

CONNECTICUT'S UNSPOKEN CRISIS

Elevating the Voices of Young People



AUGUST 2024
FINAL REPORT

Acknowledgments

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Foreword

Connecticut has a great opportunity at hand. We have the chance to re-engage and reconnect young people while providing them with the empathy, care, and support they deserve to transform their lives. Dalio Education published a study this past fall, prepared by the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), that found that 119,000 young people ages 14 to 26 in Connecticut are at-risk of not graduating high school or disconnected from work and school altogether — 1 in 5 young people in our state are being failed by the systems intended to support them.

To begin to inform our collective understanding of ways to support young people experiencing disconnection, Dalio Education published a second report by MDRC in the spring that looked across the country to identify programs, practices, and policies that help reconnect young people to school, work, and other social supports. This study from Community Science rounds out Dalio Education's series on Connecticut's Unspoken Crisis and our understanding of both the root causes of youth disconnection and its implications by bringing to life the data reported by BCG through the voices of young people from across Connecticut currently navigating this crisis.

The research study led by Community Science elevates community voice in two ways. It uplifts the stories of 74 young people experiencing disconnection to understand their circumstances and challenges that caused them to become disconnected from prosocial institutions. The researchers also established a Community Advisory Group comprised of nine youth and young adults and four professionals representing five cities across Connecticut, to inform and guide the study.

This study demonstrates how lived experience can be leveraged to provide meaning to the impact that systems in Connecticut are having on the lives and social advancement of our young people. Recognizing lived experience as expertise ultimately enhances how we understand the root cause of this crisis while potentially unveiling breakthrough solutions. These solutions exist within the communities affected by this crisis, and this research offers a model of how to shift power dynamics by centering experiences and elevating voices of the community to uncover and lift up those solutions.

It is on us, the collective Connecticut community, to reimagine and rebuild our systems to prevent disconnection before it begins, and create a state where every young person thrives, regardless of the zip code or circumstances they're born into. It will require a coordinated, multi-system approach that centers trauma-informed and restorative practices to prioritize inclusion and rehabilitation over punishment.

We hope that after reading this report, you see that youth experiencing disconnection are like any other young person. They dare to thrive despite the compounding challenges they face due to systemic injustices like poverty, racism, and community violence that are further amplified by the failure of systems to adequately nurture and support them. They have the same goals and aspirations as many of their peers — to become financially stable, do better for their children, and give back to their community — a testament to their resilience, resourcefulness, and determination to reach their full potential.

With commitment to a better Connecticut,
The Community Advisory Group

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1 Executive Summary

With approximately 119,000 young people between the ages of 14 and 26 in Connecticut experiencing disconnection from the education and workforce systems or at-risk of disconnection, there is an urgent need to understand and address this crisis. Thus, this research study delves into the pervasive issue of youth disconnection in Connecticut, aiming to understand its root causes and implications on young people. By conducting more than 70 qualitative interviews with young people aged 14 to 26 in seven of the state's largest cities, the study sheds light on the multifaceted dynamics contributing to disconnection and the resilience of young people, even in the face of adversity, by focusing on their hopes and dreams for the future.

Research Study Purpose and Approach

Community Science worked with Dalio Education's Connecticut Opportunity Project (CTOP) to conduct more than 70 interviews with young people in Connecticut to learn more about their experiences and stories. The research team interviewed young people between the ages of 14 and 26 who were neither employed nor enrolled in school, aiming to explore the reasons behind their disconnection. Interviews focused on the experiences of youth across Connecticut — in Bridgeport, Danbury, Hartford, New Haven, Norwalk, Stamford, and Waterbury. These are some of the largest cities in the state, with the most concentrated numbers of young people experiencing disconnection from school and employment (BCG, 2023).

Delving into the experiences of and reasons for disconnection, the study focused on examining and understanding the complex contributing dynamics, including interactions with societal systems, such as education and criminal justice, and environmental and social influences, such as neighborhood dynamics and interpersonal relationships. We sought to learn about young people who had likely been disconnected from systems and supports for long periods and who had experienced barriers to reconnection, including deep distrust of social institutions and persistent experience with trauma.

Thus, this research study delves into the pervasive issue of youth disconnection in Connecticut, aiming to understand its root causes and implications on young people. By conducting more than 70 qualitative interviews with young people aged 14 to 26 in seven of the state's largest cities.

Community Science and CTOP convened a Community Advisory Group (CAG) to center the local voices of young people in research study development, data sensemaking, and reporting. The CAG consisted of 13 members, including young people, grantee partners, and community leaders. This included nine youth and young adults between the ages of 14 and 32, with an additional four professionals from various sectors — ensuring an intergenerational group and a dynamic exchange of ideas and perspectives to inform the study. CAG engagement emphasized capacity building efforts, focused on working with young people who: 1) were from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds; 2) have struggled with disconnection from education, gainful employment, and other social supports; and 3) best understand local assets, strengths, and barriers to navigating youth education and employment in Connecticut — to learn about research as a tool for storytelling and change making.

Research Findings

This study aimed to understand the lived experiences of young people in Connecticut experiencing disconnection and how interactions with key societal systems — education, criminal justice, housing, child welfare, and healthcare — shape and impact the lives of young people. With an emphasis on bringing forward young people's voices and experiences, this study highlights the intricate role of various systems on youth disconnection. It emphasizes the need for a more systemic rather than individualistic approach to address the challenges faced by young people who are not connected to school, work, and other prosocial supports.

Our findings reveal the critical role these systems play in shaping opportunities and outcomes for young people. The findings outlined in this report underscore the urgent need for multi-system approaches that address systemic inequalities, trauma, and limited access to resources and opportunities. It highlights the roles and interconnectedness of societal systems such as education, healthcare, child welfare, criminal justice, and housing, which significantly influence the lived experiences and outcomes of young people experiencing disconnection. Our analysis shows how the interconnectedness of systems, such as criminal justice and education, has lasting impacts on youth and contributes to significant barriers, such as limited access to resources, systemic racial injustices, and enduring traumas, impeding their ability to live thriving lives or simply reconnect with prosocial institutions. Youth experiencing disconnection are also confronted with heightened risks of homelessness, exposure to violence, and a lack of social capital, and the interconnectedness of these systems often exacerbates disconnection when they are not adequately aligned.

