure more childcare centers agreed to accept families with subsidies.

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[9] For more on policy and funding and promising practices used to advance these changes, see the 2021 evaluation report: Boosting Capacity to Drive Equitable Systems Change: https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/report/boosting-capacity-to-drive-equitable-systems-change/

NARRATIVES

The opportunity youth movement began in part to change how employers, institutions, and societies historically thought about "dropouts," —working instead to highlight the opportunities and contributions of these young people. These underlying mental models about values and the way the world works matter in social change work. Narratives become embedded throughout society and influence the way that partner organizations, the public, and opportunity youth themselves act. Collaboratives described **narrative changes and mindset shifts** among partners, youth, and community members both as an important outcome of their work *and* as a way that they facilitate further changes.

Collaboratives identified changing narratives and mindsets in a few key areas:

- **Awareness among partners and public officials about opportunity youth and the structural barriers they face.** Collaboratives are helping sector partners recognize the benefits and strengths that opportunity youth bring to their communities. Some collaboratives hope to leverage these shifts into support for specific programs, practices, and policies. For example, Youth on the Rise in Tucson worked with city and county workforce development employees who now use the term "opportunity youth" and better understand the barriers youth face. Hartford worked with organizations across Connecticut to raise awareness of the need for additional investments for opportunity youth.
- **Creation of safe, supportive spaces for historically marginalized communities.** For example, Del Norte acknowledged the different strategies required by different groups to meet a shared goal (targeted universalism[10]), and convened discussions on the history of the region. This led public officials to acknowledge the federal history of genocide of local tribes and the forces that led Hmong veterans to settle in the area. Missoula described hosting a "Banned Together" book event for families, which helped challenge banning books about the experiences of queer and/or people of color
- **Supporting young people as they change their own inner narratives** about what is possible for them. Generational poverty and cycles of trauma create limiting, internalized ideas about the paths that young people expect to take. Partners in Atlanta and the Pueblo of Taos described helping youth see their own potential and possible futures, beyond what they initially thought possible. In Greenville, MS, this work helped young people show up and participate in city strategic planning meetings in ways they had not before.

Collaboratives worked to leverage these changes in narratives to expand and improve how partners work with young people and to increase funding for opportunity youth.

PATHWAYS TO EDUCATION AND CAREERS

In addition to changing policies, funding, and narratives to support young people in local communities, collaboratives identified and worked to fill the gaps left by current systems that prevented young people from continuing their education or career paths. Collaboratives named ways that they worked with workforce and educational partners to connect young people to education and career opportunities or help them overcome barriers to their success.

Many collaboratives described using programs to bridge the gaps left by systems, creating pathways for youth. In some places, this involved **scaling pilots, programs, or approaches** that worked in one area to

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[10] https://belonging.berkeley.edu/targeted-universalism

have broader reach. For example, following Education Experience Employment (E3)'s initial success in Del Norte, the program is now being implemented by 11 workforce boards statewide. In other places, these pathways helped **create options for young people that did not exist before**, like Atlanta's work to create apprenticeships in sectors that don't traditionally use apprentices. Career pathways were an approach highlighted by rural communities as well; for example, San Augustine provided local access to programs that helped stack medical certifications for students, and the Pueblo of Taos's helped connect youth to opportunities through a summer youth worker program.

When a pathway already existed in an area, collaboratives **hired personnel who served as navigators** to help young people get connected to available opportunities that they might not have otherwise known about or been able to access. In Denver, re-engagement specialists helped connect youth detained at the justice center to education and work opportunities, and in Houston, a college and career manager collaborated with the K-12 school district to reconnect young people with educational options.

Over the past four years, collaboratives have fought to ensure that systems contribute to equitable experiences and outcomes, through policy and funding, narrative, and pathway creation. Broadly, our assessment of the OYF network measures how collaboratives build capacity to change systems for young people. The next section will delve into how collaboratives' capacity to advance these system changes has changed, and how different types of systems have progressed over time.
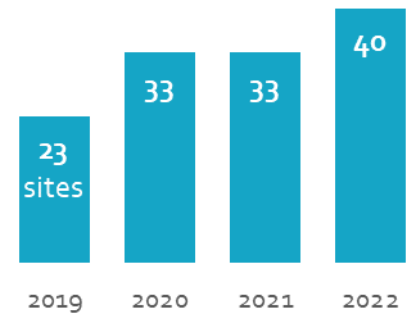
CHANGES IN THE OYF NETWORK OVER TIME, 2019-2022

The OYF Network, 2019-2022

The OYF network has grown significantly over the last four years from 27 collaboratives in 2019 to 43 collaboratives in 2022 – a 59% increase.[11] As the network has expanded, its characteristics, the communities served, and the backbone organizations that coordinate the OY efforts have also shifted. Based on self-assessment data, over time, the number of sites who serve rural areas has increased (from 17% in 2019 to 23% in 2022). This is due to the FCS's concerted effort to diversify the network and include collaboratives in rural and tribal areas. Because of this, the years of experience in the network with OY efforts decreased over time (more collaboratives and backbones had fewer than 5 years of experience with OY efforts). These changes have implications for assessing collaborative capacity and systems change trends at the network level.
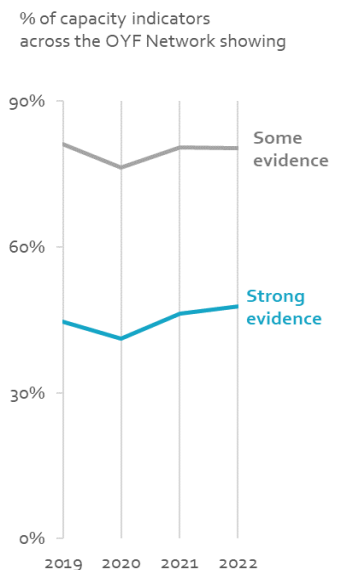
FIGURE 8. **NUMBER OF COLLABORATIVES WHO COMPLETED THE OYF ANNUAL ASSESSMENT**

Building Collaborative Capacity, 2019-2022

Collaboratives in the OYF network have completed the same self-assessment for the last four years, allowing for comparisons of both the network and individual sites over time. Each year, collaboratives have rated their capacity, or the structures, processes, and resources needed for cross-sector collaboration and systems change work. Across the network, **collaborative capacity dipped in 2020, rebounded in 2021 and remained fairly steady in 2022** (Figure 9). Almost half of the capacity indicators (48%) were strongly evident in OYF collaboratives in 2022, the highest level in four years though still with continued room for development and growth of vital capacities in the collaboratives.

Three of the four capacities – *leadership, planning, and convening power*; *data and learning*; and *resources for the collaborative* – were stronger in 2022 compared to 2019 across the network (Figure 10). While it is the least present capacity, *resources for the collaborative* has grown steadily over the past four years, reflecting growing partner support (both in-kind and financial) for collaboratives and backbone organizations (particularly directed to collaboratives). *Data and learning* also grew significantly from 2019 to 2022.

FIGURE 9. **NETWORK CAPACITY SCORES BY YEAR**

% of capacity indicators across the OYF Network showing

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[11] The number of collaboratives who completed the self-assessment each year was slightly less (see Figure 8). If a collaborative was not active during the year being assessed, it did not complete an assessment (but still may have been officially part of the network).

