



EXECUTIVE  
SUMMARY  
2024

# The Opportunity Youth Forum: Collaborating to Transform Local Systems and Amplify Youth Impact An Update, 2019-2024

Prepared for The Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum| August 2025

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FINDING  
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CHANGE



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## The Opportunity Youth Forum: Collaborating to Transform Local Systems and Amplify Youth Impact – An Update, 2019-2024

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). OYF is a network of more than 40 local collaboratives focused on the educational and economic success of youth and young adults. OYF's goal for the next ten years is to reduce youth disconnection by 50 percent in OYF communities, resulting in 500,000 fewer opportunity youth by 2033.<sup>1</sup>

### KEY FINDINGS IN THIS REPORT

- ❖ In OYF communities in 2023, 11.2 percent of 16-24-year-olds were not working and not in school, **returning the overall percentage of opportunity youth in these communities nearly to the low reached before the pandemic**. The 2-percentage point reduction between 2021 and 2023 represents **nearly 150,000 fewer opportunity youth**.
- ❖ Across the OYF Network, **overall collaborative capacity and systems change in 2024 were reported to be at their highest levels in six years**. *Data and learning* (a type of collaborative capacity) and *public policy and pathways improvements* (types of local systems changes) were all at their highest reported levels since 2019.
- ❖ We continue to find that collaboratives with **greater collaborative capacity** are more likely to see **greater evidence of local systems changes that better serve young people**.
- ❖ As we looked at trends from 2019-2023, preliminary data indicates that collaboratives reporting **greater evidence of systems change in 2019** in their local communities tended to have **lower youth disconnection rates in 2023**.

<sup>1</sup> Forum for Community Solutions, Opportunity Youth Forum, <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/opportunity-youth-forum/>.



# 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 almost 40 communities dedicated to improving systems so all young people, including the over 850,000 opportunity youth in OYF communities, can connect or re-connect to an education or career pathway.