Housing instability further complicates the lives of young people in Connecticut. Maintaining a safe and stable home is foundational for building a future, yet many young people face significant challenges such as high rental costs, financial strain, and lack of access to adequate housing. These housing issues oftentimes impact other aspects of young people's lives, including their mental health, school attendance, and job retention.

Additionally, while intended to safeguard young people, the dual nature of the child welfare system oftentimes offers supports to young people yet can also inadvertently worsen their circumstances, leading to deepened distrust and disconnection. Young parents, particularly mothers, often experience instances of anxiety and apprehension about engaging with child welfare services due to potential negative outcomes based on past experiences and the risk of their children being removed from their care. This apprehension can deter them from seeking necessary support, further pushing them into disconnection.

It is important to note, the impacts of disconnection extend beyond school-aged youth, with older youth experiencing sustained and prolonged disconnection and recurring system involvement, highlighting the long-term impact of systemic inadequacies. Challenges and recurring system involvement persist, revealing the critical role of social capital, support systems, and relationships — or the lack thereof — in their trajectories.

This report underscores the urgent need to strengthen the social safety net and address systemic barriers to support these young people as they navigate life and seek to reconnect to educational, workforce, and prosocial support services. Enhancing access to resources and support services can provide financial stability and economic freedom while fostering meaningful connections can mitigate the long-term consequences of disconnection, ultimately reducing the rate of disconnection and facilitating the successful reintegration of young people into productive pathways and futures.



Young People’s Goals and Aspirations

Despite the adversities many young people experienced, most expressed hope for their future by sharing their aspirations and goals for the next 3–5 months and five years. When asked to define “success,” most referenced “getting back on track,” which proved to be a multilayered sentiment encompassing various goals and aspirations they aimed to achieve.

For many young people, employment and educational achievements were often seen as pathways to fulfilling their core values, such as providing financial stability and secure housing for themselves and their families. Common objectives included improving circumstances for their children, contributing to their communities, achieving financial security, pursuing further education, accessing support services, and relocating to new communities, oftentimes out of state. These findings underscore the resilience and determination of young people experiencing disconnection, emphasizing the importance of tailored interventions and support systems to help them achieve their goals and aspirations.

Recommendations

Our recommendations emphasize the importance of prioritizing equity, inclusivity, and opportunity for all young people. They advocate for a coordinated, multi-system approach that fosters collaboration and support tailored to the specific needs of young people. Highlighting the need for intentional and equitable coordination across systems to avoid fragmented support, which can exacerbate issues for young people, our recommendations call for the development and adequate resourcing of targeted interventions across social systems to prevent and address disconnection at its onset. This includes implementing restorative practices, trauma-informed approaches, and wraparound services to enhance the capacity of existing systems to address the complexity of youth disconnection in Connecticut.



Education

The education system has the potential to connect and transform the lives of young people. To reduce youth disconnection, it is essential to address systemic inequities, resource constraints, and the diverse cultural, racial, and linguistic aspects of communities. Strengthening support networks, prioritizing the needs of disconnected youth, and fostering inclusive environments are crucial for cultivating a sense of belonging and empowerment among all students. A holistic approach is necessary to dismantle pipelines to disconnection and create equitable opportunities for thriving youth and must involve more comprehensively:

- **Implementing educational restorative justice practices**, moving from punitive disciplinary measures to a stronger emphasis on fostering accountability, healing, and repair within the educational environment;
- **Strengthening support networks and wraparound services within the education system**, including implementing, expanding, and reinvesting in trauma-informed practices within schools;
- **Addressing disparities in access to quality education and support services**, through culturally responsive practices that recognize and respect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of Connecticut youth — to help create inclusive learning environments where youth feel valued and supported, despite their racial, cultural, ethnic, economic, or linguistic background; and
- **Fostering caring and supportive adult relationships** within and outside the education system to promote positive outcomes and help prevent disconnection.



Criminal Justice

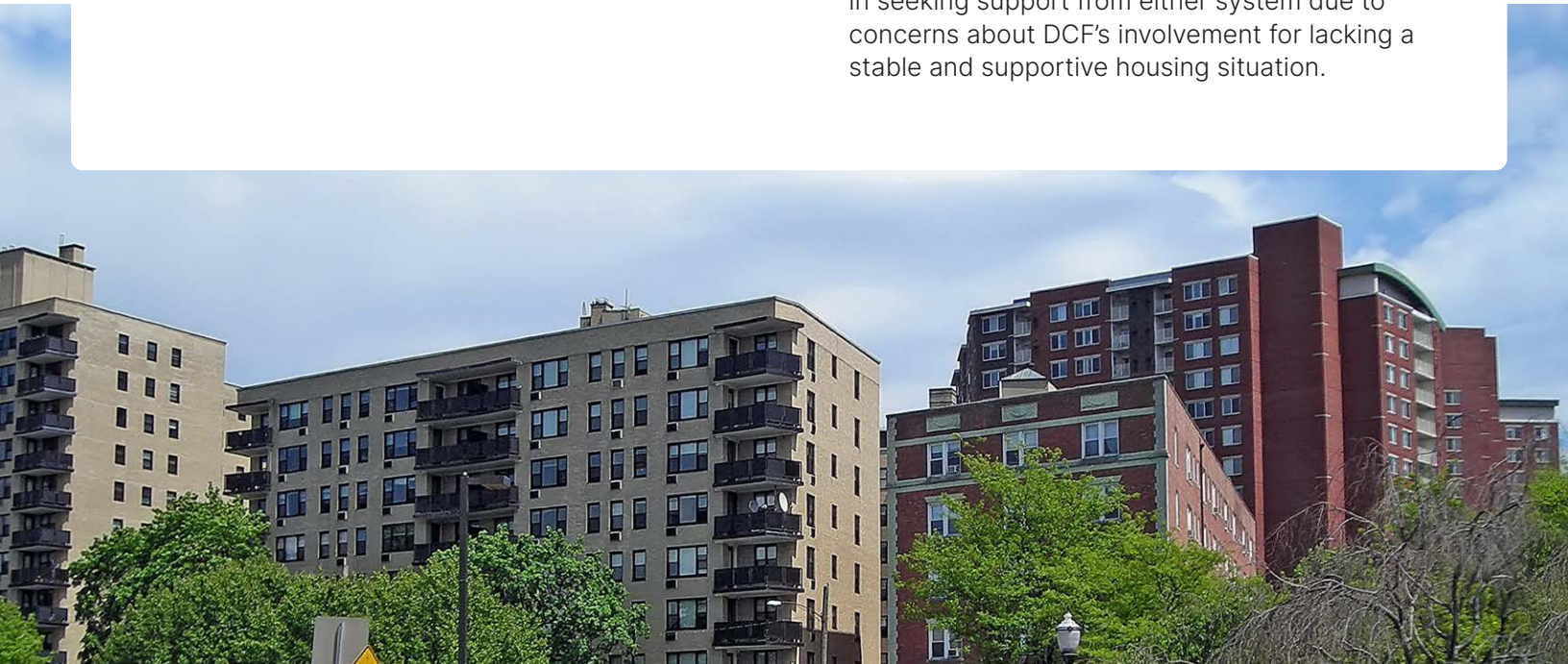
The impact of Connecticut's criminal justice system on young people requires ongoing advocacy, policy reform, and community support to ensure it serves as a control mechanism and foundation for positive change. Key actions include expanding access to diversion programs, enhancing reintegration support, and addressing systemic biases affecting marginalized communities. By focusing on rehabilitation and equity, Connecticut can transform its justice system into a conduit for empowering youth to overcome past challenges and embrace a brighter future by:

- **Promoting supports and services for incarcerated youth that address the root causes of crime**, as study participants expressed, the root causes of crime can range from violence at home to childhood abuse to mental illness to poor educational quality;
- **Implementing a restorative justice approach to rehabilitating youth**, by identifying strategies to repair harm caused by crime and conflict, as opposed to punishing them and further perpetuating the unfair treatment of traditionally underrepresented populations; and
- **Further developing partnerships with stakeholders**, such as parents and caregivers, community members, community-based organizations, and local businesses, to identify and strategize creative ways to improve the justice system for all youth.

Housing

Housing serves as a fundamental cornerstone of stability, with the ability to impact young people's education, employment, health, and emotional well-being. Affordable and stable housing is also essential for young people transitioning to independence, either from child welfare services or their parents or guardians. However, the lack of affordable housing creates significant challenges, especially for those without family support or financial resources. Helpful approaches to housing include:

- **Expanding the availability of affordable housing options via zoning** and bolstering efforts to push for zoning changes that would increase the supply of affordable units, including the passage of Public Act 21-29 which added requirements for equitable housing and reduced zoning barriers for multifamily units;
- **Creating more comprehensive state and local housing support services**, enhancing housing stability among youth and young people within Connecticut by addressing underlying issues such as financial insecurity, employment instability, family dynamics, and awareness of individual rights and responsibilities; and
- **Improving collaboration between the housing and child welfare systems** given the intersecting challenges of housing instability and involvement with the Department of Children and Families (DCF) — for instance, addressing the fear and apprehension young people may experience in seeking support from either system due to concerns about DCF's involvement for lacking a stable and supportive housing situation.



Child Welfare

The child welfare system in Connecticut can serve as both a safeguard and a potential source of concern for young people. Improving young people's experiences demands a multifaceted approach that addresses the complexities and vulnerabilities in their experiences. Crucial improvements for the child welfare system includes enhancing communication, increasing support, and adopting policies and practices that aim to strike a balance, ensuring the system protects young people while minimizing potential harm and providing a comprehensive roadmap for reform. Recommendations uplift the need for further:

- **Enhancing communication and rights awareness among young people**, particularly when children are removed from their homes, and ensuring clear and transparent communication from the onset of child welfare system engagement could empower parents, reduce trauma associated with these processes, and ensure families are treated with dignity and respect;
- **Goal setting and supportive resources**, including child welfare agencies actively working with young people to set goals and provide the necessary resources and support to achieve these goals (this approach would help foster a sense of agency and forward-looking optimism, crucial for young individuals navigating challenging circumstances); and
- **Centering rehabilitation and trauma-informed care over punishment**, including streamlining access to support services while mitigating the fear of negative consequences given young parents reported hesitation to seek assistance due to concerns about triggering DCF involvement.

Healthcare

Connecticut's healthcare system is vital for providing access to services for young people, yet affordable healthcare remains limited. Prioritizing efforts to reduce enrollment barriers, simplify application processes, and advocate for more accessible HUSKY, Connecticut state healthcare policies, especially for underserved populations such as undocumented youth, is essential along with:

- **Expanding access to affordable healthcare coverage for youth**, including advocating for policies that reduce barriers to enrollment and increase awareness of available resources — especially for undocumented youth;
- **Improving communication, empathy, and cultural competence in healthcare interactions**, creating inclusive spaces for young people that accommodate their cultural backgrounds and needs;
- **Enhancing comprehensive mental health services and support**, services should encompass a range of interventions such as increasing and prioritizing access to therapy, counseling, and support groups — to support young people in becoming resilient in their own spaces, foster positive relationships with family and friends, and develop coping skills; and
- **Continuing to promote trauma-informed care**, including training healthcare providers to recognize and respond to the unique needs of youth who have experienced trauma, creating trauma-informed environments that prioritize safety and empowerment, and integrating trauma-informed practices into healthcare delivery systems.



2 Understanding Connecticut's Unspoken Crisis

The issue of youth disconnection in Connecticut represents a critical challenge requiring the attention of multiple agencies and stakeholders. Recent data from the Boston Consulting Group reported that one in five Connecticut youth are experiencing disconnection, at an alarming rate of nearly 10,000 youth in the state becoming newly disconnected from traditional educational or employment pathways annually (BCG, 2023). The demographic of youth who are impacted encompasses a diverse array of young people, in particular youth of color, who are tackling systemic barriers and challenges that hinder their access to educational and economic opportunities across multiple social systems. Despite the severity of this issue, the root causes of youth disconnection remain understudied, especially from a qualitative perspective that uplifts the firsthand perspectives and stories of young people.

In this report, we discuss the multifaceted nature of disconnection, which is often influenced by factors such as academic environments, familial challenges, systemic inequalities, and limited or no access to resources and opportunities due to cultural, racial, and linguistic differences. These intersecting dynamics underscore the complexity of disconnection and emphasize the need for holistic approaches to addressing this issue in Connecticut. This report highlights the urgent need for proper resourcing and targeted interventions across social systems to prevent and address disconnection at its onset, thereby mitigating the risk of future systemic entanglement and improving outcomes for youth experiencing disconnection.