Year-to-year fluctuations in collaborative capacity at the network level are likely due to a few factors. The composition of the network changes as new collaboratives join the network, and occasionally, collaboratives step back as they undergo transitions. For example, the number of collaboratives in the network (who completed the assessment) grew from 23 in 2019 to 33 in 2020 – a period of significant network expansion.[12] Since newer collaboratives generally have lower capacity, it is not surprising to see a dip across the network in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic also influenced collaborative priorities, partnerships, and implementation. The growth in capacity from 2019 to 2022 is also likely due to continued support and technical assistance from FCS and its partners, particularly the focus on building data capacity.[13]
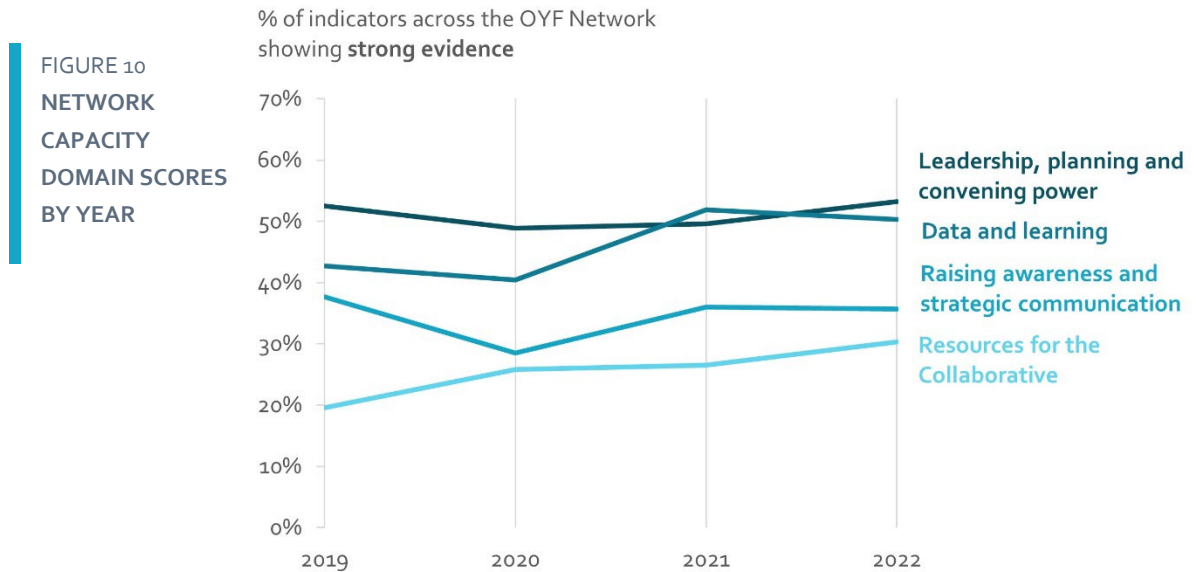
FIGURE 10
NETWORK CAPACITY DOMAIN SCORES BY YEAR

% of indicators across the OYF Network showing **strong evidence**

Legend:
- Leadership, planning and convening power
- Data and learning
- Raising awareness and strategic communication
- Resources for the Collaborative

Changing Systems, 2019-2022

Each year the collaboratives assessed the state of systems in their communities – namely, shifts in public policies at different levels, availability of public and private funding for opportunity youth, using data across systems, narratives about opportunity youth and public awareness, and education to career pathway alignment and scaling. From 2019 to 2022, **systems change in the OYF network has been steady,** even as new collaboratives joined the network. Systems change in the network was steady from 2019 to 2020, increased in 2021, and then declined in 2022 (Figure 11). Overall, systems change stayed the same from 2019 to 2022 with about one-third of indicators (31%) strongly present in communities.

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[12] 33 collaboratives completed the assessment in 2021, and 40 in 2022, though several partially completed, including "joint programs."
[13] See the 2023 report, "Using Data to Facilitate Systems Change" for more information on building data capacity.
https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/report/using-data-to-facilitate-systems-change/

While most of the types of systems changes were steady or declined slightly from 2019 to 2022, two types grew – *data use* and *systems funding* grew by 5-7 percentage points (even larger growth was evident from 2019 to 2021) (Figure 12). These areas likely grew due to targeted technical assistance in data, including using data to drive systems change, and pandemic-related funding opportunities in 2020 and 2021.

As with capacity, year-over-year fluctuations in systems changes can be influenced by the composition of the network, which has changed over time. Collaboratives may choose to focus only on certain types of systems change. In addition, the context of the community is a significant factor in the ability to make changes; for example, we've consistently seen established urban communities with higher systems change scores than newer or rural collaboratives. We will explore the factors that affect systems change journeys in more detail in the next section.
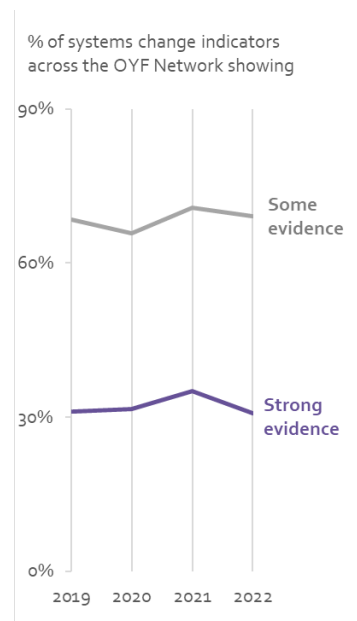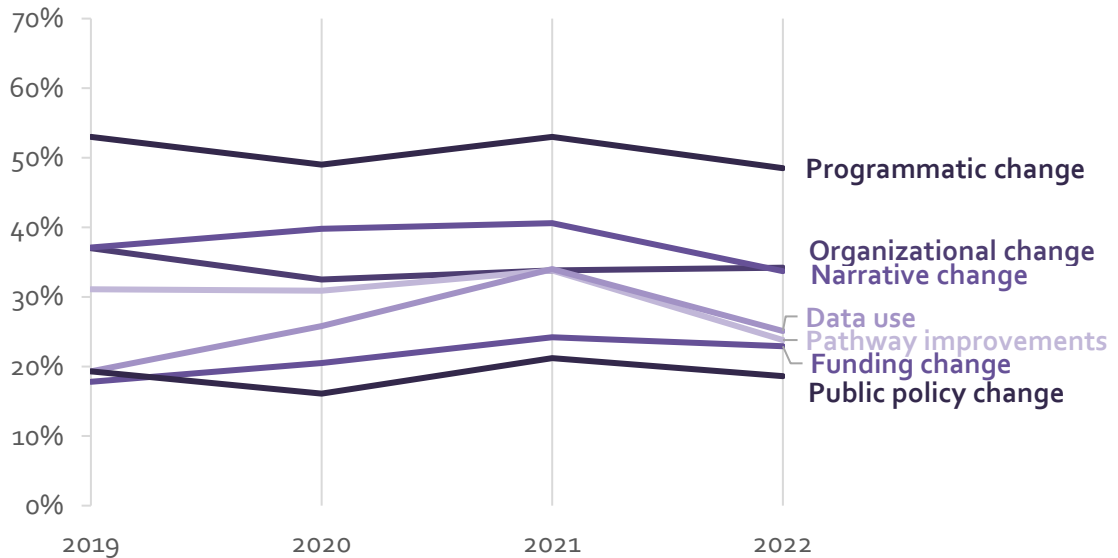
FIGURE 11. **NETWORK SYSTEMS CHANGE SCORES BY**

% of systems change indicators across the OYF Network showing

FIGURE 12. **NETWORK SYSTEMS CHANGE DOMAIN SCORES BY YEAR**

% of indicators across the OYF Network showing **strong evidence**

COLLABORATIVES' SYSTEMS CHANGE JOURNEYS, 2019-2022

Trends at the network level tell the broad story of systems change for a diverse and changing group of OY collaboratives over time. Looking at how *individual* collaboratives begin to shift systems over several years as part of the OYF network provides a more nuanced story of the different types of paths collaboratives take to changing systems to improve outcomes for opportunity youth. **Overall, there is no one common journey towards systems change for collaboratives in the OYF network.** Among collaboratives with at least three years of self-assessment data, 14 of 25 collaboratives (56%) improved systems change from 2019 to 2022. However, the year-to-year journeys were varied, with the majority of collaboratives experiencing some variation of "ups and downs" (growth and declines) over time, such as a zigzag pattern, u-shape pattern, or growth followed by decline.

Steady growth. About a quarter of collaboratives (24%, 6 collaboratives) demonstrated steady growth in systems changes in their communities, indicating that for some, there is a more linear progression in the work and community impact.

Zigzag. Slightly more than a quarter of collaboratives (28%, 7 collaboratives) exhibited a "zigzag" pattern of systems change scores, with yearly changes from 2019 to 2022.

U-shape. About a quarter of collaboratives (24%, 6 collaboratives) followed a "u-shape" pattern of declines, followed by rebounds or a period of growth.

