# The Opportunity Youth Forum: Collaborating to Transform Local Systems and Amplify Youth Impact

## An Update, 2019-2024

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# 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.[1]

### 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) are 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*.

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[1] 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.
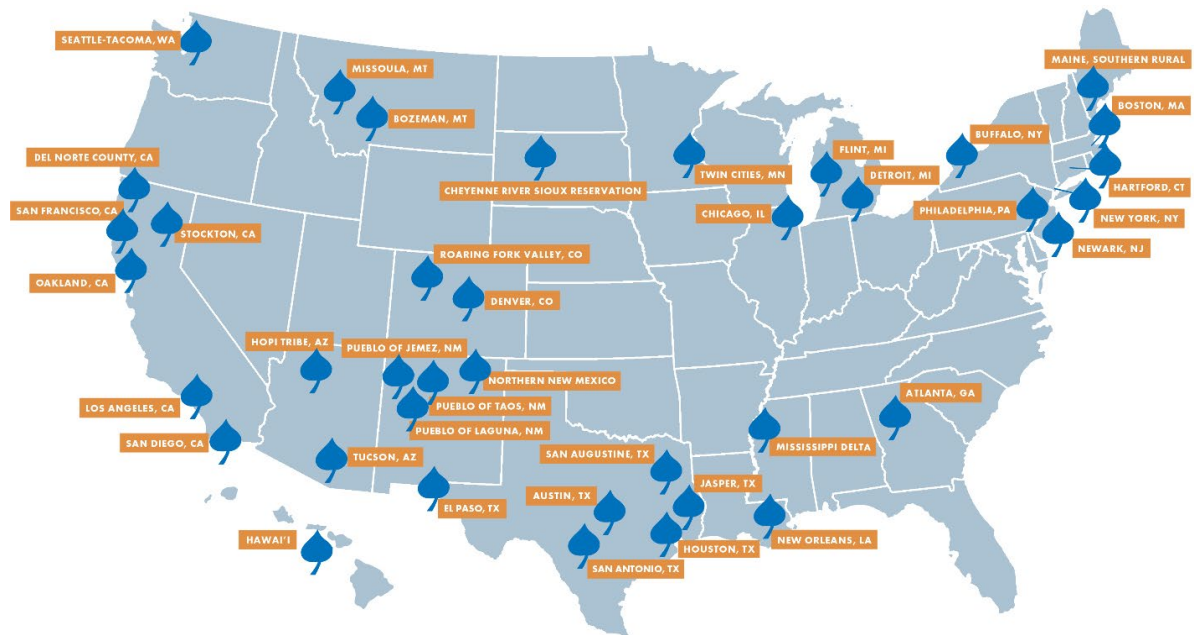
**FIGURE 1.** MAP OF THE OYF NETWORK IN 2024



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

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

## 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[2] and the OYF Common Measures.[3]

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



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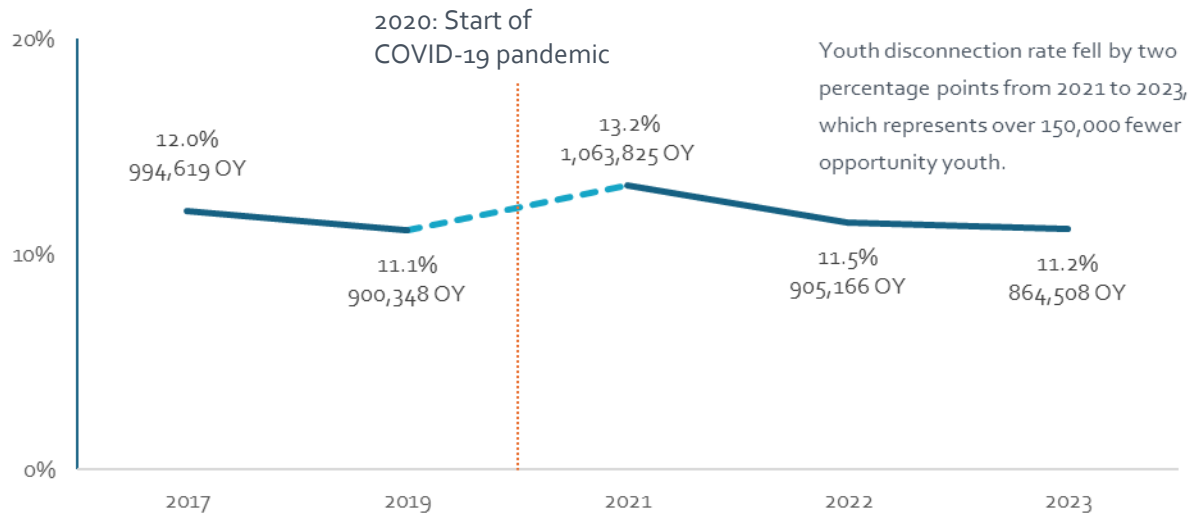## Youth Outcomes in OYF Communities, 2017-2023

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.**

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[2] 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*).

[3] 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/oyf-common-measures/

Source: American Community Survey Data[4]

## 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[5] 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.

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[4] 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.
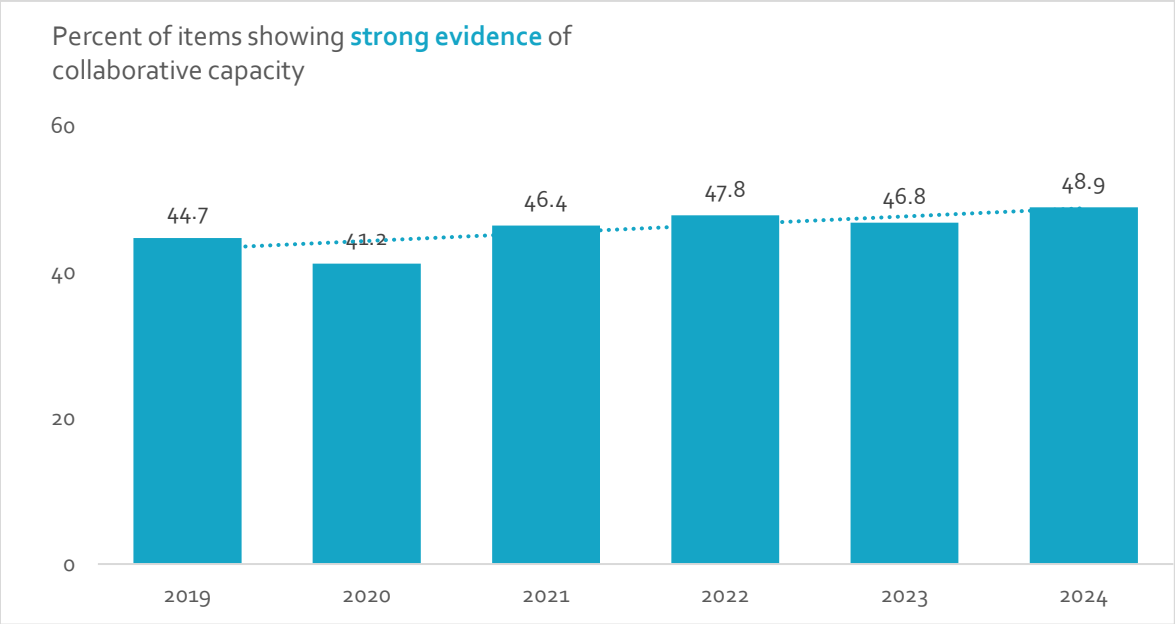
[5] r=-0.39, p=0.15

# 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

Percent of items showing **strong evidence** of collaborative capacity

| Year | Value |
|------|-------|
| 2019 | 44.7 |
| 2020 | 41.2 |
| 2021 | 46.4 |
| 2022 | 47.8 |
| 2023 | 46.8 |
| 2024 | 48.9 |

*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).*
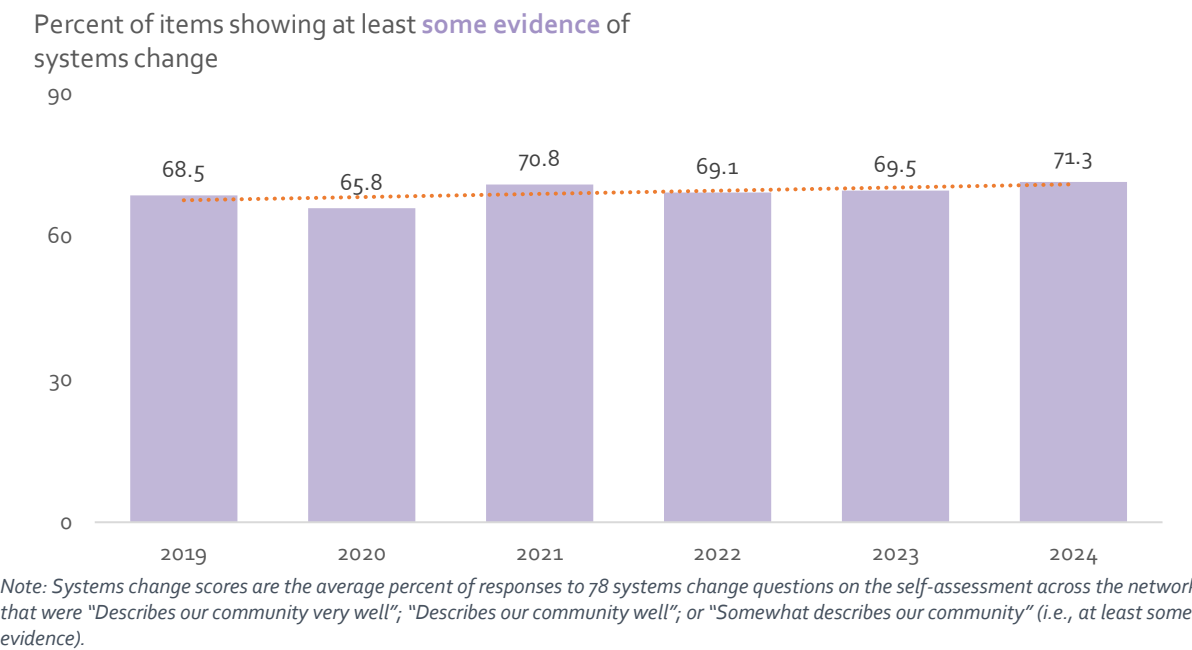
# SYSTEMS CHANGE
## OYF Network Trends Over Time, 2019-2024

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).*
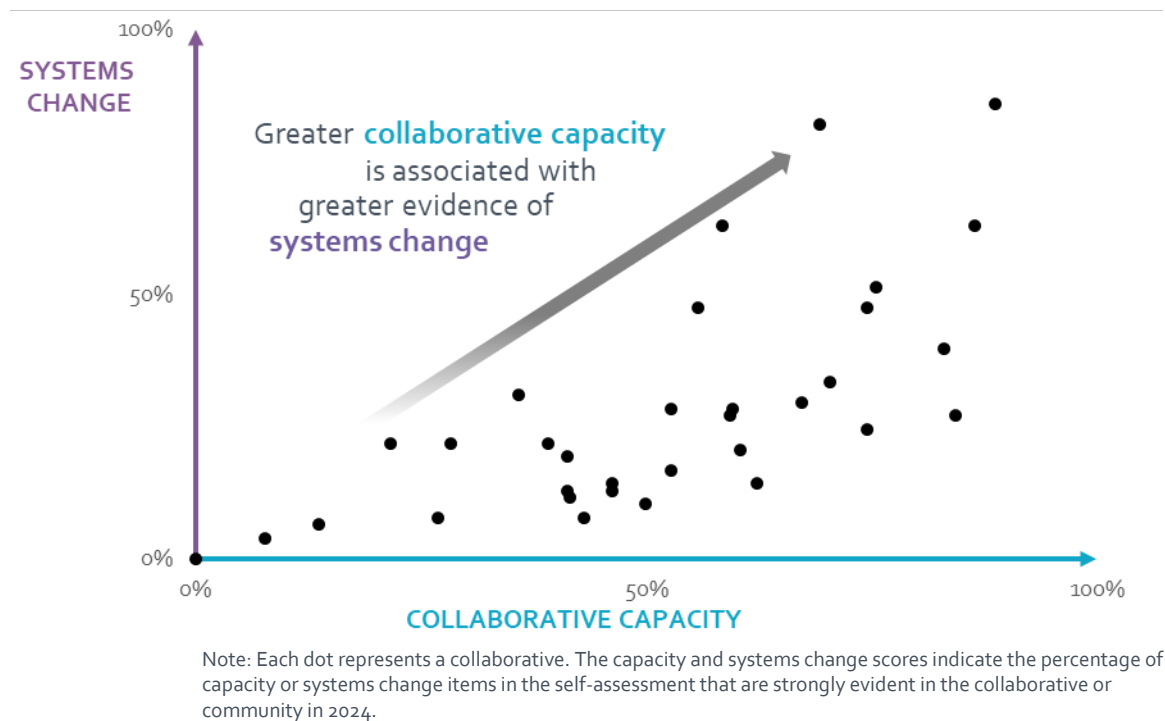
## The Relationship Between Collaborative Capacity and Systems Change in 2024

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)