This research report is part of a comprehensive series of studies focused on the experiences of young people that Dalio Education's Connecticut Opportunity Project commissioned. The other two — Connecticut's Unspoken Crisis: Getting Young People Back on Track (BCG, 2023) and A National Scan of Policies, Practices, and Systems Affecting Young People (MDRC, 2024) — focused on deeply understanding the demographic profile of young people experiencing disconnection or who are at-risk of disconnection in Connecticut and a national scan of programs, practices, and policies that affect these youth. This study elevates young peoples' firsthand perspectives through their own words and stories.

Youth in Connecticut are experiencing a crisis that has been overlooked. Approximately 119,000 14-26-year-olds in the state are disconnected from school or work or are at-risk of disconnection (BCG, 2023).

3 About the Study

This qualitative research study investigated the experiences of disconnection among young people between the ages of 14 and 26 in Connecticut. The researchers interviewed individuals who were neither employed nor enrolled in school, aiming to explore the reasons behind their disconnection. Interviews focused on people who self-identified as residing in or being from Bridgeport, Danbury, Hartford, New Haven, Norwalk, Stamford, or Waterbury. These are some of the largest cities in the state with the most concentrated amounts of young people experiencing disconnection (BCG, 2023), therefore it was critical to learn about the firsthand perspectives of young people in these areas.

The study focused on examining and understanding the complex dynamics contributing to disconnection, including interactions with societal systems, such as education and criminal justice, and environmental and social influences, such as neighborhood dynamics and interpersonal relationships. We sought to learn about young people who had likely been disconnected from systems and supports for long periods and who had experienced barriers to reconnection, including deep distrust of social institutions and persistent experience with trauma. See Exhibit 1 for an overview of research questions.

This research seeks to shed light on the role of various systems on youth disconnection. It emphasizes the need for a more systemic rather than individualistic approach to address the challenges faced by young people who are not connected to school, work, and other prosocial supports. The approach, therefore, was to inquire not just about the youth's experience, but also the context of the social systems that shape that experience. For instance, our analysis shows how the interconnectedness of systems, such as the criminal justice and education systems, has lasting impacts on youth and contributes to significant barriers, such as limited access to resources; persistent and systemic racial injustices; and enduring traumas, impeding their ability to live thriving lives or simply reconnect with prosocial institutions.

Youth experiencing disconnection are also confronted with heightened risks of homelessness, exposure to violence, and a lack of social capital. Despite the challenges many young people in the study faced, they commonly had a sense of hopefulness and articulated personal goals and aspirations.

EXHIBIT 1

Key Research Questions

1. **Overarching Question.** How do disconnected young people **survive and thrive**?
2. **Relational Context.** What are the **settings and contexts** in which disconnected young people **live, work (informally), and play**?
3. **Role of Systems.** What is the role of different systems (past, present, and future) in the lives of disconnected young people — including the **education, juvenile/criminal justice, child welfare, housing, and health systems**?
4. **Goals and Aspirations.** What are the **goals and aspirations** of youth who are not connected to school, work, or other prosocial supports?

This report synthesizes study findings, building on the preliminary research brief released in April 2024 (Community Science, 2024). The next section provides an overview of our methods; while Section 5 discusses the integral role that the Community Advisory Group played in informing the study. Section 6 highlights the demographic information of study participants, such as their city, race and ethnicity, age, gender, and educational attainment, to further contextualize young peoples' stories. Section 7 provides contextualization on the intricate web of social systems that young people interact with — education, housing, child welfare, criminal justice, and health — which play pivotal roles in shaping their experiences, opportunities, and outcomes. In this section, we define these systems, before moving into Sections 8 and 9, in which we discuss young people's experiences with these interconnected systems. Lastly, in Sections 10 and 11 we discuss young people's goals and aspirations and recommendations for strengthening this web of systems to help young people throughout Connecticut thrive.

4 A Culturally Responsive and Trauma-informed Approach to the Research Study



Study Participants

For this study, the research team interviewed 74 young people between the ages of 14 and 26 who were not connected to school, work, and prosocial supports. Interviews focused on people who self-identified as residing in or being from Bridgeport, Danbury, Hartford, New Haven, Norwalk, Stamford, or Waterbury.

Participant Recruitment

The research team collaborated with Daliao Education's Connecticut Opportunity Project team and their network of local nonprofit organizations and educational institutions to launch a robust recruitment effort. This included both virtual and in-person outreach in which leaders of nonprofit and educational entities shared informational materials about the study and helped connect the research team to youth who were interested in participating. The research team also partnered with local nonprofit organizations to hold informal informational discussions about the study at their locations and conduct coordinated street outreach with their staff. This coordinated outreach occurred on days when the research team provided same-day, in-person opportunities to participate. Additionally, recruitment methods included social media outreach and snowball sampling in which young people who participated shared information about the interview with other young people or brought other youth in and introduced them to the research team.

The outreach flyer indicated that the study provided an opportunity for young people to share their stories. Outreach materials also noted that young people would be compensated with a \$50 Visa gift card for their participation and provided the selection criteria, which was that participants must: 1) be between the ages of 14 and 26; 2) not be in school or working at the time of the interview; and 3) live in or be from Bridgeport, Danbury, Hartford, New Haven, Norwalk, Stamford, or Waterbury. The flyer also included a QR code that young people could scan to learn more about the study or indicate interest and a phone number that they could call or text.

More than 90 individuals responded to recruitment outreach efforts, which exceeded our target of 60 participants. Of those 90 young people who responded to outreach, 74 met eligibility requirements and went on to participate in the study. The research team met the target before completing data collection in all seven selected cities and, therefore, collected beyond the target in our efforts to further diversify the sample. As young people expressed interest in participation, the research team talked with them in-person or via phone to ensure that they met eligibility requirements. Eligible participants were then invited to participate in the interview.



Research Study Participant Protections and Compensation

The research team obtained permission for data collection through an accredited Institutional Review Board (IRB). Each research team member also participated in a series of training sessions focused on the protection of research study participants. The IRB approved all research processes and materials, including recruitment plans and study outreach materials — such as verbal scripts, flyers, email templates, and text message templates that the team used to recruit study participants.

The IRB also reviewed consent processes and forms. For participants under 18 years old, the research team obtained their written assent and their parent or legal guardian's consent before beginning the interview. For participants who were 18 years old and older, we obtained their written consent.