Growth, then decline in 2022. 16% of collaboratives (4 collaboratives) showed growth over three years and then a decline in 2022, likely due to significant internal staff transitions and funding challenges.
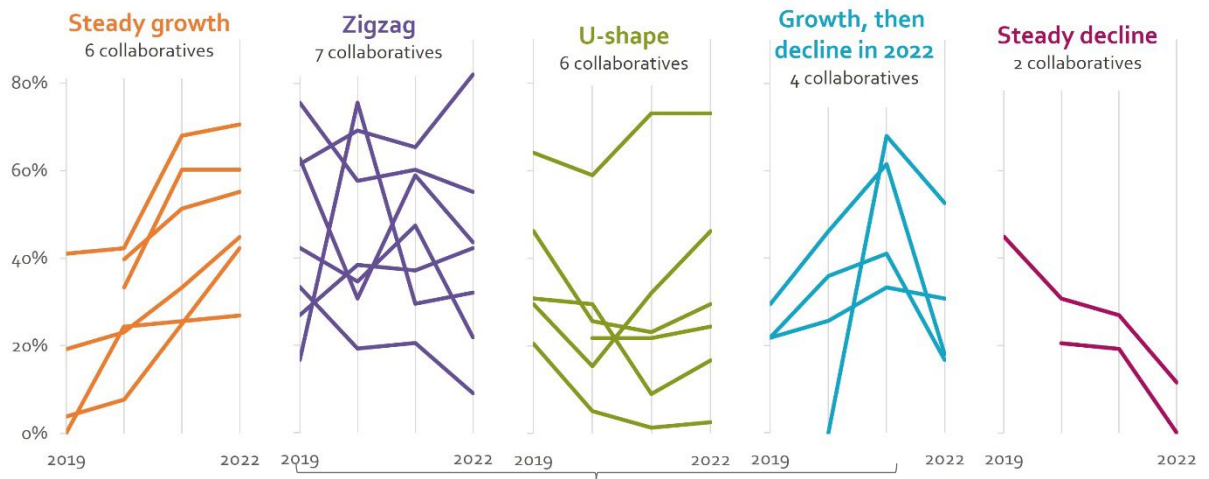
Ups and downs (68%, 17/25 collaboratives)

Steady declines. Only 8% of collaboratives (2 collaboratives) had steady declines in systems change over the three to four years.

% of systems change indicators by OYF collaborative that show **strong evidence**

Ups and downs

The range of patterns in systems change scores over time demonstrates that systems change work is not a direct and linear process (Figure 13). Even collaboratives that consistently demonstrate high systems change scores experience ups and downs. For example, Boston has high systems change scores over the four-year period (more than half of the systems change indicators were strongly evident each year), and yet they also experienced a "zigzag" pattern of declines followed by growth followed by declines over this same period. All types of collaboratives were represented across these five journeys – established urban collaboratives, rural communities, and collaboratives with different types of backbone organizations.

For the four collaboratives that experienced growth from 2019 to 2021 followed by a sharp decline in 2002, there seemed to be a significant transition or precipitating factor(s) in that decline, such as a leadership transition or financial instability.

The variety of journeys suggests that many factors can influence a collaborative and a community's ability to shift their local systems in the short-term. Furthermore, collaboratives may intentionally pause their systems change work to prioritize the immediate needs of the community, such as during COVID or other emergencies such as climate disasters.

Understanding the factors that contribute to growth over time, as well as what factors influence backslides, can help us better understand the complex systems change journeys of collaboratives as they aim to change local systems that serve opportunity youth and other young people.

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[14] Communities with 3-4 years of data are included. One community did not fit these groups, with no strong evidence of systems change over three years.

What helps advance and accelerate systems change among OYF collaboratives?

OYF collaboratives recognize systems change as a long-term goal, ultimately addressing barriers that keep young people from accessing and persisting through education and career pathways. The path to progress towards this goal is nonlinear, and likely to move forward in fits and starts depending on several factors. Collaboratives' progress may be upended by changes in funding, relationships among key system actors and organizations, and social-political context, to name a few examples.

Despite the potential for these roadblocks to emerge, many OYF collaboratives have been able to maintain and improve systems change progress over the years. Through interviews conducted with OYF site leaders[15], we identified a set of strategies collaboratives have used to help maintain momentum on their systems change pursuits, "weathering the storm" through the conditions and contexts that can impede progress.

FIGURE 14. **ACCELERANTS AND BARRIERS TO SYSTEMS CHANGE**
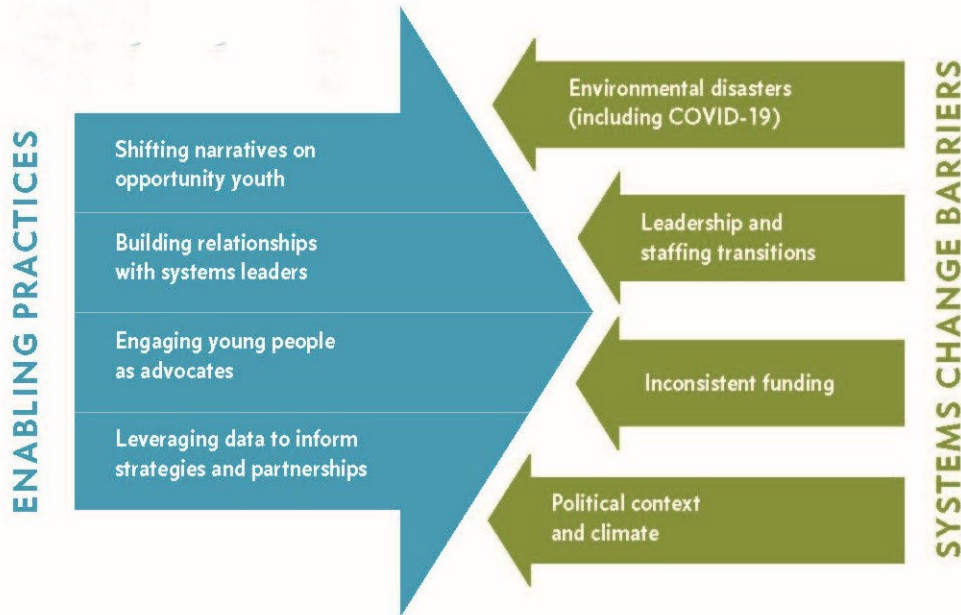
SHIFTING PUBLIC NARRATIVES AND DISPOSITIONS ON OPPORTUNITY YOUTH TO SUSTAIN SYSTEMS CHANGE

Even successful policy changes run the risk of being reversed through inadequate implementation, funding loss, and policy maker turnover. One site leader, in describing the fragility of change efforts in education summed it up: "I feel that schools think they can out-wait [administrators] and just give lip-service to changes, wait for someone new to come around." Collaboratives guard against these challenges by striving to ensure system actors and their institutions are brought along with the change, understand why it helps opportunity youth, and buy into the belief that change needs to happen.

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[15] We interviewed 17 site leads representing all five systems change journeys.

Collaboratives educate cross-sector partners about opportunity youth through their communications and outreach campaigns. Collaboratives recognize that successful and sustainable OY strategies require partners within and beyond their collaborative and intentionally seek to create allies across sectors. Site leads in Atlanta and San Augustine described focusing efforts on educating employers about working with and hiring opportunity youth as a sustainable and effective business strategy, instead of a "corporate social responsibility" strategy or charity. Sites like Del Norte and Hartford sought to educate public officials, including state policymakers and city managers. Leads in Tucson described working with local funders to expand definitions of success (and relatedly, success metrics) for opportunity youth.

Collaboratives also seek to educate their communities about opportunity youth. By educating the public about opportunity youth, collaboratives increase the likelihood that policymakers take collaboratives' call to action seriously. Collaboratives use media to influence the local conversation – including op-eds, as observed in Hartford, and social media campaigns, as organized in Newark. Communications strategies aimed at changing the narrative around opportunity youth can also include hosting convenings and publishing data reports and research, as seen in New York City.

Collaboratives name opportunity youth as a specific priority population. By ensuring opportunity youth are named in legislation, public spaces and events, and research, collaboratives make certain intentional strategies are designed and resources are allocated to support opportunity youth. Site leaders in South King County described how important it is to remember education systems include both "mainstream K-12" and "folks that those systems have already pushed out of schools." Site leaders helped advocate for opportunity youth to be named in large municipal funding initiatives, including the King County Promise, commenting "it's validating to see larger entities including opportunity youth as part of their larger picture of what they're interested in, paying closer attention to." Site leaders felt when communities and organizations name opportunity youth in legislation it helps de-stigmatize these young people for employers and other actors who may not interact with opportunity youth frequently, and in-turn, lead to more supportive legislation and the further allocation of resources.