Note: Each dot represents a collaborative. The capacity and systems change scores indicate the percentage of capacity or systems change items in the self-assessment that are strongly evident in the collaborative or community in 2024.
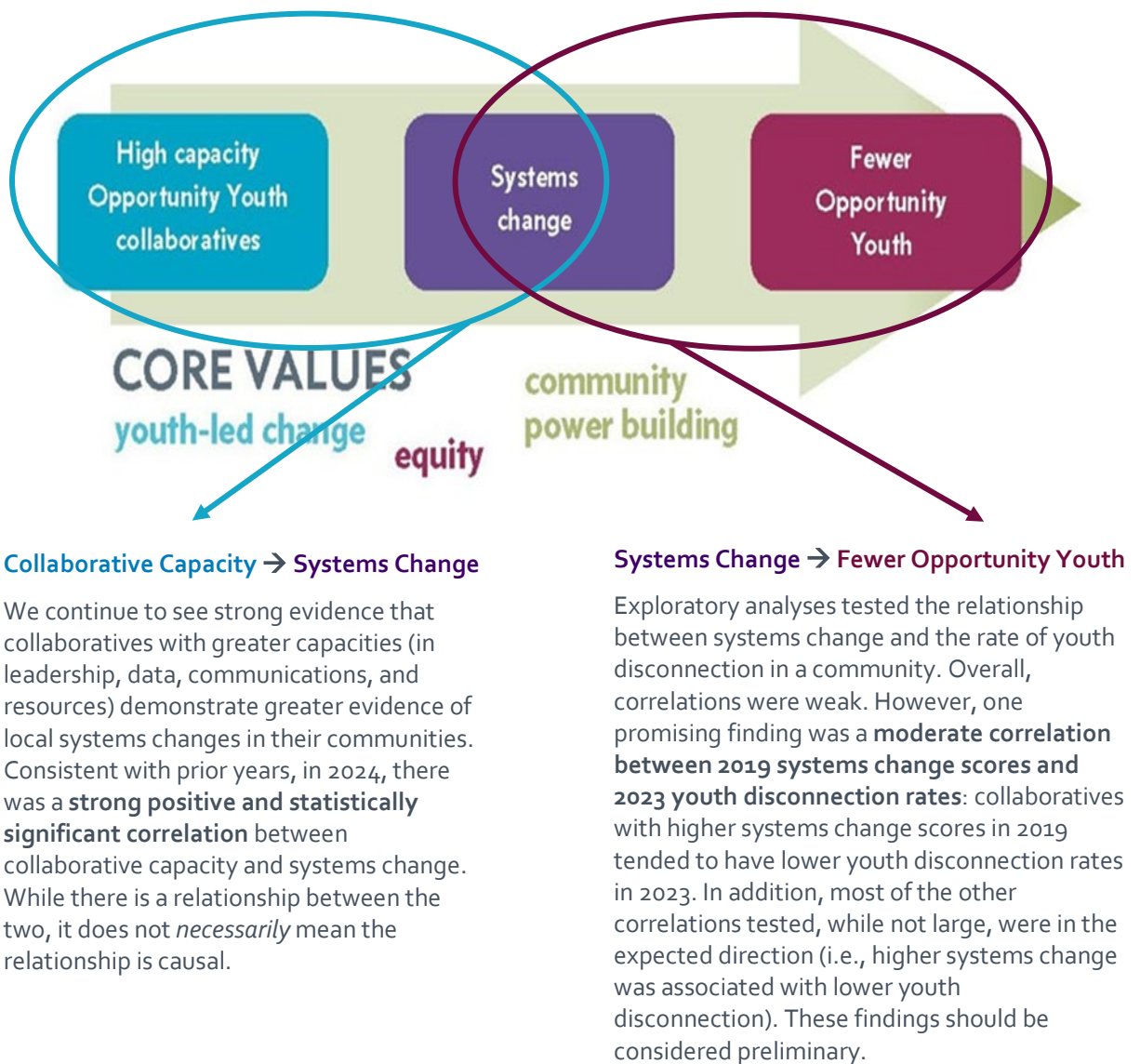
# Conclusion: Evidence to Support the OYF Theory of Change

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



### Collaborative Capacity → Systems Change

We continue to see strong evidence that collaboratives with greater capacities (in leadership, data, communications, and resources) demonstrate greater evidence of local systems changes in their communities. Consistent with prior years, in 2024, there was a **strong positive and statistically significant correlation** between collaborative capacity and systems change. While there is a relationship between the two, it does not *necessarily* mean the relationship is causal.

### Systems Change → Fewer Opportunity Youth

Exploratory analyses tested the relationship between systems change and the rate of youth disconnection in a community. Overall, correlations were weak. However, one promising finding was a **moderate correlation between 2019 systems change scores and 2023 youth disconnection rates**: collaboratives with higher systems change scores in 2019 tended to have lower youth disconnection rates in 2023. In addition, most of the other correlations tested, while not large, were in the expected direction (i.e., higher systems change was associated with lower youth disconnection). These findings should be considered preliminary.

# 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 improving and transforming 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 flawed 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 42 community-based collaboratives[6] that make up the OYF network (Figure 1) to change the institutions, policies, narratives, and systems that fail our nation's most vulnerable young people.

**FIGURE 1.** MAP OF THE OYF NETWORK IN 2024



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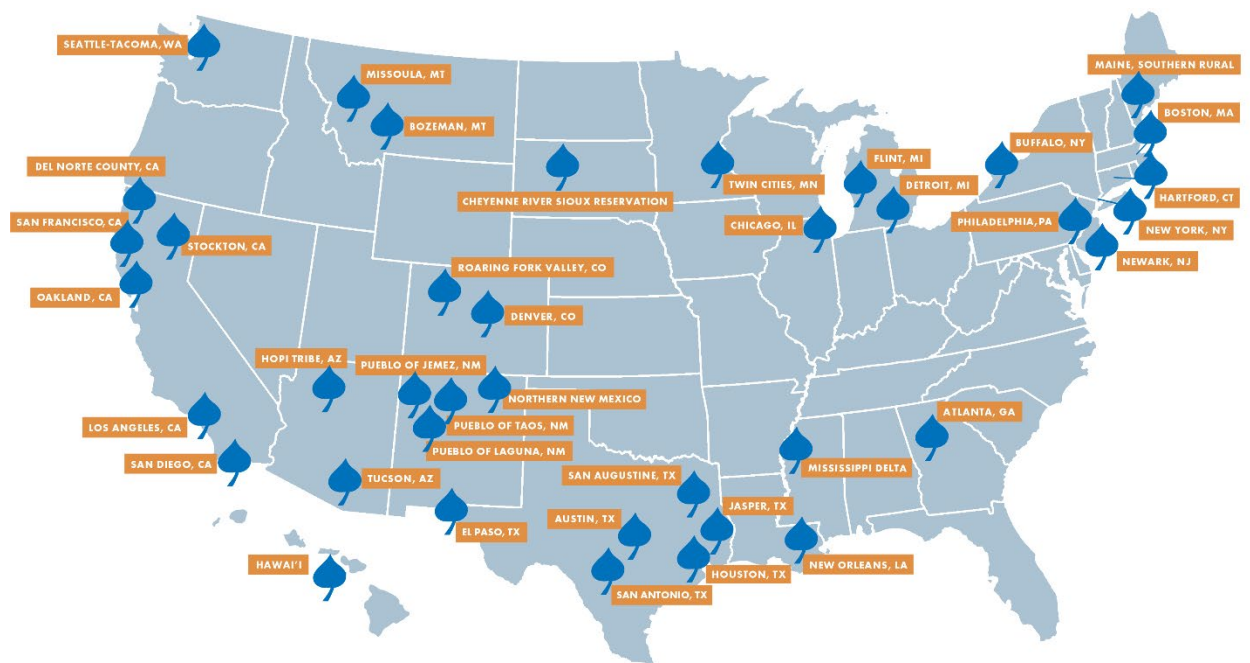
[6] The map displays 42 collaboratives in the OYF network in 2024 (New York City has four collaboratives). Of these, 36 collaboratives (86%) completed the 2024 self-assessment.

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

Since OYF's inception, place-based cross-sector partnerships have used a collaborative approach[7] to connect or re-connect opportunity youth to education and career pathways. Underlying these strategies is the belief that disconnected and inadequate systems create barriers to education and career opportunities for young people. 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 (Figure 2).

**FIGURE 2.** OYF THEORY OF CHANGE FOR PLACE-BASED COLLABORATIVES
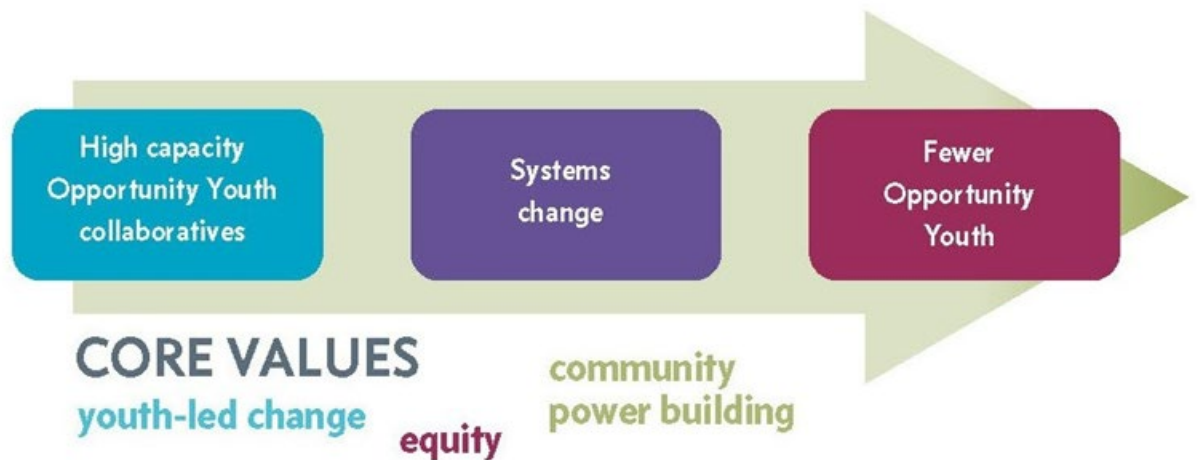


The OYF evaluation focused on, and measured, the three interrelated elements central to the OYF theory of change, along with a set of embedded core values that guide the work.

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"[8] – in this case, the disconnected pathways and inequitable conditions that prevent young people from achieving education and employment outcomes.

3. **Fewer opportunity youth**: The goal of OYF is to reduce youth disconnection from education and work. Over the next ten years, OYF's goal is to reduce the incidence of youth disconnection by 50 percent in OYF communities, resulting in 500,000 fewer opportunity youth by 2033.[9]

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

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[7] Collaboratives vary in their structures and approaches with some taking a collective impact approach (https://collectiveimpactforum.org/what-is-collective-impact/). As the network has grown, the approaches implemented have become more varied. See Mapping the Diversity of OYF Collaboratives: A Guide to Understanding the OYF Network for a study that explored OYF collaborative identity and approaches.

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

[9] Forum for Community Solutions, Opportunity Youth Forum, https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/opportunity-youth-forum/

## Assessing the Elements of the Theory of Change

We drew findings in this report from two sources: an analysis of the 2023 American Community Survey data to report on the OYF Common Measures and the 2024 annual OYF self-assessment. We also looked at previous years' data to examine trends over time.

The Common Measures[10] use American Community Survey (ACS) data to **calculate the percent and number of opportunity youth** in each OYF community, and have been calculated in 2017, 2019, 2021, 2022, and 2023. The Common Measures are population-level rates – rates of disconnection in a defined community that can be tracked over time and disaggregated by demographic characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, and age to understand disparities across different groups. The OY disconnection rate is one way to look at progress towards the goal of OYF – reducing the number of opportunity youth.

The self-assessment has been administered annually in each collaborative since 2019 and focuses on collaborative capacity and systems change. **Collaborative capacity** is assessed across four areas: 1) *leadership, planning, and convening power*; 2) *data and learning*; 3) *raising awareness and strategic communications*; and 4) *resources for the collaborative*. Seven types of **systems change** in local communities are assessed: 1) *programmatic change*; 2) *organizational change*; 3) *public policy change*; 4) *funding changes*; 5) *data*; 6) *narrative change*; and 7) *pathway improvements*. **Core values** of *equity*, *youth-led change*, and *community power* are embedded across the different capacities and systems changes.

## Structure of the Report

In this report, we describe 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. We start with the landscape of youth disconnection across the OYF network in 2023 and over the period from 2017 to 2023, exploring how changes in systems in OYF communities might be associated with youth disconnection. We then detail findings on collaborative capacity and systems change in a snapshot of 2024 and in trends from 2019 to 2024 and examine the relationship between them to better understand the evidence behind the OYF theory of change. Finally, we share findings on the three core values that undergird OYF's work with young people and communities.

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[10] Forum for Community Solutions, OYF Common Measures, https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/oyf-common-measures/

# 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) are 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*.
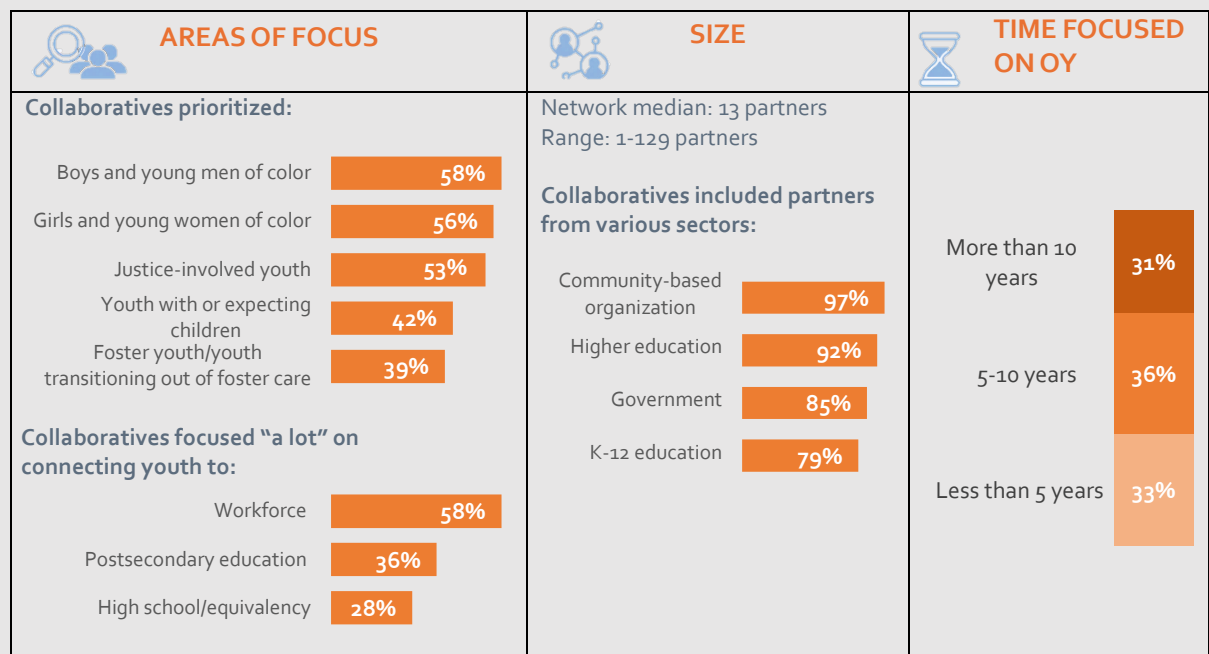
# About the OYF Network

Since its launch in 2012, the OYF network has grown significantly. In 2024, 42 collaboratives were part of the OYF network, double the number of collaboratives when the network formed. While partners involved in the OYF network share a common vision, the communities in which they operate, the collaboratives leading this work and the backbone organizations coordinating these efforts vary greatly.[11] Additional descriptive information is in Appendix B-D.

## COLLABORATIVE CHARACTERISTICS

In the OYF network, cross-sector collaboratives work to connect youth to education and employment opportunities. Collaboratives vary in their approach, experience working with opportunity youth, size, and areas of focus. Collaboratives were asked about the intended scale and reach of their collaboratives – if they were looking to make "comprehensive change" by aiming to improve outcomes for all youth or if they were more narrowly focused on improving youth outcomes in a specific sector or focused on a specific project or program. Almost three-quarters (72%) identified their collaborative as seeking comprehensive change. Three collaboratives described themselves as a "joint program"[12] and seven as seeking changes within a sector. Key collaborative characteristics are presented in Figure 3.