The research team created printed and electronic versions of the consent forms, hosting all electronic forms on the DocuSign platform. We used printed forms for in-person interviews, and electronic forms for virtual interviews. Parents and legal guardians had the option of signing printed or electronic consent forms and were able to choose whether to receive the

form link via text or email. We found that having these options was critical for obtaining parental consent, and the text option was especially convenient.

Additionally, the IRB approved the interview facilitation approach, interview guide, and demographic survey. The research team also submitted plans for ensuring the protection of research participants, both: 1) while study participants were completing the interview discussion and demographic survey and 2) following their participation, in terms of how we secured and shared their data. These plans included strategies such as removing the names of interview participants and assigning a unique identification number to each interview transcript to ensure anonymous reporting. Additionally, the research team secured a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health to provide heightened protection for any sensitive information that participants disclosed.

Lastly, the IRB approved the compensation amounts and processes for the study. Young people who participated in the interview received a \$50 Visa gift card to thank them for their time.¹ Consent forms indicated that participants would receive this gift card regardless of if they decided to skip any interview questions or end the discussion at any time. Researchers also verbally reminded study participants of this protocol to ensure they felt comfortable ending the interview when they chose to.

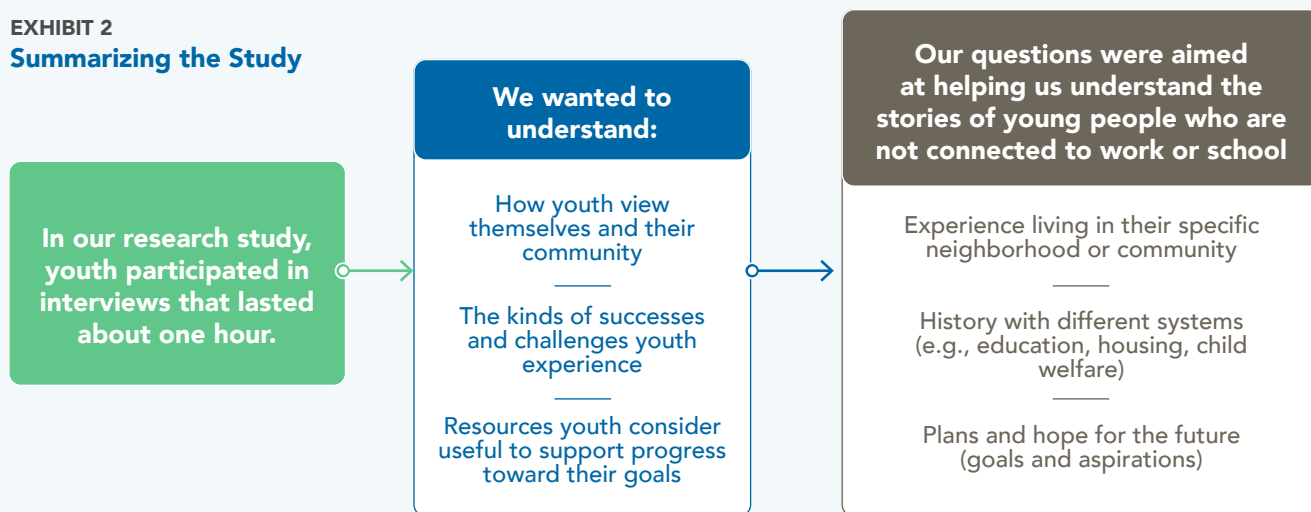
¹Visa gift cards were electronic for virtual interview participation.

Data Collection

The research team conducted semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes, with variations between 30 and 120 minutes to accommodate individual experiences and responses. Interview settings prioritized participant safety, comfort, and familiarity, with in-person and virtual options available (the latter only for participants 18 years old and older). Most participants chose in-person, and three interviewees elected to complete the interview virtually on camera via Zoom. The research team conducted these interviews with participants between August 2023 and January 2024.

EXHIBIT 2

Summarizing the Study



The interview protocol had 13 focused questions on themes of disconnection and systems interaction. (See Exhibit 2 for an overview of research study questions.) These questions were aimed at helping to answer the overarching research study questions. The research team used open-ended questions supplemented by organic probing inquiries to ensure comprehensive, rich data collection (Maxwell, 2005). This approach allowed for flexibility and depth, ensuring a thorough exploration of participants' experiences (Merriam, 2009). Participants were encouraged to elaborate and were given the option to provide additional information post-interview.

Interview questions focused on:

- **Relational Context:** Learning about the connections youth had with people in their lives, such as family, friends, or other informal and formal groups and organizations. This included asking young people about positive and supportive connections, as well as those who they saw as having a negative impact on them. We also asked participants to describe where they lived and how they spent most of their time during a typical day.
- **Role of Systems:** Exploring the role of different systems in the lives of disconnected young people. We usually started by talking about the education system, and then moved on

to asking about their experiences with other systems (e.g., juvenile and criminal justice, child welfare, housing, and health), allowing them to guide which system(s) they felt comfortable discussing. Additionally, we asked young people to talk about how violence impacted their lives, noting that violence can happen in many ways and in a variety of places, including online. We noted that sometimes violence is physical, but it does not have to be. It can be verbal, emotional, psychological, or sexual.

- **Goals and Aspirations:** Discussing how young people defined success and learning about their goals and aspirations, as well as what barriers might stand in the way of achieving these and what supports might help them.

At the end of the interview discussion, study participants completed a brief online demographic survey. The survey included nine questions about participants' backgrounds, focused on:

- Demographic information (age, city, race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation);
- When participants were last enrolled in school; and
- When participants were last employed.

Centering Young People Within the Data Collection Approach

To ensure the comfort and safety of participants, the research team used several trauma-informed and culturally responsive strategies (CDC, 2020; Wong, 2021). These strategies also built on our team's past experiences and lessons from working with young people (Exhibit 3).

Prioritizing emotional and physical safety: In-person interviews were conducted in private spaces within familiar locations, such as community-based organizations and public libraries. In preparation for facilitating interviews, we also worked with leaders of community-based organizations to develop plans necessary to ensure young people felt physically and emotionally safe. At some sites, this involved ensuring that particular study participants were not on site at the same time due to safety and security concerns. In other cases, we also used female-identified interviewers only, when facilitating interviews in spaces that were predominately female-identified youth — including young women who had experienced trauma and sexual assault. For almost all other interviews we had both female- and male- identified interviewers available and asked participants if they had a preference, due to the sensitivity of the conversation. The research team provided snacks and sensory items (e.g., stress balls and fidget spinners).