The Forum for Community Solutions provides direct support to collaboratives to help them advance their systems change goals. These supports include:

Collaborative Convening. FCS brings collaboratives around the country together twice per year to elevate community best practices, share network priorities (including a recent focus on Belonging, Meaning, Well-being, and Purpose; see Appendix C for related data), and engage in training. Participants are able to network with colleagues from other collaboratives, as well as draw inspiration from hearing field leaders speak and learning from their research.

Grants. FCS provides grants to support implementation to a select group of collaboratives. Grant programs included the recent Data for Impact grants, which supported communities in their efforts to measure OY outcomes.

Technical assistance. FCS provides technical assistance and training to collaboratives on a myriad of topics, including internal data collection, goal setting, and communications.

Research and learning. FCS supports research and evaluation to support both the field and individual communities advocate on behalf of opportunity youth. Examples include Common Measures and the annual OYF assessment.

> "...now it's not uncommon I would say, to go to another meeting and they use that term [opportunity youth]. And not only is it a language shift, but I think it is accompanying a mental model shift in terms of these aren't delinquents, these aren't at risk youth. They really truly are youth that want to engage but are facing systemic barriers. And I think that mind shift has allowed for collaboration and support of our projects..."

Collaboratives focus on changing institutions and not young people. By helping system actors understand institutions and policies have historically not been designed with opportunity youth in mind, collaboratives help system actors design strategies that address root causes of challenges. Site leads in Boston described helping school leaders in Boston Public Schools recognize that students are "not broken", rather the educational system is not designed to serve them. As a result, school leaders revised its attendance policy to be "non-punitive" and adopted new, more accurate metrics to understand student attendance and participation. In addition to rethinking metrics, site leads described schools committing to more holistic interventions to encourage higher attendance, including changing the school culture to be more welcoming to students and "making the young people feel like they belonged."

Collaboratives communicate a community-wide, collaborative vision. By leveraging the stories and assets of the community, collaboratives' key messages are amplified and carry great weight and credibility. Site representatives from New York City noted partners were able to win significant public dollars to support opportunity youth because messaging was "not so reliant on just one main community partner but having its core dedicated stakeholders be in the driver's seat." The site representative commented on the "power of them coming together" and the funding agency's understanding that the partnership approach, while a new way of funding for the agency, could ultimately have the greater impact than funding a single organization.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS TO MAINTAIN MOMENTUM

Systems change efforts can be slow and arduous and are often stymied by bureaucracy, process, and differences in opinions and ways of working. System leaders rely on their relationships to help prioritize actions steps, expedite tasks, and help disparate organizations and institutions see themselves as part of a larger whole. Relationships are key to building coalitions and movements, helping gain the attention of the public, funders, and policy makers. From one OYF collaborative: "Having all of the practitioners, having CBOs, having workforce development, having civic leaders all involved in this and being able to show where movement and alignment was happening, which is, I would say, interesting to legislators, interesting to people, where they are able to push [an] agenda where there's alignment amongst various people in this work. It wasn't just CBOs, it was a lot of other folks involved."

> "...the relationships that have formed with the service providers in the [collaborative] space has made systems navigation easier for our young people, where they might be able to move in between systems easier than they would've been otherwise."

Collaboratives leverage convening power to design communal strategies and a shared vision. OY strategies may fail to take form due to mixed or competing messages from various individuals and organizations who work within systems. By bringing disparate voices together to shape a communal message, effective collaboratives mitigate such risks. Representatives from New York City described convening a roundtable of chambers of commerce, business improvement districts, and city agencies to inform a "single-system strategy around employer recruitment and training for work-based learning." The cohesive message led to the expansion of summer youth employment to support 100,000 youth. Leads from South King County credit their monthly provider meeting with helping them come up with shared language for the network, including "equity-centered language", which in-turn helped pave the way for opportunity youth-supportive legislation.

Collaboratives recognize "the good" in system partners and institutions and respect the relationship. Many collaboratives see key institutions – including local school systems and universities – as critical partners, even as they may look to influence change within these institutions. One site reflected: "We're supportive partners. We're not out to get them." Leads from this site believed the institutions were more likely to take their recommendations on changes when they see the collaborative as an ally. Sites lean into this strategy by supporting the goals of institutional actors. Representatives from New York City reported that local colleges were coming to the collaborative for implementation advice, including supporting recruitment efforts.

"For the initiative, I would say that was one of the key first things, making sure the school system was involved."

Collaboratives leverage relationships to help advance conversations around racial equity. Many collaboratives have been carefully working to center racial equity in their work and partnerships. Collaboratives, including Del Norte, Tucson, and South King County, credit the strength and longevity of their relationships in helping navigate delicate conversations with partners who have different levels of experience of engaging in complicated conversations around the role of race. A lead from Tucson observed, "So I think taking the time to build relationships based off trust and respect has been really crucial for working towards those mental model shifts [about Opportunity Youth] as a group," which has led to deeper partner engagement and commitment, and, ultimately, the expansion of re-engagement centers.

Collaboratives seek out partnerships with influential individuals and organizations to expedite their systems change work. Collaboratives credit establishing and nurturing relationships with visible and influential entities as accelerating their systems change efforts. One urban community discussed how its well-respected university president was able to usher through a critical policy change. The lead shared, "I think anytime we've been able to put together a public forum and deliberately choose speakers from the systems we're trying to impact that usually has an effect."

Long-term relationships help collaboratives take risks and advance new initiatives and ways of working. Some collaboratives reflected that their (and their leaders') established history of working in partnership within systems gave them credibility to push new thinking. One urban collaborative, reflecting on its transition to advocacy work, offered, "And that longevity and that history has provided a foundation of legitimacy and to a certain extent on the topic, our CEO has been doing this work for decades and building relationships for decades. And so when we were ready to pivot to this work, we

were able to build on all of that." Another lead, reflecting on the recent expansion of its summer jobs program, observed, "at this point [the program] is over 20 years old, and so it's just a lot of people in a lot of different systems and different levels of leadership and kind of places of power across the city know [it]." One site credited sustained leadership for its progress: "we can convene and build networks and collaborations amongst other entities because we're seen as a trusted ally or we're seen as a trusted body, and we're able to put forth our work and be in a space where people will gather because they trust the individuals who are leading the work."

ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE AS SYSTEMS CHANGE ADVOCATES

Authentic youth engagement is a critical core value for FCS. But collaboratives also employ it as a strategy to buttress their systems change work. Collaboratives center and empower young people in their advocacy, recognizing the unique expertise that young people, both harmed and undeterred by the system they commit to fix, bring to these efforts. To that end, collaboratives seek to both include young people in their advocacy work and develop young people's skills to shape and share their own story. As one lead sums up, testimony from a young person can serve as "wake-up call" for even the most "cynical administrator."

Collaboratives look to elevate the perspectives and lived experiences of young people as necessary for system actors, including legislators, to understand the challenges, barriers, and opportunities of systems change. One site remarked that having youth come and speak "helped bring clarity" to OY work. Another found that including young people in advocacy efforts "does not leave the opportunity to misinterpret or misunderstand anything. It's coming straight from the source." A site lead from one urban collaborative reflected, "They went to the State House, they spoke with representatives, they spoke with state senators, they spoke with so many people who are involved within the political arena. You could not ignore what they were trying to say. You could not ignore what it is they were advocating and fighting for because they were fighting for themselves."

Collaboratives develop the skills of young people to position and elevate their stories to advance advocacy goals. Collaboratives develop intentional strategies for young people to hone their leadership and advocacy skills. Leads from Maine described the Young People's Caucus as a space for young people to lead conversations and "share from personal experience," appreciating how lived experience can bolster advocacy efforts. Leads credited the education focus of the Young People's Caucus: "We're growing an ability to mobilize young people around particular legislation they care about and support them to get to Augusta and prepare and provide testimony and follow up with their local representatives to ask them to support or not support." Leads in Missoula described its Youth Advisory Council as a place for young people to practice their organizing and leadership, including affinity groups and community events. Leads described a recent event focused on educating the community on banned books: "They definitely are committed to ensuring our community has those opportunities to not only connect and build those relationships, but also be educated from their experience about what's going on, and how it's impacting them and their success in life."