**FIGURE 3. COLLABORATIVE CHARACTERISTICS SNAPSHOT (2024)**

### AREAS OF FOCUS

Collaboratives prioritized:

| | |
|---|---|
| Boys and young men of color | 58% |
| Girls and young women of color | 56% |
| Justice-involved youth | 53% |
| Youth with or expecting children | 42% |
| Foster youth/youth transitioning out of foster care | 39% |

Collaboratives focused "a lot" on connecting youth to:

| | |
|---|---|
| Workforce | 58% |
| Postsecondary education | 36% |
| High school/equivalency | 28% |

### SIZE

Network median: 13 partners
Range: 1-129 partners

Collaboratives included partners from various sectors:

| | |
|---|---|
| Community-based organization | 97% |
| Higher education | 92% |
| Government | 85% |
| K-12 education | 79% |

### TIME FOCUSED ON OY

| | |
|---|---|
| More than 10 years | 31% |
| 5-10 years | 36% |
| Less than 5 years | 33% |

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[11] We explored this diversity more in-depth in a qualitative study of 12 OYF collaboratives in 2024. We identified key identity characteristics that influence how collaboratives approach their work with OY, including work with partners, youth engagement, and how they address root causes of disconnection. See https://www.equalmeasure.org/oyf-qualitative-brief/.

[12] Collaboratives that identified as joint programs did not complete the systems change questions on the self-assessment since this was not the kind of change they were seeking to make.

## COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS

Communities served by OYF collaboratives span the United States, across both urban and rural regions, and collaboratives tailor their strategies for reconnecting opportunity youth to their local context. In 2024, 36 percent of collaboratives were located solely in urban areas and 17 percent were located in rural areas. Forty-seven percent were serving some combination of urban, rural, and suburban areas.

## BACKBONE CHARACTERISTICS

The backbone organization is the lead organization coordinating the work of each OYF collaborative. Three-quarters (75%) of backbone organizations' opportunity youth work in 2024 happened as part of a broader initiative such as part of cradle-to-career initiatives or workforce-focused initiatives, while a quarter focused only on opportunity youth (25%). A third of backbone organizations (33%) were community-based organizations, 31 percent were intermediaries, and 11 percent were educational institutions (Figure 4).

**FIGURE 4. BACKBONE ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS SNAPSHOT (2024)**

| TYPES OF ORGANIZATIONS | BUDGET | STAFF | TIME FOCUSED ON OY |
|---|---|---|---|
| Community-based organization **33%**<br>Intermediary **31%**<br>Education institution **11%** | **BACKBONE ORGANIZATION BUDGET:**<br><br>Network median: $3.5M<br><br>Range: $0 to $246M<br><br>**BUDGET DEDICATED TO OY:**<br><br>Network median: $1.1M<br><br>Range: $0 to $5.9M | **BACKBONE ORGANIZATION STAFFING**<br><br>Network median: 21.5 FTEs<br><br>Range: 0 to 450 FTEs<br><br>**STAFFING DEDICATED TO OPPORTUNITY YOUTH**<br><br>Network median: 6.5 FTEs<br><br>Range: 0 to 30 FTEs | More than 10 years **36%**<br>5-10 years **28%**<br>Less than 5 years **36%** |

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

The goal of the Opportunity Youth Forum is to connect or re-connect young people to education or work opportunities, thereby reducing youth disconnection. The OYF theory of change posits that improving 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.
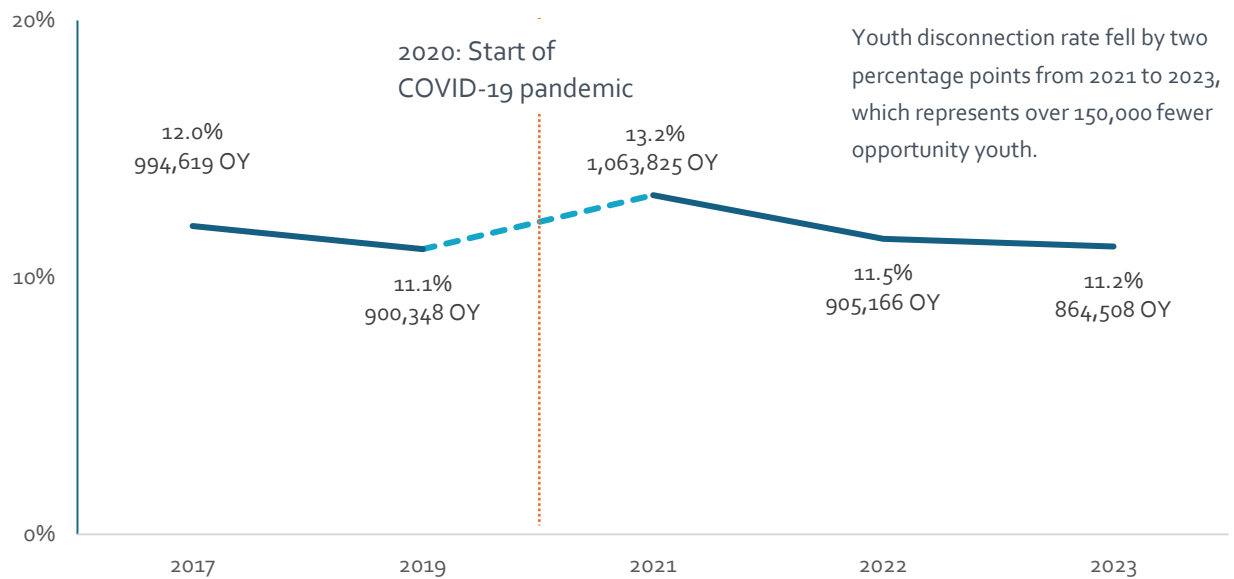
The Common Measures are intended to track and illuminate trends in youth disconnection over time and provide OYF communities with valuable community-level data to better understand opportunity youth in their communities. In 2023 (the most recent year of available ACS data), the percent of opportunity youth in the network was 11.2 percent, representing **over 864,000 opportunity youth in OYF communities**. In other words, in all OYF communities put together, about 11 percent of young people (16-24 years old) were not connected to school or work. Rates varied widely across communities; for example, only 2.4 percent of young people were disconnected in Boston in 2023 compared to 32.8 percent on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation.

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. **The disconnection rate has nearly returned to pre-pandemic levels, falling two percentage points between 2021 and 2023 in OYF communities.** (Figure 5).[13]

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[13] This pattern is similar to national trends. Measure of America reported that after reaching a historic low in 2019 (10.7%), the national youth disconnection rate spiked in 2020 and remained high in 2021 at 12.1%, returning to 10.9% in 2022. Measure of America, Broad Recovery, Persistent Inequity: Youth Disconnection in America, https://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/BroadRecoveryPersistentInequity.pdf

Source: American Community Survey Data[14]

## Analysis of Systems Change and Youth Outcomes

Based on the theory of change, we would expect OYF communities with *greater* success in changing local systems to have *lower* youth disconnection rates over the long term, since the population-level impacts of changing systems may take time to appear. We conducted exploratory analyses using data collected over six years to assess the relationship between systems change scores (as measured on the self-assessment from 2019 to 2024) and community disconnection rates (using ACS data in 2017, 2019, 2021, 2022, and 2023). We conducted correlational analyses between systems change scores at one point in time and disconnection rates at a later point in time, as well as changes in systems change scores and changes in disconnection rates over time.

There are limitations to keep in mind regarding this correlational analysis. An association between systems change and youth disconnection does not necessarily mean the relationship is *causal*. We know there are many factors that can affect youth disconnection rates in a community including the local labor market and job opportunities, accessibility of training and education, poverty, structural racism, geography, and other factors. While widespread changes to multiple local systems to better serve young people are likely to reduce youth disconnection, positive changes could be counteracted by other changes and forces in the community.

Rural and tribal communities were excluded from our exploratory analyses because the geographic areas in the ACS do not align well with the geographic areas where these collaboratives are operating. The smallest rural and tribal geographic areas and populations sampled in the ACS are often much larger than the geographic areas where collaboratives operate and the populations they serve. This is a challenge with using large national data sets to understand smaller and more rural areas and one FCS works to mitigate through data collection by local communities.

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[14] 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.

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

Overall, correlations or associations between systems change scores and community youth disconnection rates were weak. One promising finding, however, was a moderate correlation 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** (Figure 6). In addition, most of the other correlations we tested between systems change in one year and youth disconnection in another year, while not large, were in the expected direction (i.e., *higher* systems change was associated with *lower* youth disconnection).

**FIGURE 6**. COLLABORATIVES WITH HIGHER SYSTEMS CHANGE SCORES IN 2019 TENDED TO HAVE LOWER YOUTH DISCONNECTION RATES IN 2023
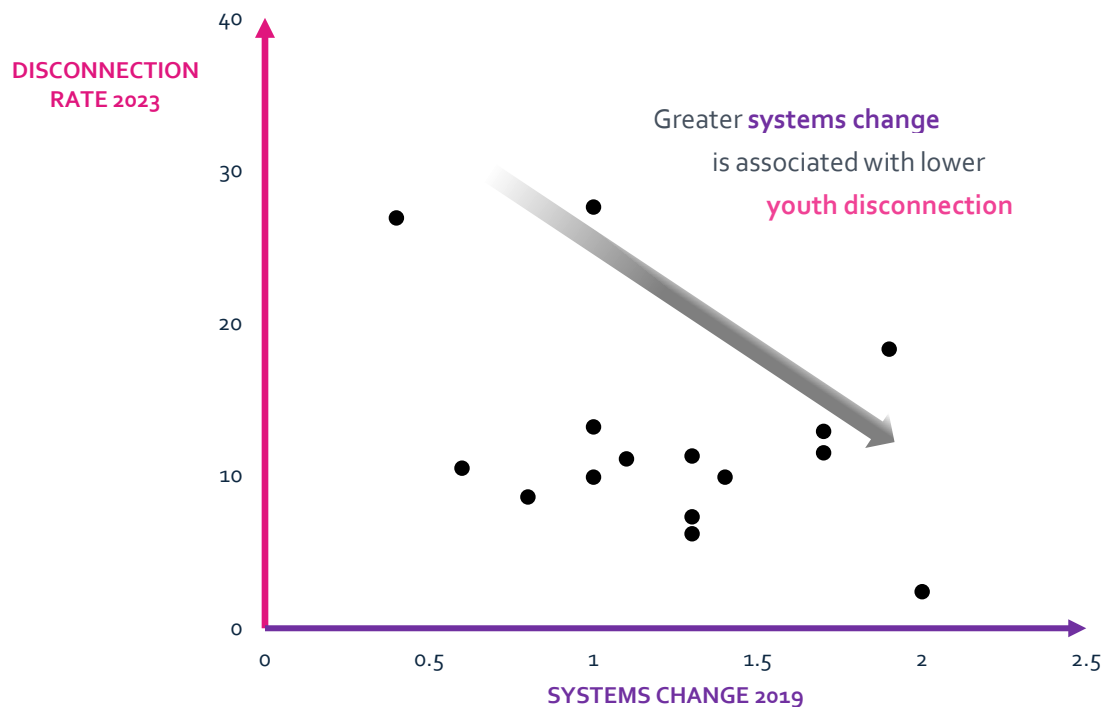


Note: Each dot (n=15) represents a collaborative. The systems change score (x-axis) is the mean score in 2019; the disconnection rate is the percent of youth 16-24 not in school and not working in the OYF community in 2023. Correlation: r=-0.39, p=0.15.

**These findings should be considered preliminary.** We know changing systems to better serve young people can take a long time (at least a decade[15]); systems have often been operating in a particular way for decades and changing the status quo is a slow and sometimes piecemeal process. As we will see in the assessment data (see next section), systems change scores are dynamic from year to year. If changing systems takes time, then it will also take time to see the impact of those changes, especially at a community or population level. Therefore, we likely need a greater length of time between changing systems and observing community impacts in the data. Even with a longer time between systems change and community impact, we need to account for other factors in the community that could also be affecting youth disconnection.

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[15] "The reality is that systems change is a multi-decade effort." The Bridgespan Group, March 2023, Field Catalyst Origin Stories: Lessons for Systems-Change Leaders, https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/field-catalyst-lessons-for-systems-change-leaders

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, residents, and young people to bring about **changes in local systems** that impact opportunity youth. The state of capacity and systems change in OYF communities in 2024, and over the past six years, is described in the next section.
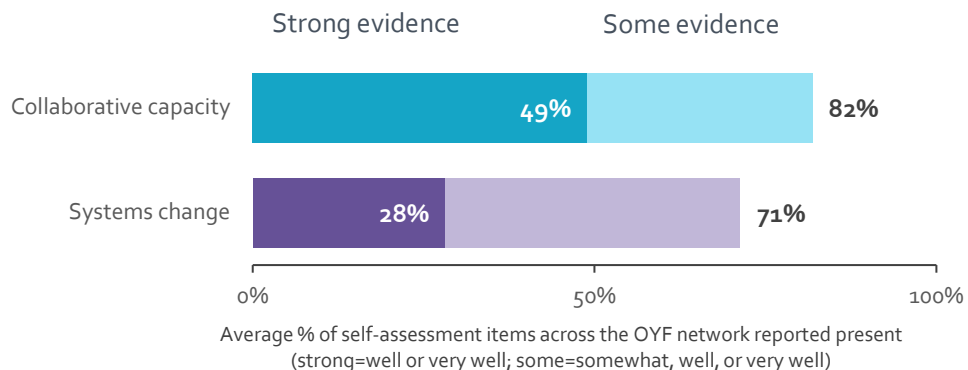
# COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY
## 2024 Snapshot: Collaborative Capacity Across the OYF Network

On average, collaboratives rated almost half (49%) of the capacity items in the assessment[16] (which includes questions on *leadership, planning, and convening power; data and learning; raising awareness and strategic communications;* and *resources for the collaborative*) as strongly evident in 2024, with 82 percent of capacity items at least somewhat evident in collaboratives across the network (Figure 7).[17] Capacity was stronger for collaboratives and backbones with more years of experience doing OY work, compared to collaboratives and backbones with fewer years of experience.[18] Experience working collaboratively on OY issues is helpful in building cross-sector relationships, leveraging connections, and building support for OY work in the community.

The overall collaborative capacity score includes four types of capacities. Collaboratives, especially newer ones, may be focused on building a particular type of capacity (more on the types below) and thus may not show evidence of *all* capacities. This can impact the overall network score in a given year.