FIGURE 1. MAP OF THE OYF NETWORK IN 2024

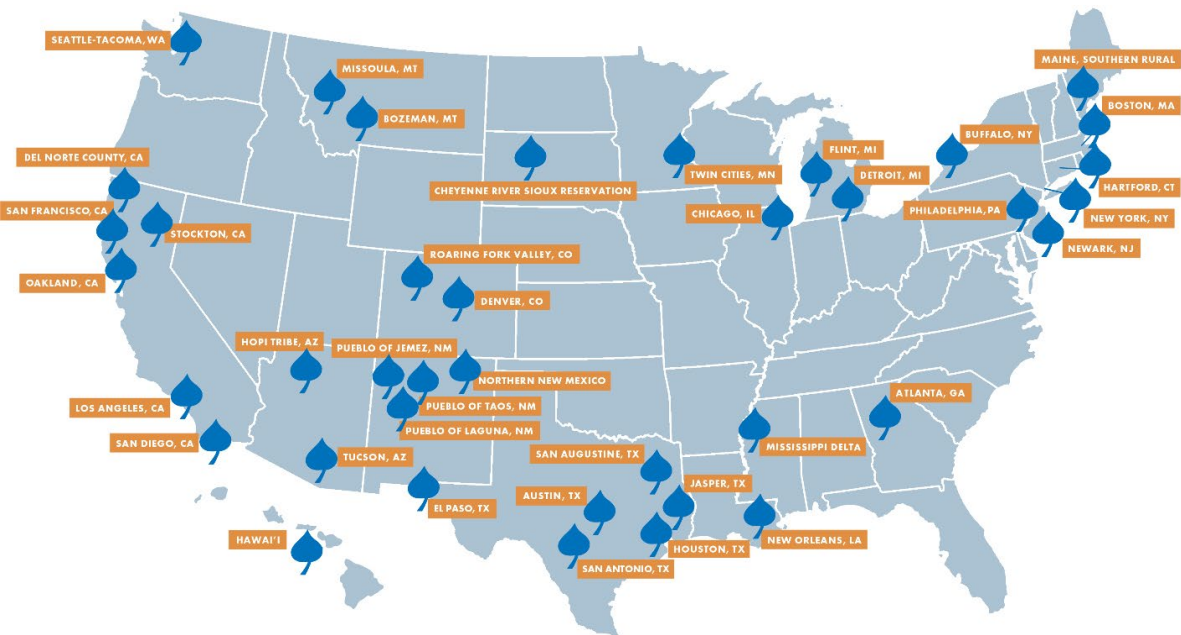





FIGURE 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF COLLABORATIVES IN THE OYF NETWORK, 2024

 AREAS OF FOCUS	 SIZE	 TIME FOCUSED ON OY
<p><b>Collaboratives prioritized:</b></p> <div><div>Boys and young men of color</div><div>58%</div></div> <div><div>Girls and young women of color</div><div>56%</div></div> <div><div>Justice involved youth</div><div>53%</div></div> <div><div>Youth with or expecting children</div><div>42%</div></div> <div><div>Foster youth/youth transitioning out of foster care</div><div>39%</div></div> <p><b>Collaboratives focused “a lot” on connecting youth to:</b></p> <div><div>Workforce</div><div>58%</div></div> <div><div>Postsecondary education</div><div>36%</div></div> <div><div>High school/equivalency</div><div>28%</div></div>	<p>Network median: 13 partners Range: 1-129 partners</p> <p><b>Collaboratives included partners from various sectors:</b></p> <div><div>Community-based organization</div><div>97%</div></div> <div><div>Higher education</div><div>92%</div></div> <div><div>Government</div><div>85%</div></div> <div><div>K-12 education</div><div>79%</div></div>	<div><div>More than 10 years</div><div>31%</div></div> <div><div>5-10 years</div><div>36%</div></div> <div><div>Less than 5 years</div><div>33%</div></div>



## OYF Theory of Change: How OYF Works to Improve the Lives of Opportunity Youth

The OYF theory of change for place-based collaboratives (Figure 3) hypothesizes that investing in the development, learning, and support of cross-sector collaboratives will enable communities to change systems to better serve young people, especially young people of color. Improving local systems – education, workforce, human services, justice, and others – will result in fewer opportunity youth by removing barriers and improving access and success on educational and career pathways.

This report describes progress across the OYF network and trends in the three main elements of the OYF theory of change: collaborative capacity, systems change, and youth outcomes, and the relationships between them using data from the annual OYF self-assessment<sup>2</sup> and the OYF Common Measures.<sup>3</sup>

FIGURE 3. OYF THEORY OF CHANGE FOR PLACE-BASED COLLABORATIVES



## YOUTH OUTCOMES

### Youth Outcomes in OYF Communities, 2017-2023

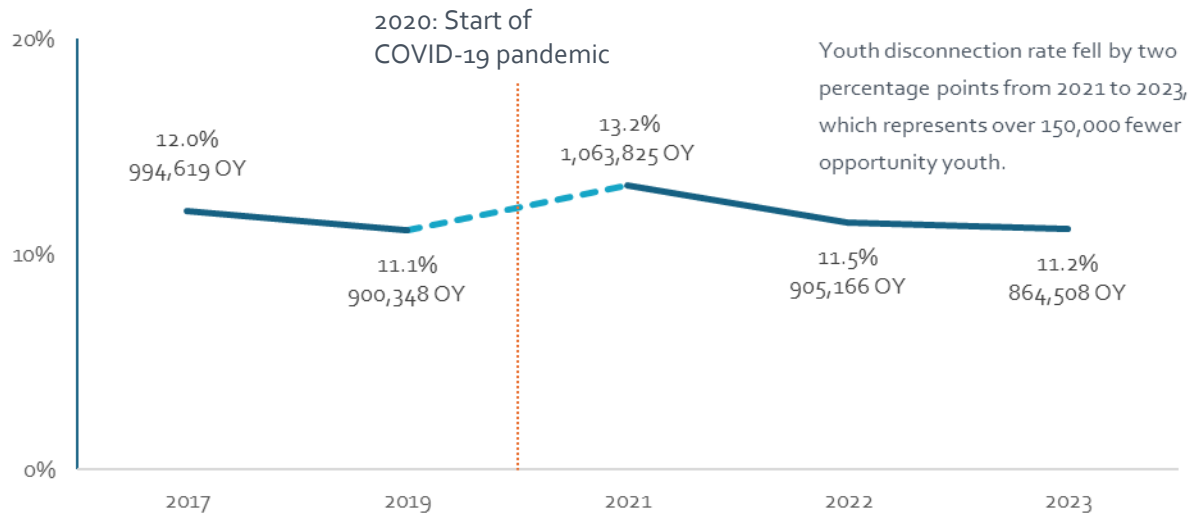
The Common Measures are intended to track and illuminate trends in youth disconnection over time and provide OYF communities with valuable community-level data to better understand opportunity youth in their communities. Across the OYF network, the youth disconnection rate was 12 percent in 2017 and 11.1 percent in 2019; jumped to 13.2 percent in 2021 (due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic) and then dropped to 11.5 percent in 2022 and 11.2 percent in 2023 (Figure 4). **The disconnection rate has nearly returned to pre-pandemic levels, falling two percentage points between 2021 and 2023 in OYF communities.**