"…creating that pathway for our youth to have their voices at the table around key issues and policies that are impacting them… has been a success and best practice… So forming a Youth Advisory Council was a way for us to not only model what we ask other organizations, schools and communities to do, which is to create avenues of leadership and base building for building power."

LEVERAGING DATA TO JUMPSTART SYSTEMS CHANGE

Over the last decade, FCS has prioritized (through technical assistance, investment, and convening) data capacity and data use by collaboratives[16]. Indeed, data elements score relatively well on the self-assessment each year. And while in the annual assessment, data use is a systems change outcome in its own right, collaboratives continue to elevate data as a support and enabler of their other systems change efforts. Collaboratives use data to:

- **Expand existing programs.** Collaborative representatives from New York City described using data to launch a new initiative for career pathways in high schools – expanding from 60 schools, with the goal of reaching 500.

- **Inform policy makers about issues surrounding opportunity youth.** Leads in Hartford reported sharing population-level data with state officials and education officials to help explain how the existing K12 education and post-secondary education systems contribute to the number of opportunity youth. The collaborative recognized the needs of opportunity youth should be explicitly considered in legislation and appropriation, and believed data would "keep the issue of opportunity youth as a critical issue for the state to be responding to." Leads in South King County agreed with this strategy, noting their data reports come with recommendations "directed more towards systems or school districts, lawmakers, things like that, to actually take those into consideration for new policies that are written." A collaborative in rural Texas hired a research firm to provide economic and labor market data to help inform public officials, economic and workforce development organizations, workforce development agencies, CBOs, and educational institutions about the needs of the community with the goal of having them open more pathways for young people.

- **Design community supports.** Leads in Houston referenced using data to better understand the location of communities with high rates of youth disconnection to help craft a place-based strategy. Leads hoped to use census data to understand differences in neighborhoods and provided targeted technical assistance and funding.

- **Access new funding streams.** Leads from Hartford described using data to build a public awareness campaign with the goal of accessing $500 million in funding to support opportunity youth across the state over the next decade.

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[16] See https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/report/using-data-to-facilitate-systems-change/

Why is this work hard to maintain?

Collaboratives working to change systems navigate the ebbs and flows of changing social and political climates. Embracing this complexity means acknowledging that all collaboratives, no matter how well prepared, hit stumbling blocks. As we dug more deeply into collaboratives' experiences over the past four years, we found much to learn from investigating setbacks to changing systems. Four interconnected challenges posed the most issues for collaboratives:

- Impacts of COVID and natural disasters
- Leadership, staffing, and backbone transitions
- Funding and resources, especially for the backbone organization
- Political context and climate

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND NATURAL DISASTERS

Discussing systems change over the past four years means recognizing both the **immediate and longer-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic**. In response to the pandemic that by the end of 2022 had killed over one million people in the United States[17], collaboratives in 2020 described intentionally adapting the way they worked: shifting their focus to addressing immediate needs in their communities and transitioning to virtual work[18]. Recently the lasting consequences have become clearer. The pandemic has had and will likely continue to have deep and enduring impacts throughout society, on the systems that serve young people, and on young people themselves. Nationally, the pandemic reversed a decade of trends showing improving youth connection to work and school[19]. It led to learning loss, lower rates of school enrollment and employment, and a sharp increase in reported disabilities for young adults – likely driven by the mental health consequences of the pandemic. Students who systems have historically marginalized– low-income, Black, and Latino students, among others – have continued to experience disproportionate burdens resulting from the pandemic.

Collaboratives who have experienced systems change setbacks were not alone in naming the pandemic as a culprit, though these collaboratives may have been more deeply impacted and slower to rebound. Not only did it shape the political climate and shift resource distribution, it contributed to leadership and staff turnover, which in turn delayed partnership efforts. Through 2022 some collaboratives described how they continue to experience challenges in locating, reconnecting, and recruiting young people for programs.

Although the global COVID-19 pandemic was one powerful example, other **natural and manmade disasters have the power to influence systems change** as well. Natural disasters – fires, floods, tornadoes – create barriers to changing policies as well, as local leaders continue to have their hands full with immediate needs. As one site lead said, "I don't think that can be underscored enough what climate change and natural disasters have also done… you always seem to be in crisis."

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[17] https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/

[18] For more information about the response of OYF communities to the pandemic, see Equal Measure's 2020 evaluation report "The Opportunity Youth Forum: Seizing the Moment to Advance a Movement" https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/report/the-opportunity-youth-forum-seizing-the-moment-to-advance-a-movement/

[19] Lewis, Kristen. *Ensuring an Equitable Recovery: Addressing Covid-19's Impact on Education.* New York: Measure of America, Social Science Research Council, 2023. https://measureofamerica.org/youth-disconnection-2023/

LEADERSHIP, STAFFING, AND BACKBONE TRANSITIONS

All collaboratives, backbones and partner organizations experience transitions in staff, leadership, and strategy. Interviewees attributed some increased staff and leadership turnover to the pandemic; however organizational and staff transitions are ongoing challenges that collaboratives face.

Collaboratives named multiple types of transitions as especially disruptive to their systems change work. Such transitions included:

"Because of COVID, a lot of leaders have left the community or refocus their efforts and time or roles. So it's just been a lot of figuring out... who's still here...."

- **Staff turnover** among program leaders and supervisors at the backbone and core partner organizations, which requires recruiting and training new staff to run core programs and develop meaningful, supportive relationships with young people.
- **Leadership transitions** at the backbone or core partner organizations, which often involved shifts in strategy and approach for collaborative partners.
- **Shifts in who provides backbone support for collaboratives,** even when such transitions are planned they require building capacity and rebuilding relationships with the new organization.

Many partners who experienced systems change setbacks had multiple types of transitions happening at the same time or multiple partner organizations in transition, further delaying the work to improve systems for opportunity youth.

Some organizations reflected that even after transitions occurred, staff needed to be in their new roles for at least a year or more to rebuild trust and relationships. Other collaboratives, especially those who had been a part of the Opportunity Youth Forum for many years, reorganized where their OY work sits within the backbone organization and reassessed which organizations were best positioned to lead the work forward through its next stage. Internal capacity building and strategic adjustments are necessary for long-term success and may mean temporary shifts from external visible systems wins, as the collaborative realigns itself to the current partners and context.

> "At the end of the day, all of this comes down to the individual people and a lot of it is about the trust that those individuals have in each other around responsible and effective stewardship of these investments."

FUNDING AND RESOURCES

OYF collaboratives seek funding from a wide range of sources and have varying degrees of financial support for their backbone organizations. Though some collaboratives were able to take advantage of time-limited COVID-related funding over the past few years, funding and resource scarcity continues to impact all aspects of a collaborative's work. As one collaborative indicated, "I would love to talk about capacity challenges of all the other three [leadership, communications, and data], but unless I can find resources...if I can't find the money, I can't help anyone. And I wish it wasn't that way." Collaboratives elevated a few areas where additional funding and resources could help them mitigate challenges and enhance their programmatic and systems change work:

- **Backbone support.** One collaborative explained that only having initiative-specific funding limited the coordination, backbone support, and evaluation work that they could do. Finding funding to support collaboratives' core functions has remained a challenge.

- **Navigating programmatic funding restrictions and timelines.** Partners and backbones who receive initiative-specific funding often have data and reporting requirements tied to funder needs. This often dictates the type of commitments partners can make related to data, or youth participation, and the amount of systems change that can be accomplished.

> *"…what we're actually working through right now is how to recognize the realities of folks needing to be compliant with whatever funding they have, but also not let that be a barrier for creativity and what they are able to do within their program."*

- **Meaningful youth inclusion.** Stipends and other reimbursements for young people's time are an important strategy to advance collaboratives' equity goals, however funding for this sort of in-depth involvement can be difficult to find at the levels necessary to sustain deep, meaningful work. As discussed previously, youth engagement is not only a core value of how OYF collaboratives operate, but young people raising their voices and advocating for the changes they need to succeed are powerful drivers of policy and narrative changes.

POLITICAL CONTEXT AND CLIMATE

All OYF collaboratives ground their efforts in the local political, economic, and social realities of their communities. For some collaboratives, this environment facilitates their work towards systems changes: in Hartford and Seattle government agencies naming opportunity youth as a priority population has helped advance collectives' work. Specific local challenges ranging from local administration changes to state-by-state political divisions, however, may also impede the progress of collaboratives.