Meeting young people where they were: We acknowledged that all youth have different experiences and circumstances. Therefore, we allowed for flexibility in our approach. For instance, in addition to our standard interview guide, we had an abbreviated guide to accommodate participants who may have had limited time or had an unexpected issue come up during the interview. The team also allowed for flexibility in formats (i.e., in-person or virtual).

Building rapport with interview participants: Interviewers recognized the importance of building rapport with participants. When staff of community-based organizations were involved and knew participants, we asked them to help make a warm transition and introduction. We also commonly began discussions with rapport builder questions

EXHIBIT 3 Our Greatest Lessons in Doing Youth-focused Data Collection



Recognize the challenges that youth are facing; be adaptive and responsive to their needs.

This requires flexibility and accounting for the complex lives of young people and their multiple commitments and responsibilities.



Listen without judgement; so that young people feel comfortable sharing their stories.

Young people need spaces where they can share ideas and articulate visions for their lives and for the services and initiatives that support them.



Ensure that young people understand how their stories will be used for the research.

Youth are often unaware of the data being collected about them and how those data are used. We must clearly share with them how their data will be used.



Don't be afraid to laugh and show hopefulness.

Youth-focused studies often deal with incredibly complex and difficult issues. Humor lightens the burdens and inspires hope, especially when young people are showing humor and laughter themselves.

noted in the interview protocol, such as: “What do you love most about where you live? How would you describe where you live to someone who has never been here?” or had other informal conversations to foster space for human connection with interviewees before asking protocol questions.

Observing for cues of discomfort and pivoting accordingly: We actively observed for verbal and body language cues of participant discomfort or unease during the interviews, especially when interviewees discussed experiences related to systems engagement or violence (e.g., abuse, fighting, gun violence). We also paid particular attention when interviewees disclosed that they were talking about something they had not discussed in a long time or were sharing something they had not disclosed to anyone or very few people, as these instances can be triggering.

This included observing participants no longer maintaining eye contact, looking away or keeping their heads down while speaking, using low voices, and making short and to-the-point responses. When the research team observed these cues, we: 1) reminded participants that they could skip questions or end early and would still receive the \$50 incentive and 2) ensured that we did not exhibit any reactions of judgment. We also did not make repeated attempts to obtain sensitive information. To ensure the research team stayed cognizant, we included reminders of verbal and physical cues to observe as a part of the interview guide protocol.

Connecting young people to resources: Community-based organizations where we facilitated the interviews had staff available to connect with participants who requested or agreed to supports. In total, nearly a quarter of young people (n = 20) elected to be connected to resources, including help connecting to housing supports, returning to school or working on GED, addressing childcare needs, and connecting to employment. Some young people also requested connections to mental health supports. For instance, one young person requested to connect with staff at a community-based organization after revealing that he had been involved in a drive-by shooting and had never talked to anyone about this prior.

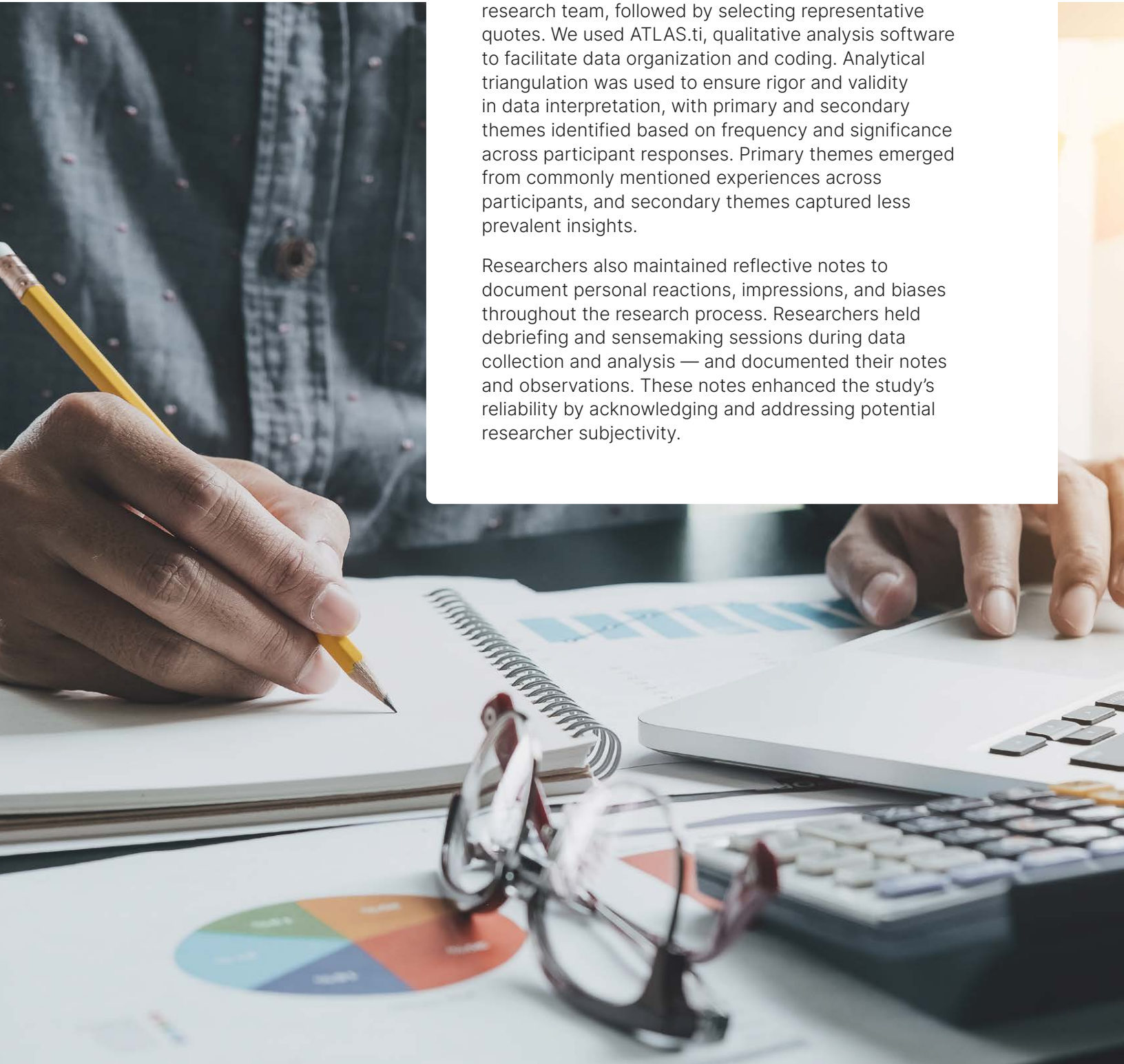
Being transparent about how we intended to use the research findings: We were transparent with participants about how we would use the information they shared with us, to share findings to ultimately inform programs, policies, and funding streams in supporting young people. The research team and Dalio Education’s CTOP team also invited all study participants — along with policymakers and leaders of government, community-based, and educational organizations — to a data walk event. This event had a series of interactive stations, each with a set of posters containing data visualizations, concise explanations, and supporting discussion prompts, with the research team and Community Advisory Group members facilitating discussion and responding to questions.