**FIGURE 7.** OVER 80 PERCENT OF CAPACITY ITEMS AND 70 PERCENT OF SYSTEMS CHANGE ITEMS ARE AT LEAST SOMEWHAT PRESENT IN OYF COMMUNITIES IN 2024



Strong evidence    Some evidence

Collaborative capacity    49%    82%

Systems change    28%    71%

0%    50%    100%

Average % of self-assessment items across the OYF network reported present
(strong=well or very well; some=somewhat, well, or very well)

*Leadership, planning, and convening power* and *data and learning* were the two strongest capacities in 2024 with over half of the items strongly evident in collaboratives (54% for each, see Figure 8). The pattern among the four types of capacities has been consistent over the last six years, indicating collaborative structures and processes and data capacities, especially a learning and improvement

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[16] The 2024 self-assessment includes 55 survey items (or questions) about collaborative capacity across four areas.
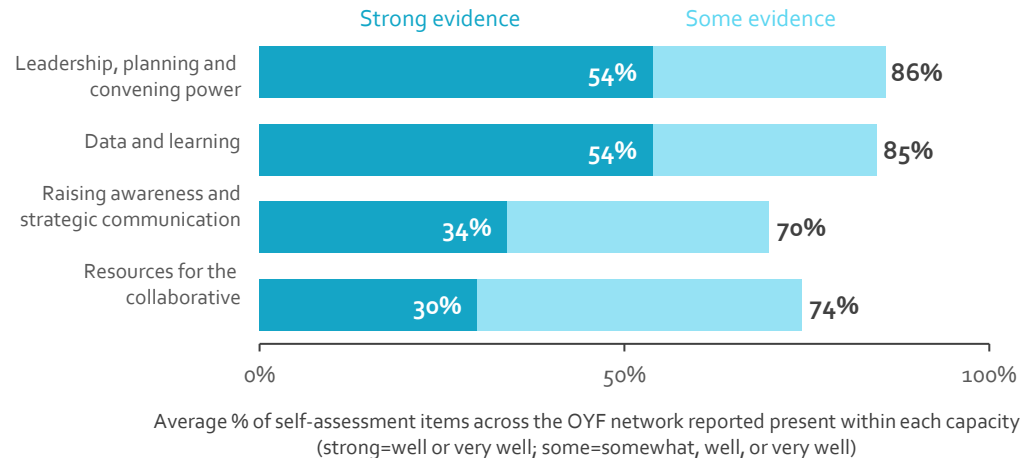[17] See Appendix for more details on methodology and calculations of percentage of indicators meeting a threshold (strong or some level).
[18] ANOVA p<.10

orientation, may be easier for collaboratives to build than external communication strategies and partner resources for the collaborative and backbone.
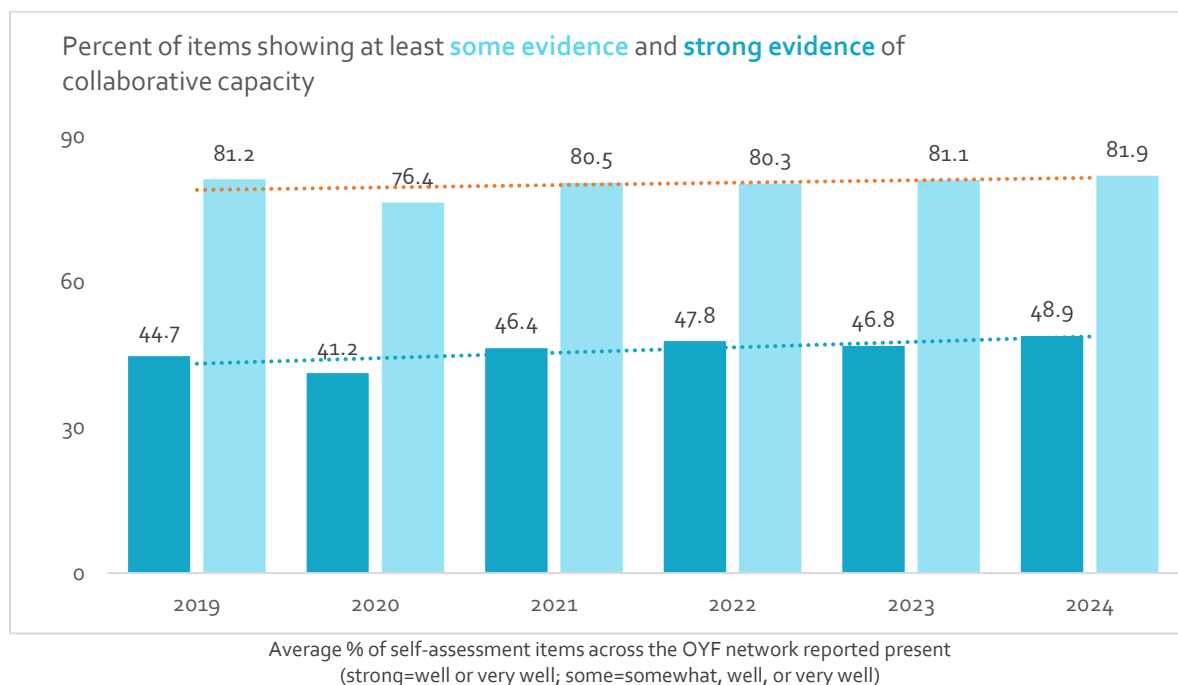
**FIGURE 8.** LEADERSHIP AND DATA WERE THE STRONGEST COLLABORATIVE CAPACITIES IN THE OYF NETWORK IN 2024



Strong evidence          Some evidence

| Leadership, planning and convening power | **54%** | **86%** |
| Data and learning | **54%** | **85%** |
| Raising awareness and strategic communication | **34%** | **70%** |
| Resources for the collaborative | **30%** | **74%** |

Average % of self-assessment items across the OYF network reported present within each capacity
(strong=well or very well; some=somewhat, well, or very well)

## OYF Network Trends Over Time, 2019-2024

Because the same assessment has been implemented over the last six years (2019-2024), we can look at changes across the network and in individual collaboratives to see if collaborative capacity is improving and which types of capacities are improving. A lack of improvement in certain areas may indicate a need for technical assistance or further support to build up that capacity. It can also take time for new collaboratives to develop and strengthen the four capacities.

**FIGURE 9.** COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY IN THE OYF NETWORK WAS AT A SIX-YEAR HIGH



Percent of items showing at least **some evidence** and **strong evidence** of collaborative capacity

| Year | Strong evidence | Some evidence |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 2019 | 44.7 | 81.2 |
| 2020 | 41.2 | 76.4 |
| 2021 | 46.4 | 80.5 |
| 2022 | 47.8 | 80.3 |
| 2023 | 46.8 | 81.1 |
| 2024 | 48.9 | 81.9 |

Average % of self-assessment items across the OYF network reported present
(strong=well or very well; some=somewhat, well, or very well)

Across the OYF network, the following changes were found:

➢ Overall, **network collaborative capacity is at its highest level in six years.**[19] From 2019 to 2024, scores increased by over four percentage points at the *strong* evidence level (Figure 9). Almost half of the 55 items measuring collaborative capacity were strongly present across the network. The network as a whole has improved in the foundational elements needed to change local systems to better serve opportunity youth.[20]

➢ Among the four types of capacities, there were many ups and downs over the past six years in the network (Figures 10 & 11). Some positive signs include:[21]

  ○ **Three of the four capacities improved over the last year (2023 to 2024), as well as over the longest time span, 2019 to 2024** (*strong* level; Figure 11)**.** In the last year, all capacities improved except for leadership, planning, and convening power (which fell by a percentage point). Over the longer time span (2019 to 2024), all capacities improved except for strategic communications (which was at its highest level in 2019).

  ○ **Capacity for *data and learning* is at its highest level in six years** (Figures 10 and 11).[22] A majority of data and learning assessment items, 54 percent, were reported *strongly* in place across the network and 85 percent were at least *somewhat* in place. This capacity improved by over six percentage points over the last year (2023 to 2024). Dedicated resources and technical assistance from FCS have likely contributed to these improvements, especially in data use and promoting a learning culture (see sidebar).

  ○ While it was the least present capacity, ***resources for the collaborative*** grew each year from 2019 to 2022; dipped slightly in 2023 and then increased again in 2024. Its scores in 2024 were over 10 percentage points higher than scores in 2019 (*strong* level; Figure 11).[23] The positive trend indicates greater financial and in-kind support from partners for backbones and collaboratives, perhaps indicating growing community partner buy-in to collaborative approaches for reconnecting youth.

> **Strongest *data and learning* items in 2024**
>
> *Percent of collaboratives responding that this describes them well or very well:*
>
> 78% —The collaborative used data to understand youth and their needs.
>
> 72%— The collaborative convened learning opportunities for partners and stakeholders.
>
> 67%— The collaborative regularly used data to inform its strategies and make decisions.
>
> 67% — The collaborative used data to communicate a vision for OY.

➢ Capacity challenges or where there might be a need for support include:

  ○ *Raising awareness and strategic communications* and *resources for the collaborative* continue to lag behind the other two collaborative capacities (*leadership, planning, and convening power* and *data and learning*). Only about a third or fewer items, on average, under *communications* and

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[19] Collaborative capacity scores are at highest levels in six years at both the *strong* evidence level and *some* evidence level.

[20] In addition to calculating the percent of indicators meeting a threshold (see Appendix for more details on these calculations), we calculated mean scores on scaled items (responses: 0-3). Mean collaborative capacity scores show little change over time; mean scores were the same in every year except for a slight drop in 2020.

[21] The discussion of trends in capacities primarily focuses on data at the "strong evidence" level (describes us well or very well). We note interesting findings at the "some evidence" level where appropriate (describes us somewhat, well, or very well). See Appendix for more details on methodology.

[22] Data and learning capacity scores are at highest levels in six years at both the strong evidence level and some evidence level.

[23] Note there are only four self-assessment questions/items for *resources for the collaborative*; therefore, changes in one or more items will produce relatively larger changes in this capacity compared to other capacities that have more questions/items.

*resources* were reported as strongly in place in 2024, 20 percentage points lower than *leadership* and *data* (Figure 8). Awareness and communication include sharing public reports, getting local media attention on OY-related issues, and strategic storytelling, particularly by young people. FCS may want to explore opportunities for technical assistance in these areas, especially in the current political and social context where strategic communications are even more critical.

**FIGURE 10.** OYF NETWORK CAPACITIES SHOWING AT LEAST SOME EVIDENCE OVER TIME

Percent of items across the OYF Network
showing at least **some evidence**



Leadership, planning and convening power
Data and learning

Resources for the collaborative
Raising awareness and strategic communication
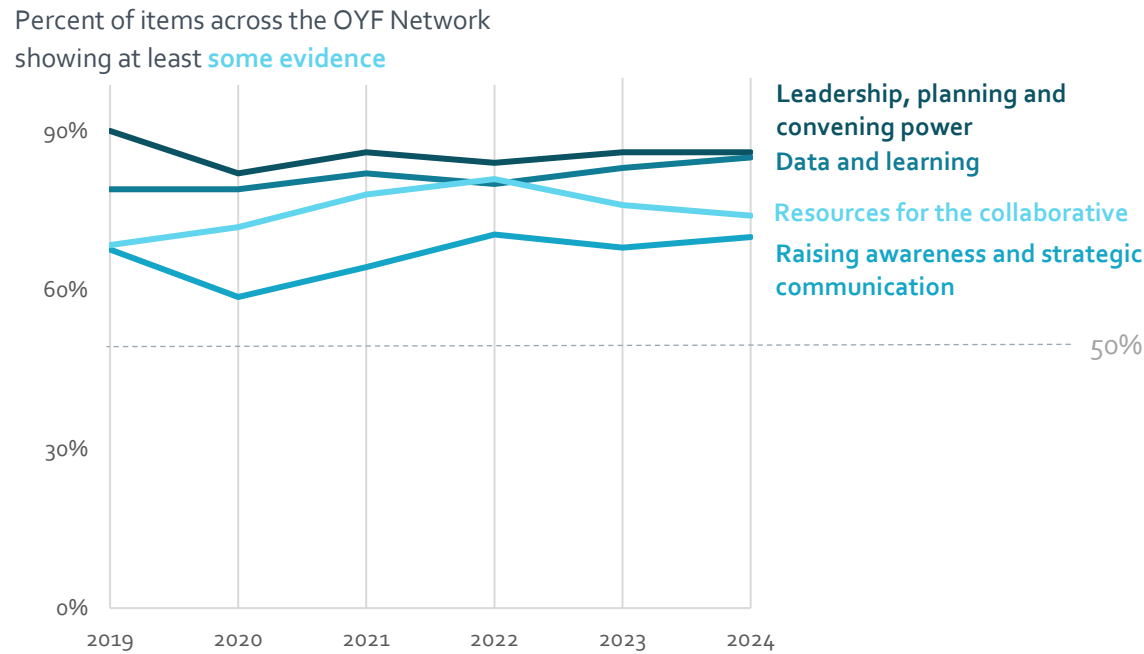
**FIGURE 11.** OYF NETWORK CAPACITIES SHOWING STRONG EVIDENCE OVER TIME

Percent of items across the OYF Network
showing **strong evidence**



Leadership, planning and convening power
Data and learning

Raising awareness and strategic communication
Resources for the collaborative
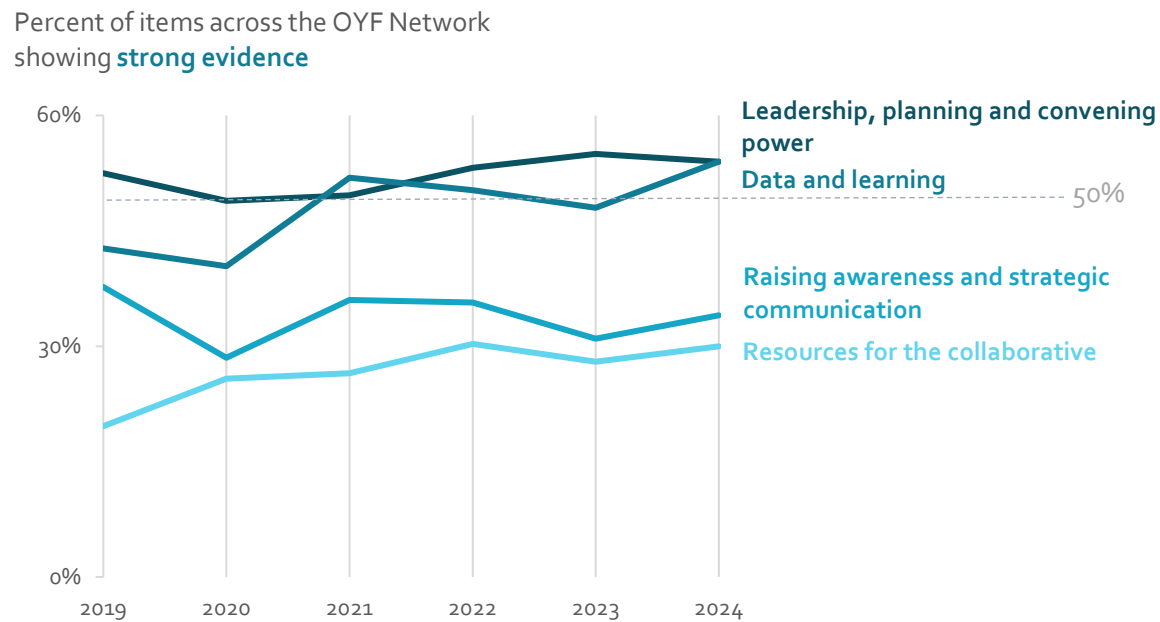
## OYF Collaboratives' Trends Over Time, 2019-2024

Looking at trends in the OYF network is complicated by its changing composition – new collaboratives join and others leave the network each year or undergo significant changes and thus do not participate in the annual self-assessment. Comparing network findings year to year is often not an "apples to apples" comparison.[24]

Another way to look at changes in collaborative capacity and avoid the problems of looking at the network as a whole, is to look at how *individual* collaboratives have changed over time.