- **Systems administration changes in local government and school districts** impact collaboratives' success. While new mayors or new district leadership may usher in new possibilities, these shifts can also interrupt in-progress efforts. One urban collaborative named that leadership for multiple organizations had transitioned in anticipation of a mayoral change, demonstrating the far-reaching impacts of shifting political climates.

- **Local political climate influences narratives** about opportunity youth, funding, and the evolution of partnerships. Collaboratives navigated tensions between their local and state political contexts, especially related to racial and gender equity. As one collaborative acknowledged, "where we can have traction locally, it doesn't always translate to what the state is doing," a sentiment echoed by multiple collaboratives. The growing politicization of and backlash against racial and gender equity work impacted opportunity youth in communities across the country and is, in the words of one collaborative, "devastating for OY" who are often members of queer communities and/or communities of color. These political narratives, a focus on individualism over acknowledgement of systemic harm, and consistently underfunded education systems both show the need to concentrate efforts on changing systems and policies, and present headwinds for collaboratives in advancing their local efforts.

LOOKING AHEAD

Collaborative capacity and systems change across the OYF network remained relatively stable from 2019 to 2022, despite new types of collaboratives joining the network and the significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, a closer look at individual collaboratives reveals that some experience steep fluctuations in their systems change journeys, largely characterized by sudden periods of both growth and decline. Our takeaway is that short-term (i.e., annual) advances and declines are typical in systems change efforts and should be expected for complex, multi-actor, multi-step processes. And while we can learn more about what facilitates and stalls changes in the short-term, we should consider a longer-term window in understanding systems change progress and success.

Those who work directly and indirectly in systems change efforts need to be aware of the up-and-down journey required.

- **Community-based practitioners and nonprofits** should expect bumps in the road, even from conditions outside their control. These conditions can include staffing and leadership transitions, funding, and social and political context. Organizations need to develop contingency plans and identify *resilience capacities* that help them mitigate these challenges to maintain progress.

- **Funders and policy makers** should consider the timeline and resources required to affect systems. Longer-term funding and general operating support will give communities and providers the necessary flexibility to apply time, resources, and attention where they are most needed and to account for unexpected shifts.

- **Researchers and evaluators** should expand their definitions of evidence, extending beyond quantitative measures and including qualitative examples of impact and progress. Researchers and evaluators should incorporate diverse approaches, including evaluating narrative change, movement building, and advocacy efforts.

APPENDIX A: BACKGROUND

TABLE 1: **COMMUNITIES IN THE OYF NETWORK IN 2022**

Atlanta, GA	Maine (southern, rural)
Austin, TX	Missoula, MT
Baltimore, MD*	New York, NY (4 collaboratives)
Boston, MA	Newark, NJ
Bozeman, MT	New Orleans, LA
Buffalo, NY	Oakland, CA
Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation, SD	Philadelphia, PA
Chicago, IL	Phoenix, AZ
Del Norte County and Tribal Lands, CA	Pueblo of Jemez, NM
Denver, CO	Pueblo of Laguna, NM
Detroit, MI	Pueblo of Taos, NM
El Paso, TX	Roaring Fork Valley, CO
Flint, MI*	San Antonio, TX
Greenville, MS	San Augustine, TX
Hartford, CT	San Diego, CA
Hawai'i	San Francisco, CA
Hopi Tribe, AZ*	San Jose/Santa Clara County, CA
Houston, TX	Seattle/South King County, WA
Jasper, TX	Tucson, AZ
Los Angeles, CA	Twin Cities, MN

* Did not participate in 2022 assessment

See also: https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/oyfcommunities/

FIGURE 1. **YEARS THAT BACKBONE ORGANIZATIONS AND COLLABORATIVES HAVE SPENT FOCUSING ON OPPORTUNITY YOUTH, N=40**

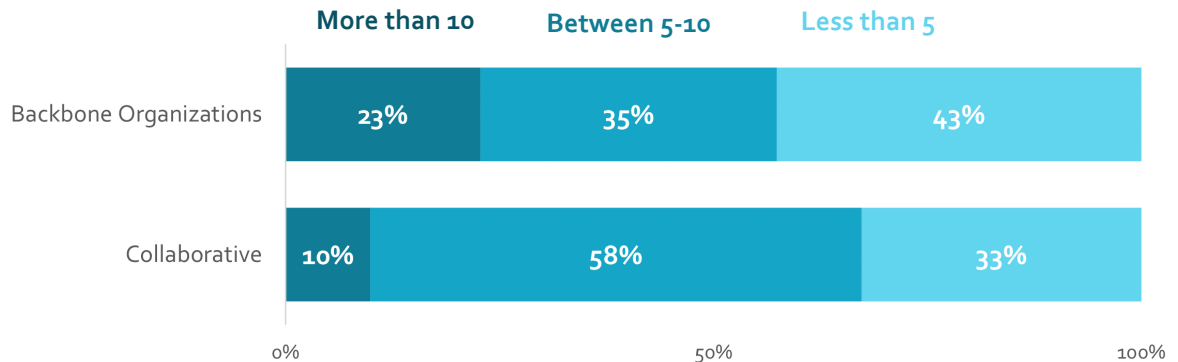|	More than 10	Between 5-10	Less than 5
Backbone Organizations	23%	35%	43%
Collaborative	10%	58%	33%

TABLE 2. **COLLABORATIVE PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS BY TYPE IN 2022, N=39**

Collaborative partner organizations by sector	Number of sites reporting at least one partner from this sector	Median number of partners	Range of reported partners
Community based organizations	39	7	2-61
K-12 public or charter education institutions	33	2	1-15
Public or private higher education institutions	35	1	1-28
Government institutions (not education institutions)	32	2	0-24
Other partners	24	1	0-47
Total partners across all sectors	**39**	**16**	**5- 119**

FIGURE 2. **PERCENT OF COLLABORATIVES THAT REPORTED PRIORITIZING CERTAIN GROUPS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN 2022, N=40**
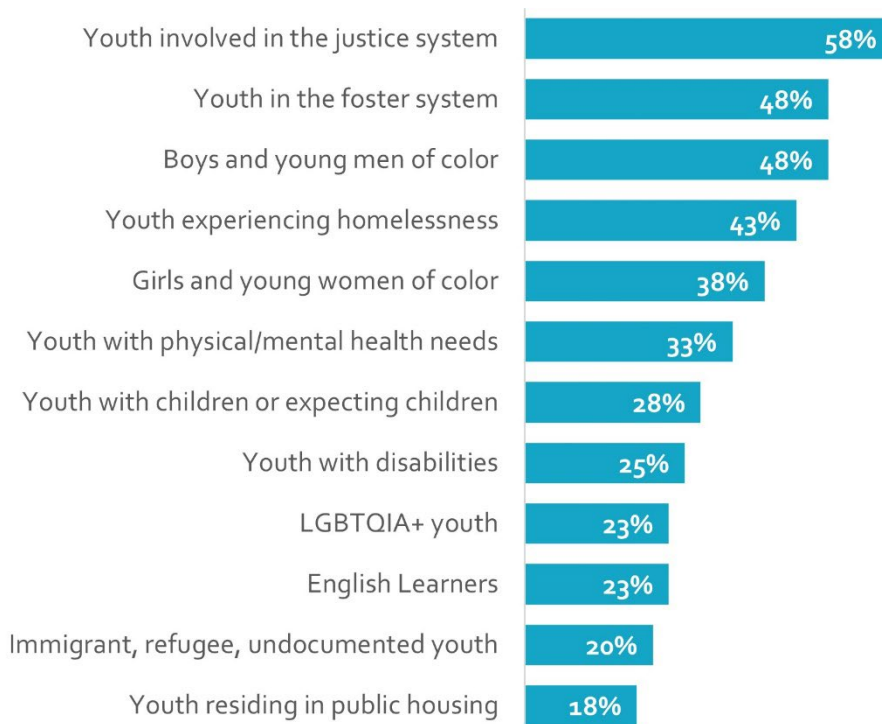
Youth involved in the justice system	58%
Youth in the foster system	48%
Boys and young men of color	48%
Youth experiencing homelessness	43%
Girls and young women of color	38%
Youth with physical/mental health needs	33%
Youth with children or expecting children	28%
Youth with disabilities	25%
LGBTQIA+ youth	23%
English Learners	23%
Immigrant, refugee, undocumented youth	20%
Youth residing in public housing	18%