Acknowledging our own positionalities: The research team interviewers acknowledged how our social identities and lived experiences related to and were different from the young people we interviewed — and ultimately how our positionalities shaped research encounters, processes, and outcomes. Four of the members of the data collection team are African American, and one is Hispanic. We have professional backgrounds in education, public policy, social work, sociology, and public health. All five of the data collection team members have had hands-on experience with studies that have taken a youth-focused and trauma-informed approach; we have also studied issues related to youth leadership and development, particularly for ethnically and racially diverse communities.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The research team used an iterative coding, categorizing, and theme development process. We first read the entire dataset of transcripts. We divided the dataset into smaller, meaningful segments and labeled each with a code. Afterward, themes were identified through collective discussions among the research team, followed by selecting representative quotes. We used ATLAS.ti, qualitative analysis software to facilitate data organization and coding. Analytical triangulation was used to ensure rigor and validity in data interpretation, with primary and secondary themes identified based on frequency and significance across participant responses. Primary themes emerged from commonly mentioned experiences across participants, and secondary themes captured less prevalent insights.

Researchers also maintained reflective notes to document personal reactions, impressions, and biases throughout the research process. Researchers held debriefing and sensemaking sessions during data collection and analysis — and documented their notes and observations. These notes enhanced the study's reliability by acknowledging and addressing potential researcher subjectivity.



5 From Insight to Action: Community Advisory Group's Role in Weaving Lived Experiences into the Research Process

To center the local voices of young people in Connecticut in the research study development, data sensemaking, and findings reporting, the research team convened a Community Advisory Group (CAG) in partnership with Dalio Education's Connecticut Opportunity Project. Because Community Science is based in Maryland, the CAG provided local context for the study team and deepened our understanding of how young people experience disconnection in Connecticut. The CAG was comprised of 13 members, nine youth and young adults, plus four professionals from various sectors, ensuring an intergenerational group and a dynamic exchange of ideas and perspectives. Each young person on the CAG had a direct history and lived experience of being disconnected from school and work. There were two young adults (ages 28 and 32) who were included despite being beyond the typical youth age range because of their ability to speak to their lived experience of disconnection during the age of 14–26 years old. See Exhibit 4 for an overview of the CAG composition.

Establishing the CAG was integral to ensuring that the research process genuinely reflected and prioritized the voices and lived experiences of young people and adults in Connecticut. Including youth and young adults between the ages of 14 and 32 allowed for a comprehensive range of perspectives, from those still navigating adolescence to those who have transitioned into early adulthood. This intergenerational approach was vital because it bridged the gap between different stages of youth development, providing a more holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by young people in diverse contexts. By engaging young adults up to the age of 32, the CAG could capture the continuum of experiences related to education, employment, and community engagement, ensuring that the insights gathered were not only relevant to current youth, but also reflective of the ongoing impacts of these early life experiences as they transition into adulthood.

The CAG played a unique and indispensable role in the process, ensuring that the study was not only about young people, but was conducted with their active involvement and leadership. This was a significant shift from traditional research methodologies, as it validated the experiences and knowledge of youth as critical data sources, thereby altering the power dynamics.

EXHIBIT 4 Community Advisory Group Composition

13
MEMBERS

The CAG membership consisted of 13 members, 9 youth and young adults and 4 professionals from various sectors

14-32
YEARS OLD

Youth and young adults ranged from 14 to 32 years old

4

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERS

The 4 professional members worked with and in support of young people through various organizations:

Compass Youth Collaborative

Our Piece of the Pie

PT Partners

William Casper Graustein Memorial Fund

The CAG's diverse composition, which included professionals from various sectors alongside youth, facilitated a dynamic exchange of ideas and ensured that the research was grounded in real-world experiences and practical insights. This approach was crucial for developing actionable and relevant recommendations, as the professionals could amplify and validate the youth's perspectives while providing additional context and expertise.

In essence, the CAG was pivotal in transforming the research from a top-down exercise to a collaborative, community-driven process that genuinely centered and uplifted the voices of young people.

CAG Planning and Groundwork

In preparation for launching the CAG, the research team and Dalio Education's CTOP team collaborated on a three-month planning process, solidifying its purpose, composition, and expectations.

In the CAG plan, we identified the following as key tenets for guiding the CAG work:

- **Creating Meaningful Engagement:** The CAG would play a central role in informing research study decisions, particularly as it relates to methods for outreach, recruitment, data collection, and the authenticity of the report narrative.
- **Centering Youth Voices:** Youth and young adult community members would account for over 50% of the CAG participants, and the professional leaders invited to participate would bring their experiences to bear primarily to amplify and validate the voices and lived experiences of the young people participating in the CAG.
- **Collaboratively Developing Group Norms:** We would work with members to collectively develop structures, rules, and guidelines for creating a brave, safe space for members to share their perceptions, experiences, and expertise to make a meaningful impact on the study.
- **Centering Capacity Building:** Members would receive ongoing capacity building as a part of the CAG engagement. We would build this training into our monthly meetings on topics such as: 1) understanding research as a tool for storytelling; 2) powerful citizenry and changemaking; 3) using data and information to drive change; and 4) sharing our stories in our own words (public speaking).
- **Compensating Members:** We would compensate all members for their time, including meeting, prep, and follow-up time. We would also provide financial and logistical support for transportation costs associated with in-person meetings, to help overcome barriers to engagement and facilitate a supportive environment.
- **Building a Loving and Brave Space:** We wanted to create a loving and brave space for members to feel comfortable building community and sharing their stories. Therefore, we would build in: 1) focused time for relationship building and 2) open lines of communication, which we will further discuss in the next section.