Over the last year (2023 to 2024):

➢ **Over half of collaboratives (55% or 18 of 33 collaboratives) improved their collaborative capacity from 2023 to 2024.** Looking at the four types of capacities, the capacities where the largest number of collaboratives showed improvements were *data and learning* (42% of collaboratives improved) and *leadership, planning, and convening power* (39% of collaboratives improved).

➢ Only 21 percent of collaboratives (seven of 33) improved *resources for the collaborative* from 2023 to 2024.

Over the last six years (2019 to 2024):

➢ **Almost two-thirds of collaboratives** (with six years of assessment data) **improved their collaborative capacity** from 2019 to 2024 (63% or 12 out of 19 collaboratives).

➢ **Over half of collaboratives** (with six years of assessment data) **improved their *data and learning* capacity** from 2019 to 2024 (53% or 10 out of 19 collaboratives).

## Summary of Collaborative Capacity Findings

Most collaboratives are building and improving their capacities over time. *Leadership, planning, and convening power* and *data and learning* were the strongest capacities among the four in the network in 2024, consistent with prior years. This suggests that collaboratives have structures and processes in place, including those related to data, to work with cross-sector and systems partners to implement their opportunity youth agendas. Notably, overall collaborative capacity and *data and learning* (one type of capacity) are at their highest levels in six years. A majority of collaboratives that have been a part of the network throughout this time period have reported improvements in overall capacity and capacities related to *data and learning*. The latter is likely due to an intentional focus by FCS on data technical assistance and capacity building for collaboratives.

*Raising awareness and strategic communications* and *resources for the collaborative* continue to lag behind leadership and data capacities. External communications such as sharing goals and progress with the public and key decision-makers is important for movement building as well as for systems changes such as mindset and narrative change, and garnering support for policy and funding changes for opportunity youth.

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[24] However, from 2023 to 2024 the network remained mostly the same, consisting of largely the same collaboratives in both years (39 collaboratives completed the assessment in 2023 and 36 in 2024; three sites only completed the 2023 assessment, and three other sites only completed the 2024 assessment).

Collaborative capacity in individual collaboratives may go up and down year-to-year due to factors such as changes in collaborative or cross-sector partner leadership, other staff changes, and fluctuations in funding. These changes can affect building and maintaining cross-partner relationships, momentum on key initiatives or projects, and the ability to invest in capacities such as data infrastructure.

# SYSTEMS CHANGE
## 2024 Snapshot: Systems Change Across the OYF Network

On average, collaboratives rated over a quarter (28%) of the systems change items in the assessment[25] as strongly present in their collaboratives and communities in 2024, with over two-thirds (71%) of the systems change items at least somewhat evident in communities across the network (Figure 7). Systems change was more evident in communities with more experienced collaboratives and backbone organizations; collaboratives and backbones with more years of experience with OY efforts had higher systems change scores than those with fewer years of experience.[26]

The overall systems change score combines all seven types of systems changes that are asked about in the self-assessment. It is not an expectation that collaboratives work in *all* seven areas; collaboratives may choose to focus on a specific area, such as policy change or data, and therefore may see progress in those areas and not others. Or they may change their focus over time. This can impact the overall network score in a given year.

Collaboratives had **higher systems change scores in areas where they reported a greater focus of their work**. (See Figure 9 in the Appendix for findings on where collaboratives prioritized work on different systems changes.) For example, collaboratives that reported *pathway improvements* was a *major* focus of their work in 2024 reported 52 percent of *pathway* items strongly present in their communities versus 23 percent when *pathway improvements* was a *moderate* focus and zero to 16 percent when it was *not a focus at all* or a *minor focus*.[27] Prioritizing certain types of systems change may result in, as one would hope, more change in that area.

*Programmatic change,* such as launching new programs, improving design, and communicating across programs to meet the needs of opportunity youth, was the *most evident* systems change in local communities in 2024 (49% of items strongly present), followed by *pathway improvements* (28%), *policy change* (28%), *narrative change* (27%), and *organizational change* (27%) (Figure 12). *Funding changes and data use across systems* were the most challenging to influence, with less than a quarter of these items from the assessment reported as strongly evident in OYF communities in 2024.[28] [29]

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[25] The 2024 self-assessment includes 78 survey items (or questions) on systems changes across seven areas.
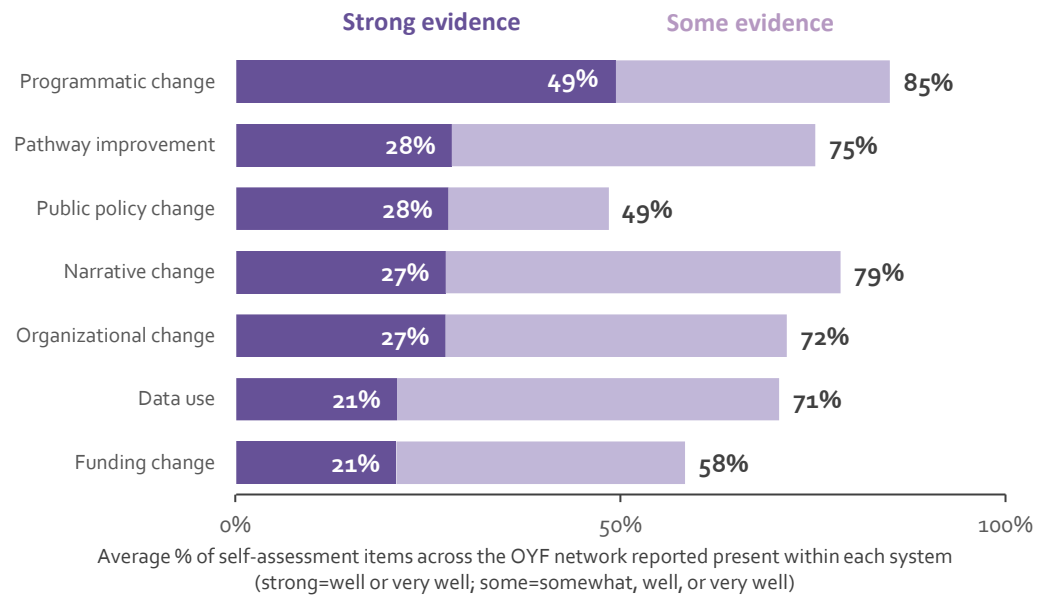
[26] ANOVA p<.10

[27] ANOVA, p<.01

[28] Established urban sites were more likely to report policy change, narrative change, and pathway improvements compared to other groups (new urban sites, rural sites, and tribal sites) (ANOVA, p<.10). In addition, backbone organizations with larger OY budgets reported more organizational changes and funding changes compared to backbones with smaller OY budgets (t-test, p<.10).

[29] In our qualitative study, we explored how collaboratives think about the root causes of youth disconnection and how they approached addressing root causes, from programmatic solutions to policy and practice changes, to changing mindsets and narratives. See Mapping the Diversity of OYF Collaboratives: A Guide to Understanding the OYF Network

**Strong evidence**  **Some evidence**

| | Strong evidence | Some evidence |
|---|---|---|
| Programmatic change | 49% | 85% |
| Pathway improvement | 28% | 75% |
| Public policy change | 28% | 49% |
| Narrative change | 27% | 79% |
| Organizational change | 27% | 72% |
| Data use | 21% | 71% |
| Funding change | 21% | 58% |

0%          50%          100%

Average % of self-assessment items across the OYF network reported present within each system
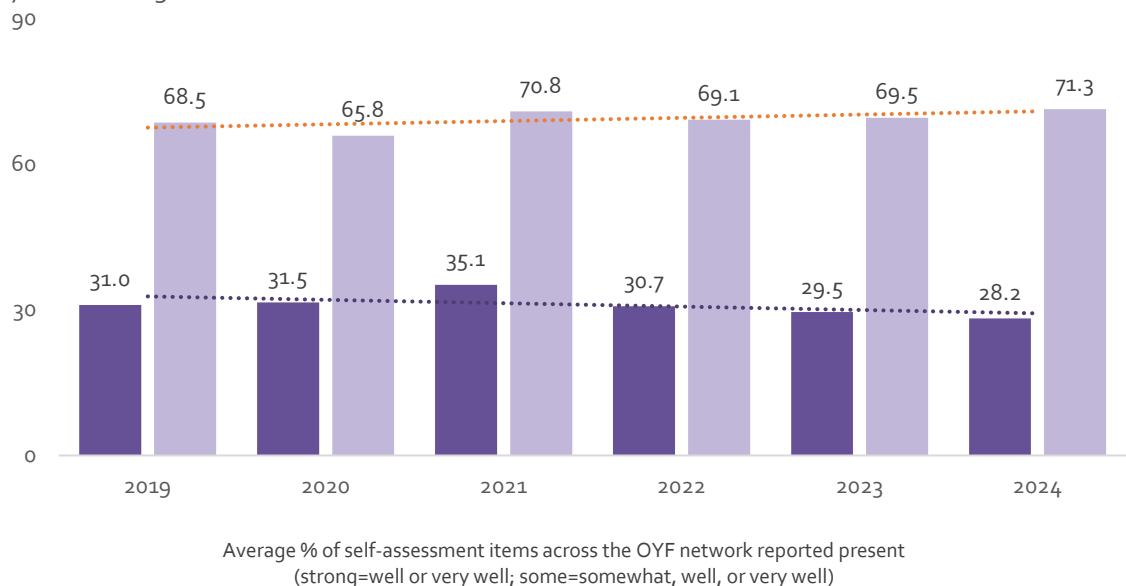(strong=well or very well; some=somewhat, well, or very well)

## OYF Network Trends Over Time, 2019-2024

As with collaborative capacity, because the same assessment has been implemented over the last six years (2019-2024), we can look at changes in the network and in individual collaboratives to see if systems are improving in local communities, and which types of systems change are most evident.

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

| | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Some evidence | 68.5 | 65.8 | 70.8 | 69.1 | 69.5 | 71.3 |
| Strong evidence | 31.0 | 31.5 | 35.1 | 30.7 | 29.5 | 28.2 |

Average % of self-assessment items across the OYF network reported present
(strong=well or very well; some=somewhat, well, or very well)

Across the OYF network the following systems changes were reported:

➢ Overall, **network systems change scores have been steady at the *strong* evidence level and slightly increasing at the at least *some* evidence level**. At the *strong* level, scores peaked in 2021 and have shown small decreases since then (Figure 13). However, at the at least *some* level, scores have increased since 2022 and are at the **highest levels in six years** – on average, 71% of systems change items from the assessment are at least somewhat evident in OYF communities.[30]

➢ Among the seven types of systems changes, there were many ups and downs in the network over the past six years (Figures 14 & 15). Some positive signs include:

   o *Public policy change* is at its highest level in six years: on average, 28 percent of policy items were *strongly present* in local communities in 2024 and about half of policy items (49%) were at least *somewhat present*. Policy scores increased by over eight percentage points from 2019 to 2024. Collaboratives reported strengths in proposing and supporting ***state level* policy changes** to benefit opportunity youth: in 2024, 36 percent of collaboratives *proposed* state policy changes and 36 percent *supported* passage of a state policy change.[31] Almost a third (30%) of collaboratives reported that new local public policies addressing OY issues and barriers were *implemented* by systems or government. (see "OYF Collaborative State and Local Policy Wins" on p. 21).

   o *Pathway improvements* **increased by over seven percentage points from 2023 to 2024,** making *pathway* changes the second most evident change after programmatic change. At the *some* evidence level, pathway improvements were at the highest levels in six years. In 2024, over a third of collaboratives (36%) reported **OY-related systems communicated with each other** well or very well. There was also a large increase from 2023 to 2024 in **co-location of services and organizations** from different systems; 30 percent of collaboratives reported this as a strength (up from 20% the previous year).[32]

➢ Challenges in changing systems include:

   o Four of the seven types of systems change (all except *programmatic*, *policy*, and *pathway changes*) decreased from 2023 to 2024.[33] Similarly, four of the seven systems changes are lower in 2023 than in 2019 (all except *policy*, *funding*, and *data*).

   o Many of the systems changes (five of seven) peaked in 2021 and have not returned to those levels. There could be many reasons for this including what changes the collaboratives were focused on, changing community context, the need for rapid response to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and others. (see 2024 Evaluation report for more on the accelerants and barriers to systems change[34])

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[30] Mean systems change scores have been the same in each year.

[31] Fort-two percent of collaboratives reported at least somewhat that they proposed state policy changes; and 48 percent of collaboratives reported that they at least somewhat supported passage of state policy changes.

[32] Ninety-one percent of collaboratives reported that OY-related systems communicate at least somewhat; and 73 percent of collaboratives reported co-location was happening at least somewhat.

[33] At the *some* evidence level, three of the seven systems changes decreased from 2023 to 2024; programmatic change, data, narrative change, and pathways increased.

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

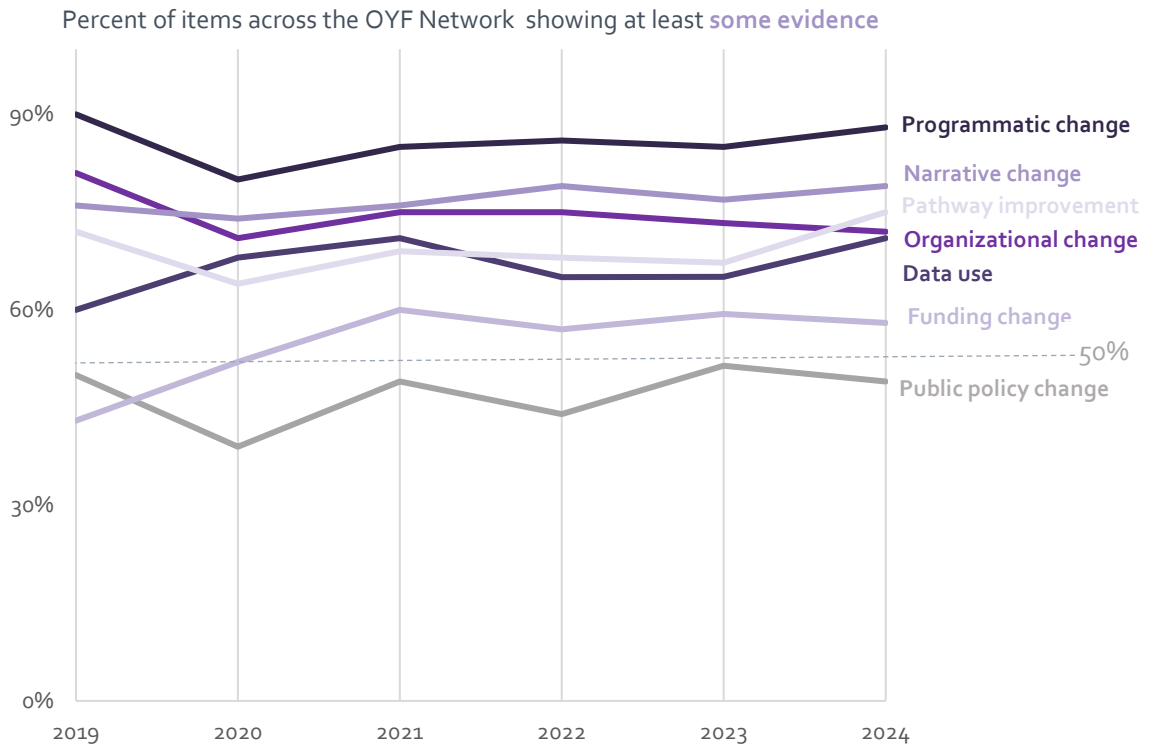**FIGURE 14.** AT LEAST SOME EVIDENCE OF SYSTEMS CHANGES IN OYF COMMUNITIES OVER TIME

Percent of items across the OYF Network showing at least *some evidence*

- Programmatic change
- Narrative change
- Pathway improvement
- Organizational change
- Data use
- Funding change
- 50%
- Public policy change



**FIGURE 15.** STRONG EVIDENCE OF SYSTEMS CHANGE IN OYF COMMUNITIES OVER TIME

Percent of items across the OYF Network showing **strong evidence**

- 50%
- Programmatic change
- Pathway improvement
- Public policy change
- Organizational change
- Narrative change
- Data use
- Funding change

## OYF Collaboratives' Trends Over Time, 2019-2024

Because the network composition changes year to year, it is important to assess change by looking at individual collaboratives. In our last two annual reports, we found that the year-to-year systems change journeys were dynamic, with most communities experiencing some variation of "ups and downs" (growth and declines in systems change scores) over time. We continue to see these trends when we add an additional year of data (Figure 16).