<sup>2</sup> The self-assessment has been administered annually to each collaborative since 2019 and focuses on collaborative capacity in four areas (leadership, planning, and convening power; data and learning; raising awareness and strategic communications; and resources for the collaborative) and local systems change in seven areas (programmatic change; organizational change; narrative change; public policy change; data use; funding changes; and pathway improvements).

<sup>3</sup> The OYF Common Measures use American Community Survey (ACS) data to calculate youth disconnection rates and the number of opportunity youth in each OYF community and have been calculated in 2017, 2019, 2021, 2022, and 2023. See: Forum for Community Solutions, OYF Common Measures, <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/oym-common-measures/>



**FIGURE 4.** PERCENT OF OPPORTUNITY YOUTH IN OYF COMMUNITIES HAS BEEN DECLINING SINCE 2021



Source: American Community Survey Data<sup>4</sup>

## Preliminary Findings: The Relationship Between Systems Change and Youth Outcomes

Based on the theory of change, we would expect OYF communities that have shown *greater* success in changing local systems to have *lower* youth disconnection rates over the long term. We conducted exploratory analyses using data collected over six years to assess the relationship between systems change scores (based on self-assessment data of community change across seven areas, including narrative, policy, and funding) and community youth disconnection rates. One promising finding was a moderate correlation<sup>5</sup> between 2019 systems change scores (the earliest year we have) and 2023 youth disconnection rates (the latest year we have): **collaboratives with higher systems change scores in 2019 tended to have lower youth disconnection rates in 2023**. These findings should be considered preliminary; more data and a longer timeframe are needed.

Community-level change in youth disconnection is the goal and OYF aims to achieve that goal through **high-capacity community collaboratives** that work across multiple sectors and with community leaders and residents to bring about **changes in local systems** that impact opportunity youth. The state of capacity and systems change in OYF communities over the past six years is described in the next section.

<sup>4</sup> Disconnection rates are based on the same set of 41 collaboratives in each year so that comparisons can be made over time. The Common Measures were not calculated in 2020 due to poor data quality of the ACS.