	A Lot	Moderately	Slightly	Not at all
Postsecondary Education	43%	25%	28%	5%
High school/Equivalency	45%	28%	18%	10%
Workforce	50%	35%	8%	8%

0%   50%   100%

FIGURE 4. **PERCENT OF COLLABORATIVES THAT HAVE SET MEASURABLE EQUITY GOALS FOR OY SUBGROUPS, N=40**

Collaboratives have set goals based on…

Race/Ethnicity	33%
Gender	21%

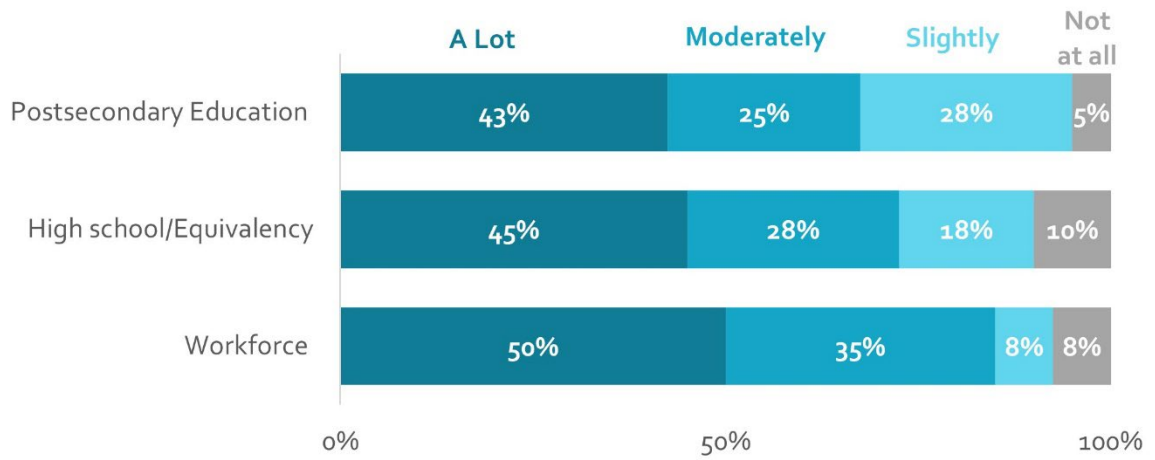| Document	Percent of sites with this document
Data-sharing agreements between collaborative partners and the backbone	70
Community OY landscape report (i.e., 'ecosystem map'), or list of partners and services for OY (may include a program-level inventory)	70
Annual action plan with the collaborative's goals and priorities for the year	68
MOUs or MOAs between collaborative members and the backbone (detailing of organizational members commitments to the collaborative)	65
OY collaborative charter (i.e., statement of values, purpose, and general goals of the OY collaborative)*	64
OY Collaborative website or webpage	60
Theory of Change/Logic Model for your OY collaborative's work**	58
OY collaborative 'organizational chart' and/or member role definitions	49
OY Collaborative three-to-five-year plan (i.e., a longer-term strategic plan)	43
5-year community wide OY goals (which could include targets set against the OYF Common Measures or other goals)*	36
Annual public, written report to the community (e.g., impact report for the year)	35

39 out of 40 sites responded yes or no to this question
**38 out of 40 sites responded yes or no to this question*

FIGURE 5. **PERCENT OF COLLABORATIVES BY BACKBONE ORGANIZATION TYPE, N=40**

Intermediary — 33%
Community based organization — 30%
Workforce investment board — 10%
Education institution — 10%
Community foundation or funder — 8%
Tribal government agency — 5%
Local government unit — 3%
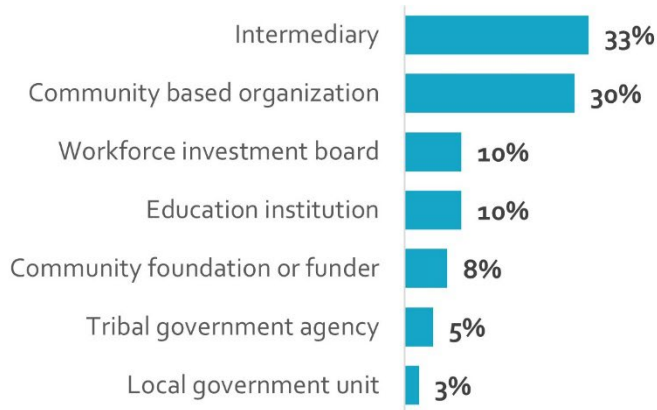
APPENDIX B: FUNDING

FIGURE 6. **PERCENT OF BACKBONES THAT SERVE AS FUNDER/GRANTOR TO ANY PARTNERS IN COMMUNITY, N=40**

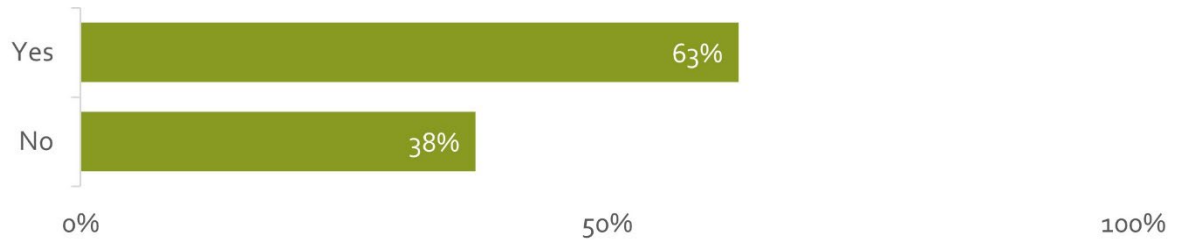|	
Yes	63%
No	38%

0%　　　　　　　　　　　　　50%　　　　　　　　　　　　　100%

TABLE 4. **SIZE OF BACKBONE ORGANIZATION BUDGETS IN 2022**

Budget	Number of sites	Median	Range
Total budget	36	$4,200,000	$0-125,000,000
Budget dedicated to OY	37	$586,180	$0-7,300,000

TABLE 5. **FUNDING BACKBONE ORGANIZATIONS RECEIVED IN 2022 FOR OY WORK, BY SOURCE**

Funding Source	Number of sites	Median	Range
Public Funding	24	$63,500	$0-140,000,000
Private Funding	22	$156,500	$0-35,000,000

FIGURE 7. **PERCENT OF BACKBONE ORGANIZATIONS WHO REPORTED RECEIVING OPERATIONAL FUNDING FROM EACH SOURCE, N=40**

Private Sources	78%
Public Sources	65%

TABLE 6. **BACKBONE FULL TIME STAFFING IN 2022**

Staffing	Number of sites	Median	Range
Total staff	39	14	0 to 220
Dedicated staff for OY	39	3	0 to 20

APPENDIX C: BELONGING, MEANING, WELLBEING, AND PURPOSE

Understand the BMWP Elements	46% / 46% / 3% / 5%
Integrate BMWP Elements into Programs for OY	41% / 44% / 5% / 10%
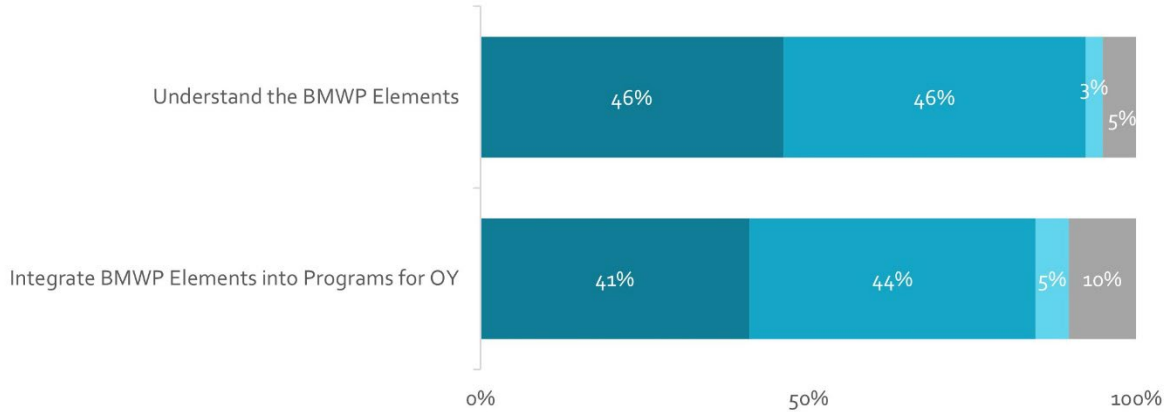
0%   50%   100%