**FIGURE 16.** OYF COLLABORATIVES SYSTEMS CHANGE JOURNEYS, 2019-2024[35]

**Zigzag.** The vast majority of collaboratives (14 of 17, or 82%) showed growth and decline over the time period (2019-2024). For some, this looked like a zigzag pattern with yearly alternating growth and declines; for others, it was ups and downs followed by multiple years of growth or decline (or vice versa). Half of this group showed improvement in scores from 2019 to 2024. Over a third had only one year of declines in systems change scores over the time period (36%, or 5 of 14).

**U-shape.** Eighteen percent of collaboratives (two collaboratives) followed a "u-shape" pattern of declines followed by rebounds or periods of growth.

**Bell-shape.** One collaborative showed growth, followed by a decline and leveling out.

---

[35] Among collaboratives with 5-6 years of assessment data (n=17).

In addition, over the past year (2023 to 2024):
> **Over half (56%) of collaboratives (15 of 27) increased their systems change scores from 2023 to 2024.** [36]

Over the last six years (2019 to 2024):
> Over half of collaboratives (with five to six years of assessment data) reported **improved systems change in their communities from 2019 to 2024** at the *strong* evidence level (nine of 17 collaboratives, or 53%).

> **At least half of collaboratives improved in four of the seven types of systems change from 2019 to 2024** – programmatic change (63% of collaboratives improved), data use across systems (56% of collaboratives improved; see sidebar), and policy and funding changes (50% of collaboratives improved).

## Summary of Systems Change Findings

The trend data continues to show the dynamic nature of systems changes in local communities. However, the data also showed overall network scores at their highest level in six years (at the at least *some* evidence level), indicating some movement in signs of community change. Policy change was at its highest level in six years (strong evidence level) and pathways improved significantly from last year. Notably, most long-term collaboratives[37] reported increases in strong evidence of systems changes in their communities over the last six years.

**Wins in Data Use Across Systems**

**Greater Houston Opportunity Youth Collaborative** hosted presentations with local funders, systems leaders, and data experts to share local disconnection data produced by Measure of America.

In **Del Norte**, 22 partners including local health organizations, schools, tribes, and human services adopted the Unite Us referral platform which will enable tracking and disaggregation of youth data to improve services and resources for youth. **Pueblo of Taos** also implemented a new data collection system, Apricot, across multiple programs.

Collaboration between **Hartford Opportunity Youth Collaborative** and Hartford Public Schools has increased data sharing which has bolstered data-informed preventive work.

> *"Systems change work is fluid, often nonlinear, and long term. It is not always characterized by forward progress – sometimes ground will simply be held, or even lost. Since this work involves a dynamic system, it is hard to model what might happen in six months, let alone six years."*
>
> The Bridgespan Group, 2024, How Nonprofits and NGOs Can Measure progress Toward Systems Change, https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/how-nonprofits-and-ngos-can-measure-progress-toward-systems-change

## 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 through 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**

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[36] Mean systems change scores also show increases in overall systems change scores for more than half of collaboratives (52%) from 2023 to 2024. More than half of collaboratives also increased their pathways and programmatic change scores (59% and 58% of collaboratives, respectively).

[37] Collaboratives that have been part of the OYF network and completed annual assessments over the last 5-6 years

**to succeed**.[38] Figure 17 illustrates the relationship between each OYF community's collaborative capacity and evidence of systems change, as measured on the 2024 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 17.** COLLABORATIVES WITH HIGHER CAPACITY SCORES HAD HIGHER SYSTEMS CHANGE SCORES (2024)
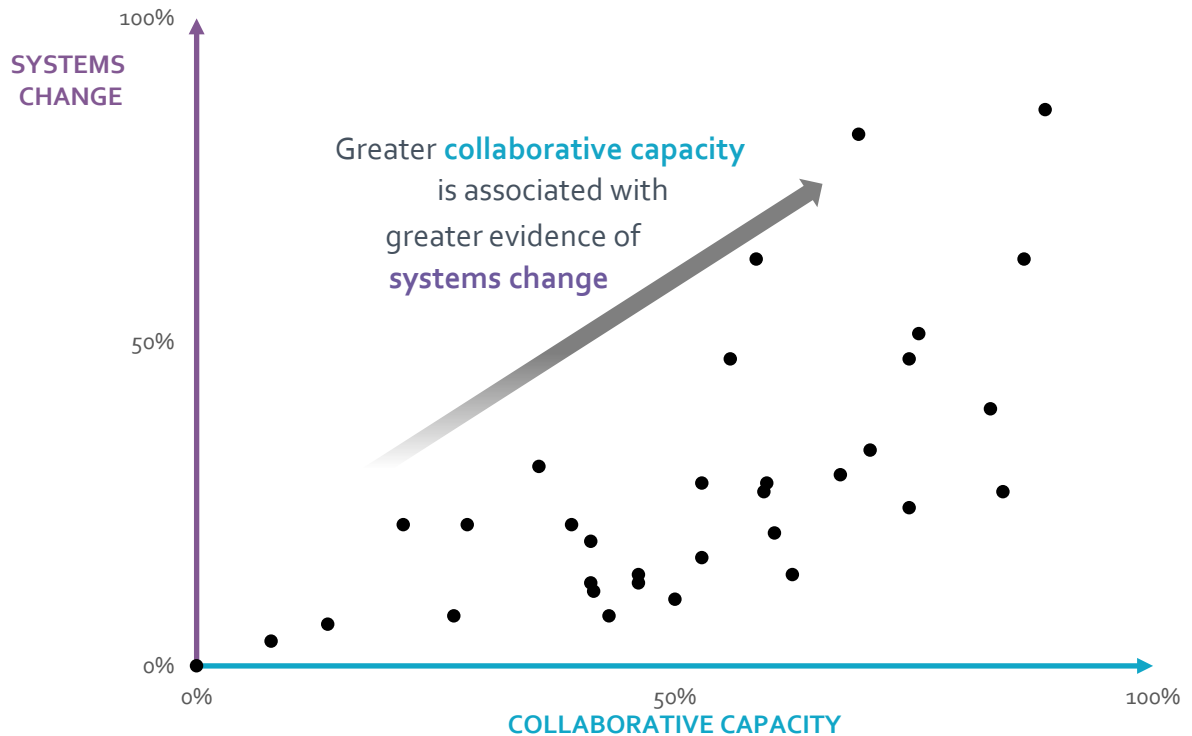


Note: Each dot represents a collaborative. The capacity and systems change scores indicate the percentage of capacity or systems change items in the self-assessment that are strongly evident in the collaborative or community in 2024.

# CORE VALUES
## 2024 Snapshot: Core Values Across the OYF Network

Overall, collaboratives rated 39 percent of the items in the assessment representing OYF core values – *equity*, *youth-led change*, and *community power*[39] [40] – as strongly present in their collaboratives and communities in 2024, with 80 percent of items at least somewhat evident (Figure 18). The overall core

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[38] Correlation between capacity and systems change in 2024: r=0.69, p<.001. Note that correlation does not imply causality. Greater capacity may lead to greater systems change; or there could be some other factor that leads to both higher capacity and systems change. The correlation indicates that there is a strong linear relationship between the two variables.

[39] FCS defines equity as "just and fair inclusion in a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential." Community power building "realizes our vision of promoting collaborative, community-based efforts that build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity." (Community Power Building - The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions) Youth-led change: "Engaging opportunity youth as experts and partners at every step has been a core principle of our work with the launch of OYF." Youth Leadership - The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions

[40] Items for core values in the assessment (equity, youth-led change, and community power) were drawn from the collaborative capacity and systems change sections of the assessment.

values score includes three different values. As with capacity and systems change, collaboratives may be focused on one area more than others at a given time which can affect the average network score.

Equity was the most evident core value across the network in 2024 (Figure 19); equity items included explicit acknowledgement of disparities, membership that reflected diversity in the community, using disaggregated data, equitable narratives about OY, and others.

**FIGURE 18.** EIGHTY PERCENT OF CORE VALUES ITEMS ARE AT LEAST SOMEWHAT PRESENT IN OYF COLLABORATIVES IN 2024



Average % of self-assessment items across the OYF network reported present within each value
(strong=well or very well; some=somewhat, well, or very well)
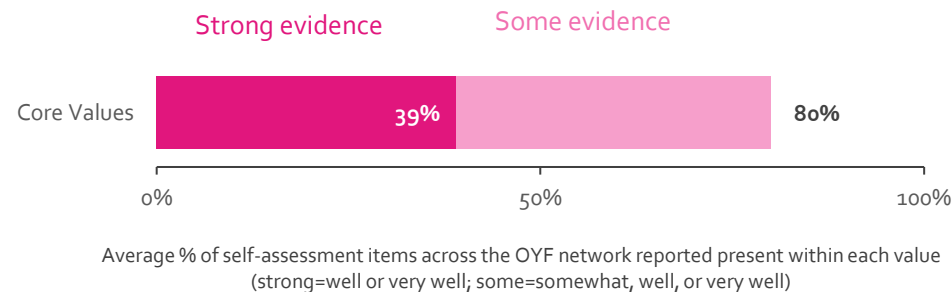
**FIGURE 19.** EQUITY WAS THE MOST EVIDENT CORE VALUE IN THE OYF NETWORK IN 2024



Average % of self-assessment items across the OYF network reported present within each value
(strong=well or very well; some=somewhat, well, or very well)
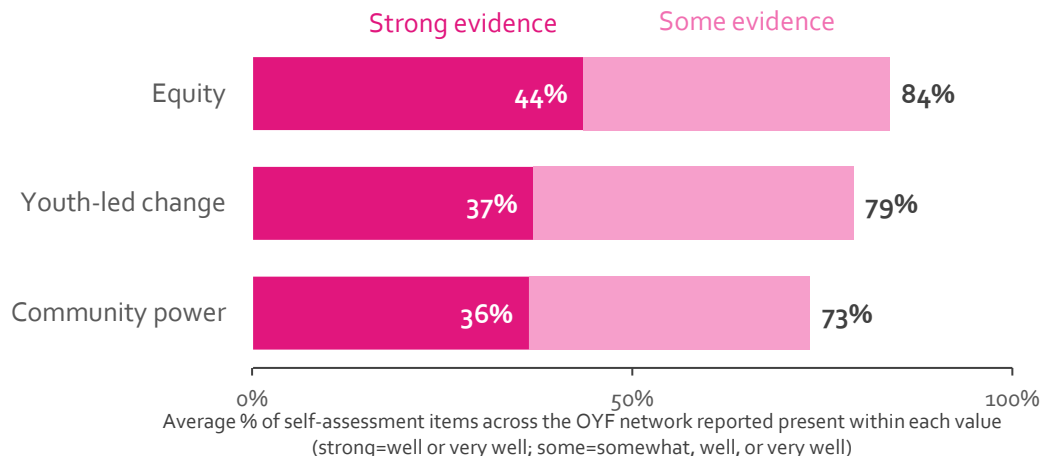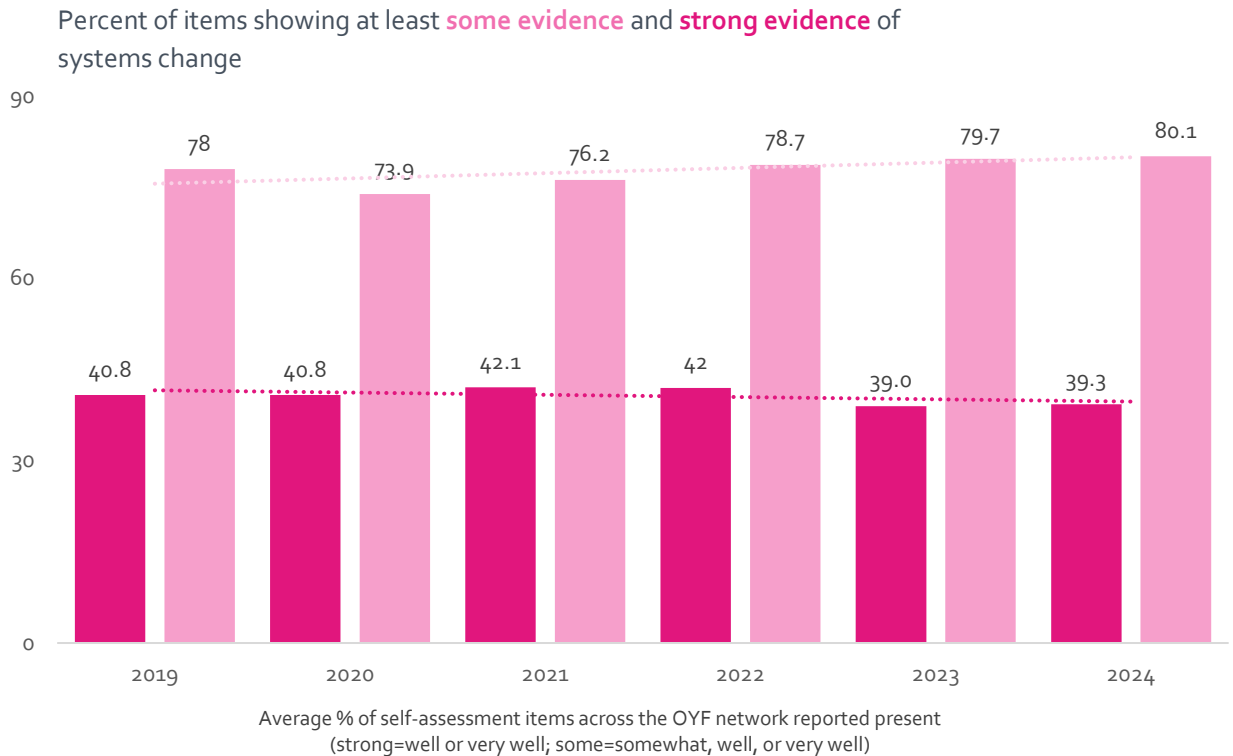
## OYF Network Trends Over Time, 2019-2024

In 2024, the overall presence of the three core values was at its highest level in six years, with 80 percent of items on the assessment at least some present in collaboratives and communities, an over six percentage point increase from 2020.