<sup>5</sup>  $r = -0.39$ ,  $p = 0.15$

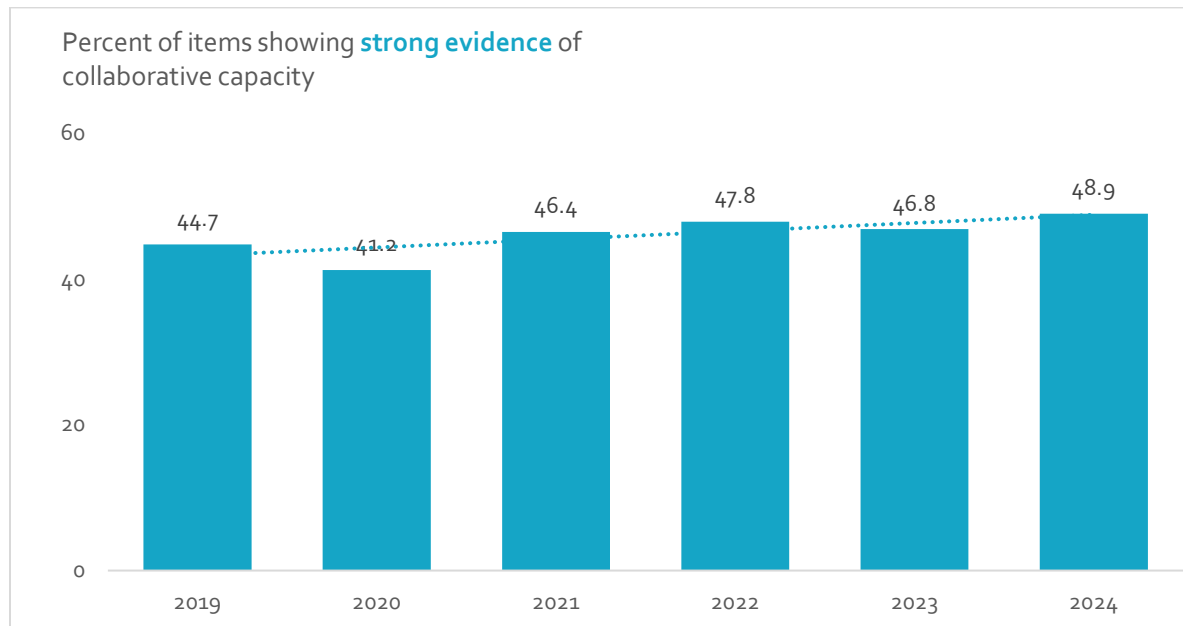


# COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY

## OYF Network Trends Over Time, 2019-2024

**Collaborative capacity**, which includes indicators of *leadership, planning, and convening power; data and learning; raising awareness and strategic communications; and resources for the collaborative* is **at its highest level in six years** across the OYF network (Figure 5). From 2019 to 2024, network capacity scores increased by over four percentage points. Capacity for *data and learning* is at its highest level in six years; this is likely due to an intentional focus by FCS on data technical assistance and capacity building for collaboratives.

**FIGURE 5.** COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY IN THE OYF NETWORK WAS AT A SIX-YEAR HIGH



*Note: Capacity scores are the average percent of responses to 55 capacity questions on the self-assessment across the network that were "Describes us very well/we excel at this" or "Describes us well" (i.e., strong evidence).*



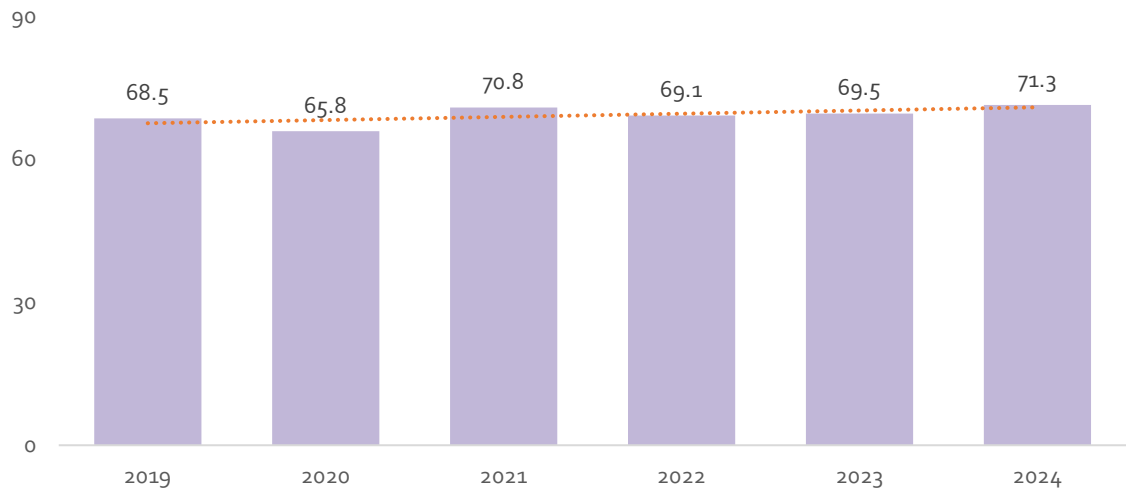
# SYSTEMS CHANGE

## OYF Network Trends Over Time, 2019-2024

Evidence of local systems changes is measured across seven areas: *programmatic change, organizational change, narrative change, public policy change, data use, funding changes, and pathway improvements*. Overall, network systems change scores where there is at least some evidence of change have been slightly increasing over time (Figure 6). From 2019 to 2024 scores increased by almost three percentage points. In addition, **public policy change is at its highest level in six years**; it increased by over eight percentage points from 2019 to 2024. *Pathway improvements* increased by over seven percentage points from 2023 to 2024.