BMWP Strategies	Percent of sites
Explained BMWP concepts to OY collaborative members.	65
Discussed BMWP implementation or strategies with young people	56
Supported programmatic improvements or adjustments to center BMWP	50
Shared research and resources around BMWP with collaborative partners	38
Explained BMWP concepts to people outside of the OY collaborative	27
Planned BMWP implementation in collaborative meetings	27
Drafted goals related to BMWP for the collaborative	21
Collected data or feedback on BMWP implementation from partners	21
Shared research and resources around BMWP with partners outside the OY collaborative	18
Other*	6

* Discussed BMWP with smaller group of providers and incorporation of Healing Wheel (BMWP) as a tool for care plan for participants

FIGURE 9. PERCENT OF COLLABORATIVES THAT REPORTED THEIR PARTNERS INCORPORATE ARNOLD CHANDLER'S SEVEN TYPES OF MEANING-MAKING INTO THEIR OY PROGRAMS IN 2022, N=39
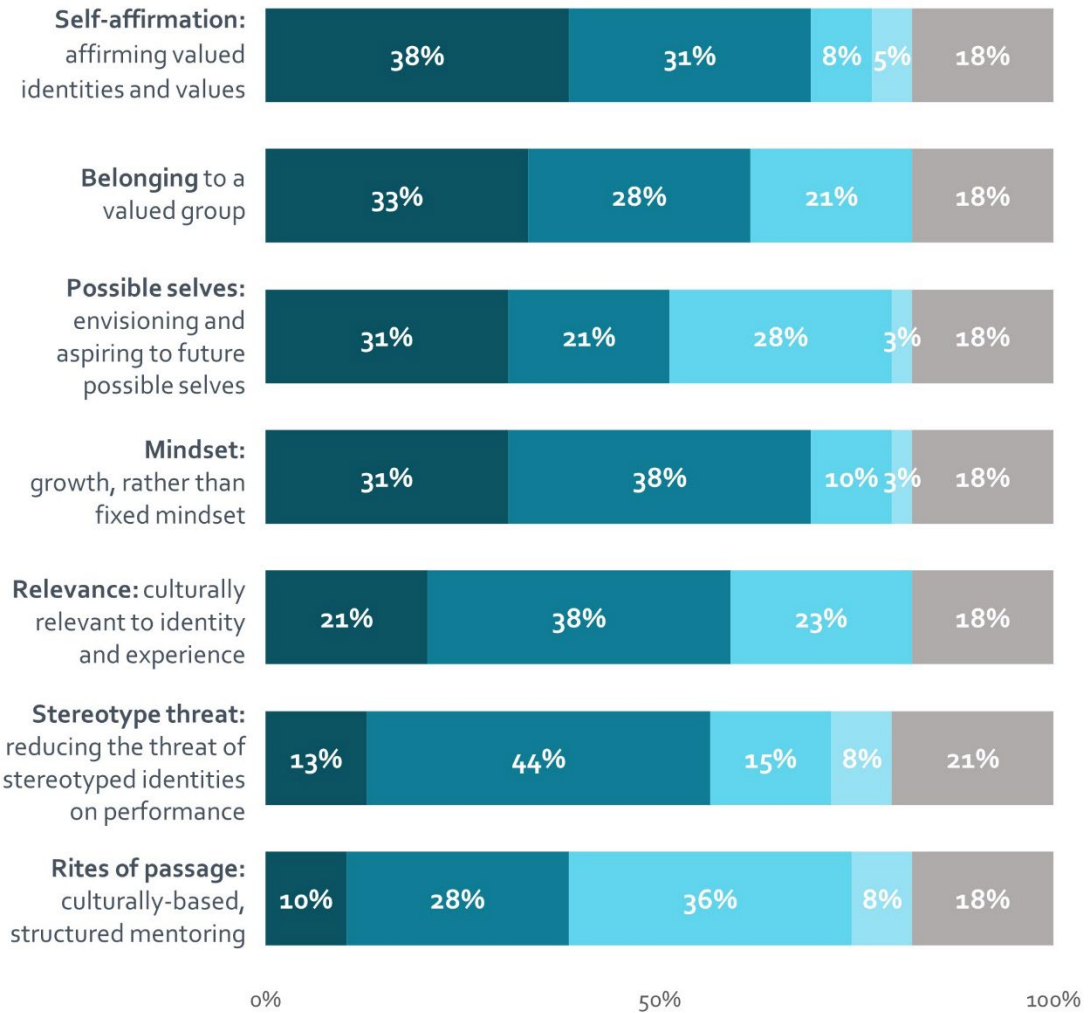

Self-affirmation: affirming valued identities and values — 38% | 31% | 8% | 5% | 18%

Belonging to a valued group — 33% | 28% | 21% | 18%

Possible selves: envisioning and aspiring to future possible selves — 31% | 21% | 28% | 3% | 18%

Mindset: growth, rather than fixed mindset — 31% | 38% | 10% | 3% | 18%

Relevance: culturally relevant to identity and experience — 21% | 38% | 23% | 18%

Stereotype threat: reducing the threat of stereotyped identities on performance — 13% | 44% | 15% | 8% | 21%

Rites of passage: culturally-based, structured mentoring — 10% | 28% | 36% | 8% | 18%

0%   50%   100%

FIGURE 10. **PERCENT OF COLLABORATIVES BY ROLE OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN SETTING COLLABORATIVE AGENDA/PRIORITIES**

Young people set the collaborative agenda — 3%

Young people were partners in setting the collaborative agenda — 25%

We were still figuring out how to incorporate young people in setting our collaborative's agenda/priorities — 30%

Young people's input or feedback was used to set the collaborative agenda — 43%

FIGURE 11. EXTENT COLLABORATIVES ACKNOWLEDGE TRAUMA IN WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE, N=40

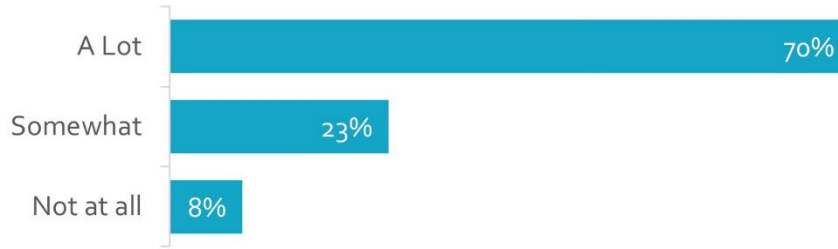|	
A Lot	70%
Somewhat	23%
Not at all	8%

TABLE 8. STRATEGIES COLLABORATIVES USED IN 2022 TO ACKNOWLEDGE AND SUPPORT HEALING AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE, N=40

Healing Strategies	Percent of sites
Regularly incorporating celebration and positive acknowledgement	75
Creating meaningful organizational leadership roles for young people (e.g., hiring as staff, serving on the board, having young people drive decision making about the organizational agenda)	69
Training and skill development in youth organizing, advocacy, social justice and/or critical awareness	67
Facilitating peer-to-peer approaches to build leadership and promote mentorship	61
Creating community-building spaces to share stories	56
Using gender neutral language to affirm and be inclusive of all gender identities	53
Individual therapy for young people	44
Building relationships between young people and elders	39
Creating separate spaces for youth and adults, and intentional spaces that bring both groups together	39
Reflecting to process conditions, experiences, and emotions, through writing or discussions	36
Incorporating culturally relevant healing practices (e.g., ceremonies, body work, mindfulness, yoga)	33
Trainings for adults to address adultism practices in youth programming	31
Attending and jointly reflecting on advocacy efforts in action (e.g., demonstrations, protests)	28
Facilitating healing circles or ways to create and establish peer support	28
Incorporating restorative justice and conflict resolution practices	28