Percent of items showing at least some evidence and strong evidence of systems change



Average % of self-assessment items across the OYF network reported present
(strong=well or very well; some=somewhat, well, or very well)

Youth-led change (strong and some levels) and community power (some level) increased slightly from 2023 to 2024. Over the past six years, youth-led change has increased by almost six percentage points.

## OYF Collaboratives' Trends Over Time, 2019-2024

Once again, because the network composition changes year to year, we looked at changes within individual collaboratives to understand changes over time in core values.

Over the past year (2023 to 2024):
> Over half (52%) of collaboratives (14 of 27) **increased their core values scores** from 2023 to 2024.

> Likewise, over half (52%, 14 of 17 collaboratives) **increased their focus and commitment to youth-led change** over the last year.

Over the last six years (2019 to 2024):
> Almost two-thirds of collaboratives (with five to six years of assessment data) reported **improvement in their focus and commitment to the three OYF core values** in their collaboratives and communities from 2019 to 2024 at the *strong* evidence level (11 of 17 collaboratives, or 65%).

> Similarly, almost two thirds of collaboratives **made improvements in youth-led change** from 2019 to 2024 (11 of 17 collaboratives, or 65%).

> Over half of collaboratives also **improved their focus and commitment to equity** in their collaboratives and communities over the six-year period (9 of 17 collaboratives, or 53%).

# CONCLUSION

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



### Collaborative Capacity → Systems Change

We continue to see strong evidence that collaboratives with greater capacities (in leadership, data, communications, and resources) demonstrate greater evidence of local systems changes in their communities. Consistent with prior years, in 2024, there was a **strong positive and statistically significant correlation** between collaborative capacity and systems change. While there is a relationship between the two, it does not *necessarily* mean the relationship is causal.

### Systems Change → Fewer Opportunity Youth

Exploratory analyses tested the relationship between systems change and the rate of youth disconnection in a community. Overall, correlations were weak. However, one promising finding was a **moderate correlation between 2019 systems change scores and 2023 youth disconnection rates**: collaboratives with higher systems change scores in 2019 tended to have lower youth disconnection rates in 2023. In addition, most of the other correlations tested, while not large, were in the expected direction (i.e., higher systems change was associated with lower youth disconnection). These findings should be considered preliminary.

# APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

## Common Measures

Equal Measure developed the Common Measures in 2018-2019 in collaboration with Aspen FCS and six collaboratives as part of Equity Counts.[41]  The goal for the Common Measures was to develop a standard method for understanding opportunity youth within and across OYF communities. The Common Measures use publicly available data, the American Community Survey,[42] to calculate disconnection rates in a standard way across the OYF collaboratives and over time. We also disaggregate the rates by race, ethnicity, gender, age and other factors to examine inequities.

The four disconnection rates, or OYF Common Measures, are:

- **Community Disconnection Rate:** The rate of young people disconnected from work and school (i.e., opportunity youth).

- **High School Disconnection Rate:** The rate of young people without a high school diploma/GED and not working who are disconnected from high school.

- **Postsecondary Disconnection Rate:** The rate of young people with a high school diploma/GED, without a postsecondary credential, who are disconnected from postsecondary education and not working.

- **Workforce Disconnection Rate:** The rate of young people with a postsecondary credential, who are not enrolled in postsecondary and are disconnected from the workforce.

These rates, as well as additional data on high school and postsecondary attainment, have been provided to all OYF communities in 2017, 2019, 2021, 2022, and 2023. Rates are calculated for the geographic areas where OYF collaboratives are working, using the smallest unit of geographic analysis available in the ACS data: Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs). Each OYF collaborative identified the PUMA or PUMAs where they are working, and those areas are used in the analyses. For rural and tribal areas, the PUMA is often much larger than the footprint of their OYF work, and thus the Common Measures are less accurate and useful for these communities.

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[41] https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/using-data-to-advance-equity/

[42] https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/),

For more detailed information on the Common Measures, see the technical guide:
https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/EC-Measures-Technical-Document-Final-20Sept2019.pdf

## Annual Self-Assessment

We drew on findings in this report from the 2024 OYF self-assessment. The self-assessment focused on four areas: 1) Community and Opportunity Youth Collaborative Characteristics; 2) Collaborative Capacity; 3) Changes in Programs, Organizations, and Systems (i.e., Systems Change); and 4) Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing, and Purpose. Starting 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 items in the self-assessment, as that is not a goal of their collaborative.[43]

We followed the same methodology as the 2019-2023 OYF reports. In the assessment of collaborative capacity and systems change, we asked collaboratives to rate the presence of 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 item, meaning the item was rated a 2 or 3 ("well" or "very well"); and 2) at least some evidence of an item, where the item was rated at least a 1 ("somewhat").

Most percentages reported throughout this report refer to the percentage of collaboratives or items 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 items that had at least "some" evidence for additional context or to acknowledge where collaboratives or communities are beginning to make changes.

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[43] *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.

# APPENDIX B: BACKGROUND

**| TABLE 1. COMMUNITIES IN THE OYF NETWORK IN 2024**

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

\* Did not participate in 2024 assessment
See also: https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/oyfcommunities/

**| FIGURE 1. NUMBER OF YEARS OYF BACKBONE ORGANIZATIONS AND COLLABORATIVES HAVE FOCUSED ON OPPORTUNITY YOUTH, N=36**



| | Less than 5 years | 5-10 years | More than 10 years |
|---|---|---|---|
| Backbone Organizations | 36% | 28% | 36% |
| Collaboratives | 33% | 36% | 31% |
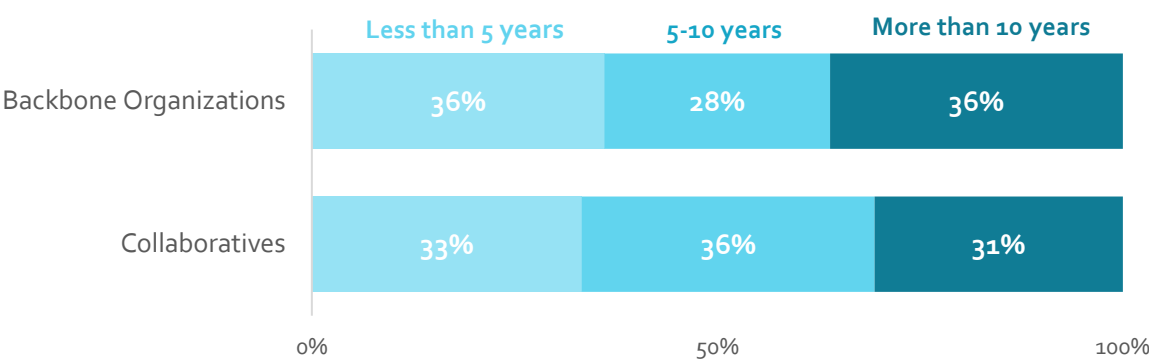
TABLE 2. **COLLABORATIVE PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS IN 2024, N=36**

| 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 | 35 | 8 | 1-65 |
| Public or private higher education institutions | 33 | 2 | 0-26 |
| K-12 public or charter education institutions | 28 | 3 | 1-12 |
| Government institutions (not education institutions) | 30 | 2 | 0-25 |
| Other partners | 25 | 3 | 0-41 |
| **Total partners across all sectors** | **36** | **13** | **1- 129** |

FIGURE 2. **PERCENT OF COLLABORATIVES THAT REPORTED PRIORITIZING CERTAIN GROUPS OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN 2024, N=36**

| Group | Percent |
|---|---|
| Boys and young men of color | 58% |
| Girls and young women of color | 56% |
| Youth involved in the juvenile justice system | 53% |
| Youth with children or expecting children | 42% |
| Foster youth/youth transitioning out of foster care | 39% |
| Youth experiencing homelessness | 39% |
| Youth with physical and/or mental health needs | 36% |
| LGBTQIA+ youth | 31% |
| Youth with disabilities | 28% |
| Immigrant, refugee and/or undocumented youth | 22% |
| Youth residing in public housing | 19% |
| English language learners | 17% |

| | A Lot | Moderately | Slightly | Not at all |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| High school/Equivalency | 28% | 33% | 25% | 14% |
| Postsecondary Education | 36% | 33% | 31% | |
| Workforce | 58% | 31% | 8% | 3% |

0%                    50%                    100%

TABLE 3. **PERCENT OF COLLABORATIVES REPORTED DOCUMENTS, N=36**

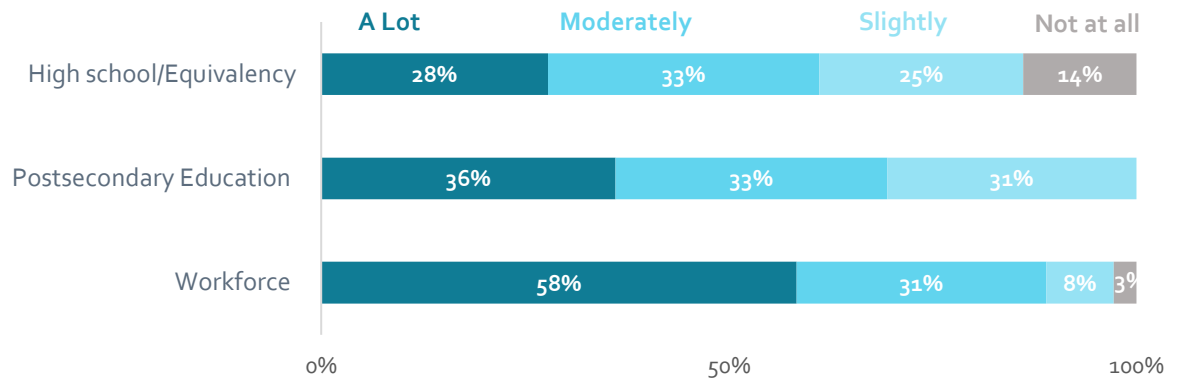| Document | Percent of sites |
|---|---|
| MOUs or MOAs between collaborative members and the backbone (detailing of organizational members commitments to the collaborative) | 78% |
| Annual action plan with the collaborative's goals and priorities for the year | 75% |
| Community OY landscape report (i.e., ecosystem map), or list of partners and services for OY (may include a program-level inventory) | 72% |
| OY collaborative charter (i.e., statement of values, purpose, and general goals of the OY collaborative) | 64% |
| Data-sharing agreements between collaborative partners and the backbone | 64% |
| OY collaborative website or webpage | 61% |
| OY collaborative three-to-five-year plan (i.e., a longer-term strategic plan) | 44% |
| OY collaborative 'organizational chart' and/or member role definitions | 42% |
| Theory of Change/Logic Model for your OY collaborative's work | 36% |
| 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 (such as a success/impact report for the year) | 31% |

FIGURE 4. **PERCENT OF COLLABORATIVES REPORTED PRIMARY PURPOSE OF COLLECTING DATA FROM PARTNERS, N=36**

| | |
|---|---|
| Track how many youth partners are serving, youth characteristics, and/or youth outcomes in order to improve partners' services and program outcomes | 56% |
| Understand the needs of youth who are disconnected, or at risk of disconnection, in our community (regardless of whether they are receiving services from partners) in order to make the case for increased services | 28% |
| Other* | 17% |

*Other responses include both; to track progress towards goal of reducing disconnection rates in their local area; understanding different touch points in the system; improving quality of data; understand and track impact of program; tracking credentials.

FIGURE 5. **PERCENT OF COLLABORATIVES REPORTED FOCUS OF OY WORK IN 2024, N=36**

| | |
|---|---|
| Comprehensive change | 72% |
| Sectoral change | 19% |
| Joint program | 8% |
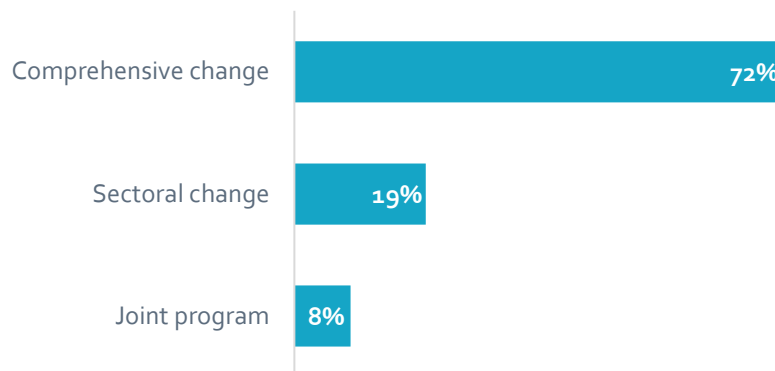
Note: *Comprehensive change* is aiming to improve all outcomes for all opportunity youth in an area. *Sectoral change* is aiming to improve a specific outcome for all opportunity youth who have not attained that outcome, within a specific sector (or for a specific outcome across sectors). *Joint programs* aim to improve outcomes only for opportunity youth who are part of a specific project or program.

FIGURE 6. **PERCENT OF COLLABORATIVES BY BACKBONE ORGANIZATION TYPE, N=36**



| Category | Percent |
|---|---|
| Community based organization | 33% |
| Intermediary | 31% |
| Education institution | 11% |
| Tribal government agency | 8% |
| Workforce investment board | 8% |
| Community foundation or funder | 6% |
| Local government unit | 3% |
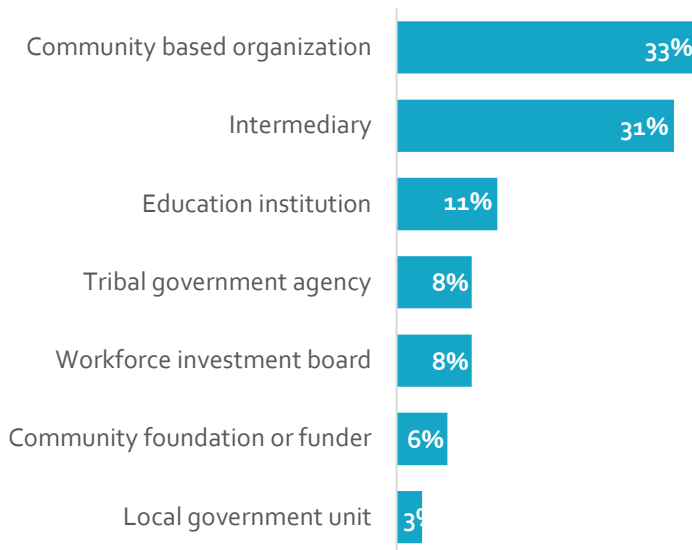
FIGURE 7. **PERCENT OF COLLABORATIVES REPORTED BACKBONE FOCUS AREA, N=36**



| Category | Percent |
|---|---|
| The backbone's OY work happens as part of a broader initiative | 75% |
| The backbone focuses on OY only | 25% |
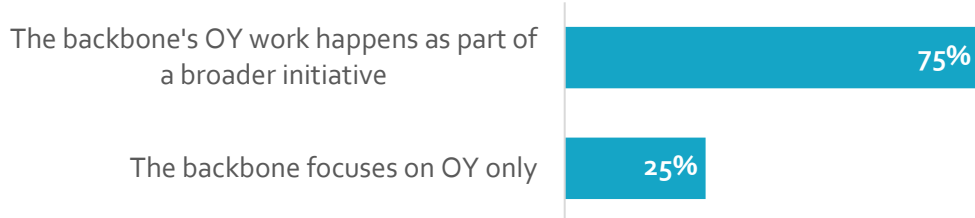
TABLE 4. **BACKBONE FULL-TIME STAFFING IN 2024**

| Staffing | Median | Range | Number of sites who responded (N) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Total staff | 21.5 | 0 to 450 | 36 |
| Dedicated staff for OY | 6.5 | 1 to 30 | 36 |

TABLE 5. **BACKBONE FULL-TIME OY STAFFING BY ROLE IN 2024**

| Roles | Median | Range | Number of sites who responded (N) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Programmatic Work/Pathways | 3 | 0.2 to 24.5 | 31 |
| Collaborative Facilitation/Leadership | 1.7 | 0.2 to 8 | 35 |
| Communications | 0.5 | 0 to 8 | 32 |
| Data | 0.5 | 0.2 to 8 | 30 |
| Fundraising | 0.5 | 0 to 8 | 27 |
| Policy and Advocacy | 0.5 | 0 to 2.5 | 26 |

TABLE 6. **PERCENT OF COLLABORATIVE LEADERS/FACILITATORS THAT ARE PEOPLE OF COLOR**

| Staff | Mean | Median | Range |
|---|---|---|---|
| Leaders/facilitators of color | 65% | 67% | 0-100% |

Based on number of paid staff (full-time or part-time) who are leading or facilitating collaborative (part of collaborative leadership).