**FIGURE 6.** AT LEAST SOME EVIDENCE OF SYSTEMS CHANGE IN THE OYF NETWORK WAS AT HIGHEST POINT IN SIX YEARS

Percent of items showing at least **some evidence** of systems change



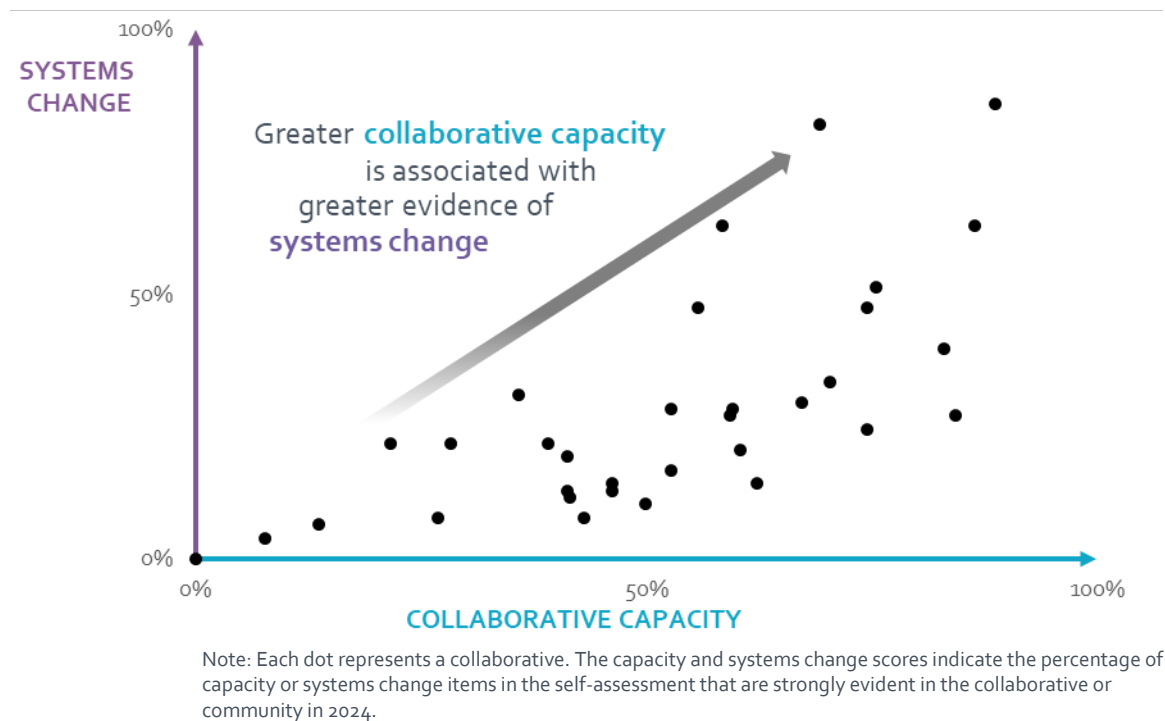
*Note: Systems change scores are the average percent of responses to 78 systems change questions on the self-assessment across the network that were "Describes our community very well"; "Describes our community well"; or "Somewhat describes our community" (i.e., at least some evidence).*



## The Relationship Between Collaborative Capacity and Systems Change in 2024

The OYF theory of change posits that as collaboratives build their capacity to implement their opportunity youth agendas by strengthening collaborative *leadership, data, communications, and resources* that they will be better able to implement systems changes in their communities. In our analysis of the 2024 assessment data, we found that 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** (Figure 7).

**FIGURE 7.** COLLABORATIVES WITH HIGHER CAPACITY SCORES HAD HIGHER SYSTEMS CHANGE SCORES (2024)







## Conclusion: Evidence to Support the OYF Theory of Change

Place-based collaboratives in the OYF network are working to build their capacities to change local systems that impact opportunity youth and ultimately reduce the number of opportunity youth in their communities by reconnecting young people to school and career opportunities and putting them on a path to economic success and wellbeing. Our evaluation collected and analyzed data to better understand each component of the theory of change, as well as the connections between them. Overall, the data suggest evidence to support this theory of change.

**FIGURE 8. EVIDENCE FOR THE OYF THEORY OF CHANGE FOR PLACE-BASED COLLABORATIVES**