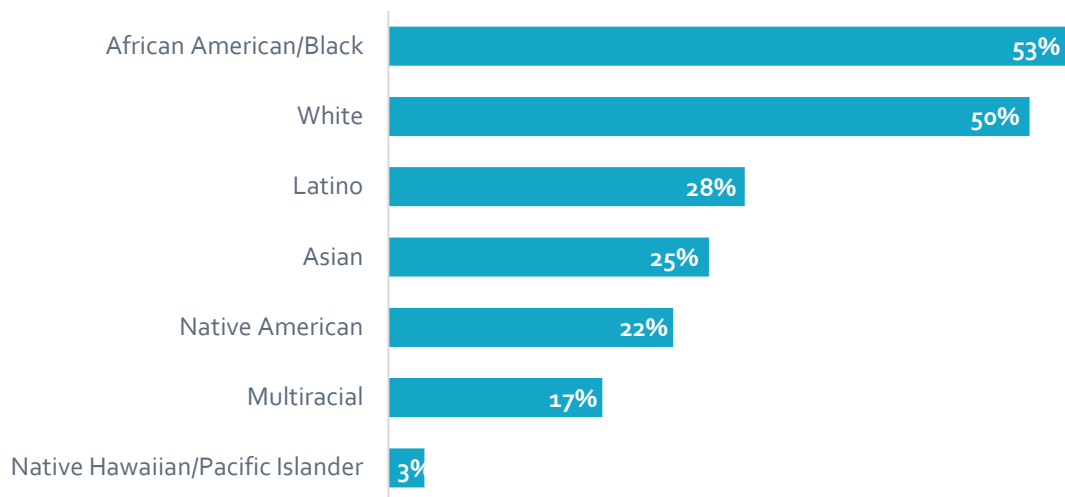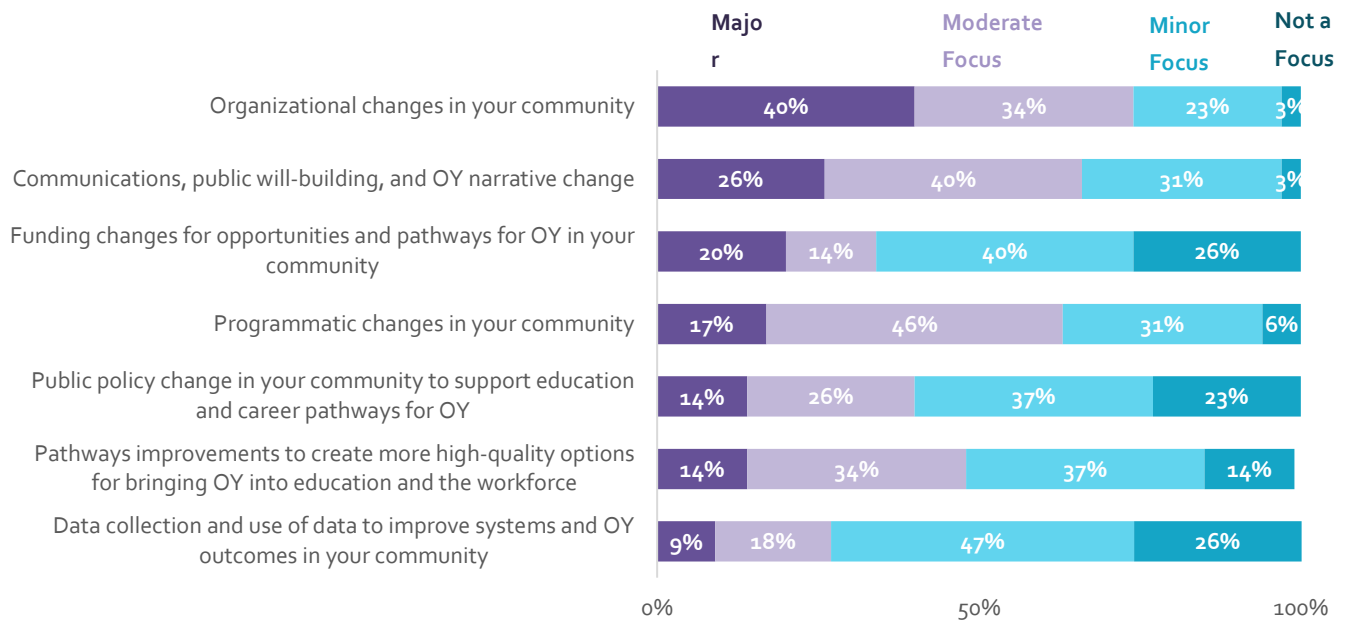FIGURE 8. **PERCENT OF COLLABORATIVES WHERE LEADER/FACILITATOR IS…, N=36**

| Category | Percent |
|---|---|
| African American/Black | 53% |
| White | 50% |
| Latino | 28% |
| Asian | 25% |
| Native American | 22% |
| Multiracial | 17% |
| Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander | 3% |

FIGURE 9. **PRIORITIES OF COLLABORATIVES IN 2024, N=35**



| | Major | Moderate Focus | Minor Focus | Not a Focus |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Organizational changes in your community | 40% | 34% | 23% | 3% |
| Communications, public will-building, and OY narrative change | 26% | 40% | 31% | 3% |
| Funding changes for opportunities and pathways for OY in your community | 20% | 14% | 40% | 26% |
| Programmatic changes in your community | 17% | 46% | 31% | 6% |
| Public policy change in your community to support education and career pathways for OY | 14% | 26% | 37% | 23% |
| Pathways improvements to create more high-quality options for bringing OY into education and the workforce | 14% | 34% | 37% | 14% |
| Data collection and use of data to improve systems and OY outcomes in your community | 9% | 18% | 47% | 26% |

# APPENDIX C: FUNDING

TABLE 7. **MEDIAN BACKBONE ORGANIZATION BUDGETS IN 2024, N=32**

| Budget | Median | Range |
|---|---|---|
| 2024 budget* | $3,546,515 | $0-$246,000,000 |
| 2024 budget dedicated to OY-specific work | $1,056,504 | $0-$5,970,871 |
| | | |
| Total network budget dedicated to OY-specific work | $55,804,593 | |

*Two outliers are included in these calculations: one collaborative reported a $246,000,000 backbone budget and another reported $0.

FIGURE 10. **PERCENTAGE OF COLLABORATIVES THAT REPORTED OY FUNDERS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES, BY TYPE, N=36**



- Private funders — 81%
- City or county public funds — 64%

FIGURE 11. **PERCENT OF COLLABORATIVES THAT HAVE INFLUENCED PUBLIC FUNDING STREAMS, IN 2024, BY AREA, N=33**



- Workforce-related programs focused on OY — 67%
- Postsecondary programs focused on OY — 52%
- Programs other than education or workforce-focused meant to support OY — 36%
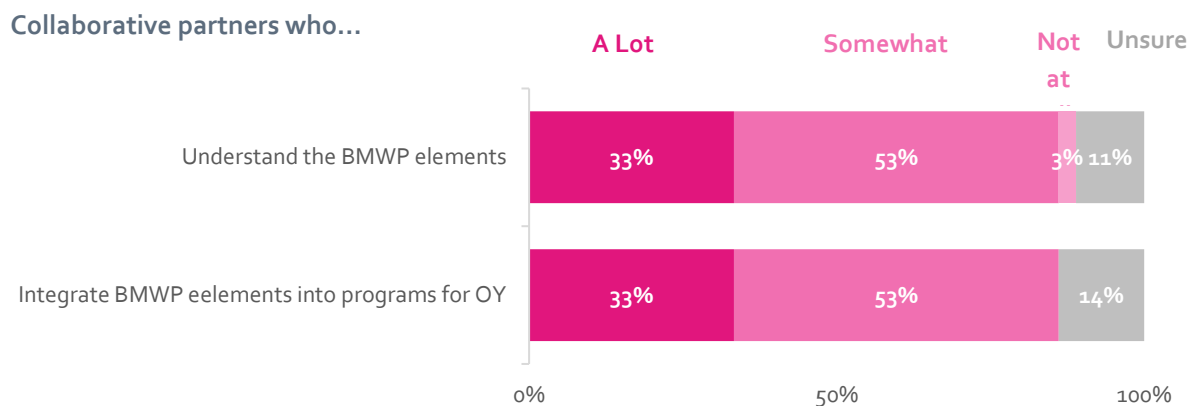- K-12 programs focused on OY — 33%
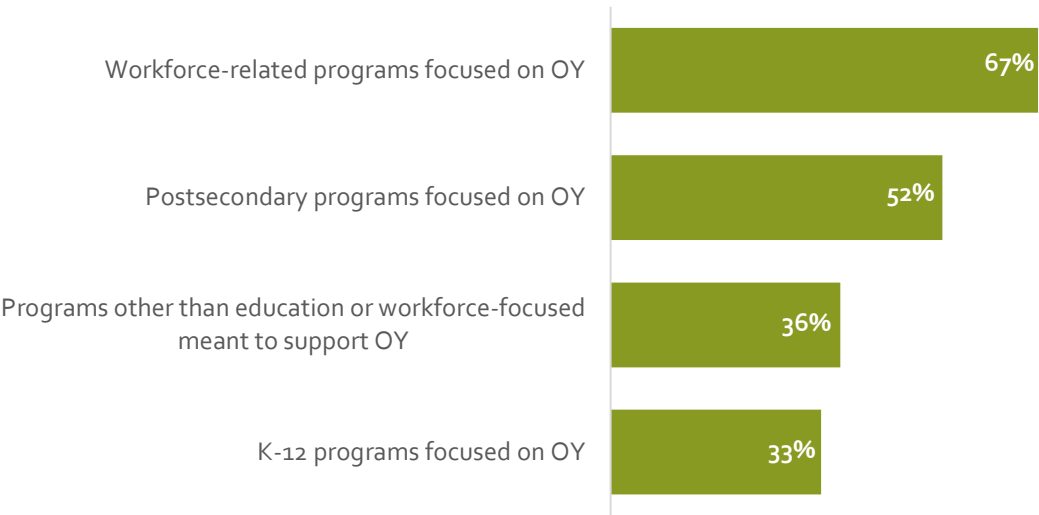
# APPENDIX D: BELONGING, MEANING, WELLBEING, AND PURPOSE

BMWP is an emergent framework put forth by FCS that stands for "Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing, and Purpose."[44] Each of the four constructs that make up BMWP (and their respective practices) are associated with a variety of positive outcomes for young people. In the 2024 self-assessment, the constructs are defined as follows:

- **Belonging**: Refers to having a meaningful voice and opportunity to participate in the design of political, social, and cultural structures that shape one's life. Those that "belong" have and express "the right to both contribute and make demands upon society and political institutions."
- **Meaning**: The ways in which people make sense of themselves, others, and social situations. Thus, meaning-making interventions are those that focus on shifting ways in which people make sense of themselves, others, and social situations in order to promote change (e.g., in behavior, motivation, beliefs, etc.).
- **Wellbeing**: The absence of intergenerational trauma. Youth have the support, confidence, and resources to thrive in contexts of secure and healthy relationships, realizing their full potential and rights.
- **Purpose**: Refers to one's desire and intention to achieve something that is significant to one's life and of consequence to the world in which one lives. Purpose is also defined as a self-organizing and prospective life aim.

FIGURE 12. **PERCENT OF COLLABORATIVES THAT REPORTED THEIR PARTNERS UNDERSTAND AND INTERGRATE BMWP ELEMENTS, N=36**



Collaborative partners who…

| | A Lot | Somewhat | Not at all | Unsure |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Understand the BMWP elements | 33% | 53% | 3% | 11% |
| Integrate BMWP eelements into programs for OY | 33% | 53% | | 14% |

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TABLE 8. **STRATEGIES COLLABORATIVES USED IN 2024 TO FACILITATE BMWP PRACTICES AMONG PARTNERS, N=36**

| BMWP Strategies | Percent of collaboratives |
|---|---|
| Explained BMWP concepts to OY collaborative members. | 64% |
| Discussed BMWP implementation or strategies with young people | 58% |
| Supported programmatic improvements or adjustments to center BMWP | 53% |
| Shared research and resources around BMWP with collaborative partners | 44% |
| Explained BMWP concepts to people outside of the OY collaborative | 36% |
| Planned BMWP implementation in collaborative meetings | 33% |
| Drafted goals related to BMWP for the collaborative | 19% |
| Collected data or feedback on BMWP implementation from partners | 19% |
| Shared research and resources around BMWP with partners outside the OY collaborative | 17% |
| Other* | 6% |

* Other responses included:
  • We are still learning about this as leaders in the field.
  • Using elements of the BMWP framework.

TABLE 9. **SUPPORTS THAT WOULD HELP COLLABORATIVES BETTER INTEGRATE BMWP INTO THEIR WORK, N=36**

| BMWP supports | Percent of collaboratives |
|---|---|
| Toolkits | 64% |
| Planning Tools | 61% |
| Training | 58% |
| Coaching | 50% |
| Evaluation and Assessment | 44% |
| Webinars | 42% |
| Other* | 8% |

* Other responses included:
  • Getting terms and definitions more out there in the public realm
  • OYF representatives or others specializing in BMWP to join monthly meetings and demonstrate how BMWP can play a key role in making practices more intentional and effective
  • All of the above.