CAG Member Recruitment

Professional leader members were initially identified through CTOP's extensive network of youth-serving organizations and related sectors, leveraging these connections to ensure a deep understanding of community needs. CTOP and their grantee partners facilitated recruiting youth and young adults across Connecticut cities, including Stamford, Hartford, New Haven, Norwalk, and Bridgeport.

The CAG was diverse in terms of background, experience, and skills of its members. The research team and CTOP prioritized that CAG members have lived experiences, cultural insight, and technical expertise.

- **Lived Experience:** Experience with disconnection from school and work and prior experience engaging with systems such as the housing, child welfare, and criminal justice systems — through their own experience or the experiences of young people they worked with.
- **Cultural Insight:** Knowledge about cultural norms and key issues affecting local communities, as residents living in the key cities the study focused on.
- **Technical Expertise:** For professional members, skills or experience working alongside and in support of young people and content area expertise related to the research.

CAG Activities and Payment

Members of the CAG met monthly through a combination of in-person and virtual engagements. Each meeting included community-building activities, a reminder of group norms and agreements, capacity building and learning topics, feedback discussions, and a wrap-up and a look forward to the upcoming meeting. As an acknowledgment of the contributions of the CAG members, we paid each member up to \$1,500 to compensate them for their time and help cover other costs associated with attending in-person meetings, such as transportation expenses (\$135 per meeting and \$25 to cover transportation).

Engagement With CAG Members

To facilitate the engagement of CAG members, two core components of the CAG work have been capacity building and relationship building (Exhibit 5). Throughout the CAG meetings, there have been various opportunities to build young people's understanding of research as a tool for storytelling and changemaking. For instance, we facilitated trainings on what research is, how data can be collected through qualitative and quantitative approaches, and roles of youth–adult partnerships in informing research.

Additionally, we tended to the importance of relationship and community building — to create a safe space where young people and caring adults felt comfortable sharing their experiences and feedback. We did this by continuously making time to get to know each other (e.g., icebreakers, games, small group discussions). We also collectively established group norms and agreements about how we work together in in-person and virtual spaces. Lastly, the research team created channels for communicating with members one-on-one and as a group — through a phone line dedicated to CAG communications. On this line, CAG members regularly communicated with the researchers, in particular youth members, regarding meeting logistics (date, times, supporting transportation needs), well-being checks, and any support needs we might be able to help with.

CAG members participated in five key phases of the study over ten months for a total of ten sessions:

1. **Introduction and Project Kickoff:** Session 1 helped build mutual understanding and respect among the CAG members and the Community Science and Connecticut Opportunity Project teams. We carefully designed these sessions to establish a foundation of trust, emphasizing creating a safe and welcoming environment. This initial phase was instrumental in acknowledging each community member's unique perspectives and lived experiences as valuable resources for the study. CAG members offered valuable feedback on group agreements, shaping the collaborative nature of the research process. Their active participation and input during this initial phase played a pivotal role in establishing the groundwork for genuine and inclusive engagement with the group.

EXHIBIT 5 CAG Capacity and Relationship Building



During the meeting, professional CAG members participated in a training entitled Engaging in Strength-based Discussions With Youth and Young-adult Partnerships. This training built on the members' previous skills and experiences and allowed them to share strategies on how they had worked alongside young people to help elevate their voices and stories.

2. **Foundation Building for Collaboration:**

In Session 2, we meticulously established groundwork enabling CAG members to use their lived experiences in informing the study. We ensured their comprehensive participation and engagement by acquainting them with the principles of research studies and qualitative methodologies. This strategic initiative was pivotal in equipping them with the necessary competencies for meaningful contribution, enhancing the study's depth and relevance. Incorporating the 'What is a Research Study?' training, offered the CAG members a fundamental understanding of what a study entails, thereby equipping them to better engage with the specifics of the project. Additionally, the training familiarized members with the concept and rationale behind qualitative research methods, elucidating why such methods were used in this study.

Emphasizing qualitative approaches facilitated a profound exploration of the intricate narratives of youth distanced from educational, occupational, and societal supports, prioritizing personal experiences over quantitative data. This methodological rigor underscores our commitment to a nuanced understanding and intervention for disconnected youth, aligning research efforts with the complexities of their lived realities.

- 3. Deepening Understanding of Research and Recruitment:** Session 3 centered on CAG members' active involvement in refining the recruitment strategy, providing essential feedback on the recruitment flyer, and offering suggestions to enhance outreach efforts. Their input on recruitment materials was crucial in ensuring that the outreach was effective and resonated with the target demographic, further enriching the project with a diverse range of participant stories and experiences. In addition to these practical contributions, the session delved into the conceptual underpinnings of qualitative research and storytelling. By framing qualitative data collection as a form of storytelling, the research team encouraged members to embrace their roles as storytellers. Through discussions on the use of qualitative data as a storytelling tool, members gained insights into how the results of the study would be contextualized and used, fostering a deeper appreciation for the research's impact on the lives of youth experiencing disconnection.
- 4. Preliminary Debrief and Sensemaking:** During Sessions 4 through 7, CAG members and researchers collaboratively reviewed and interpreted preliminary data. These sessions introduced CAG members to key concepts and methodologies essential for sensemaking and qualitative data analysis. Through specialized training, members gained a deeper understanding of the process of conducting interviews, qualitative data analysis, and the creation of research themes. By equipping them with the foundational knowledge and skills needed for these activities, we empowered CAG members to actively contribute to sensemaking sessions and shape the narrative of the research. This approach ensured that the research remained grounded in the realities of those it sought to understand and support.

- 5. Final Stage — Findings Reporting and Dissemination:** In the final sessions, 8 through 10, the focus shifted to disseminating findings and formulating policy and program recommendations. The concluding sessions were dedicated to developing strategies for effectively communicating the research findings to a diverse audience, including policymakers, community organizations, and impacted youth. This phase was crucial for ensuring that the insights gained through the study resonated with and were accessible to stakeholders, enhancing the potential for real-world impact. The active involvement of the CAG in this process was vital, as it ensured that the dissemination and application of findings were informed by the voices of those most closely connected to the experiences of disconnected youth. Session 8 delved into the intricacies of the coding process, ensuring that CAG members understood how participant interviews were carefully analyzed to extract valuable insights. In Session 9, we focused on identifying cross-system themes through interactive workshops, providing CAG members with a deeper understanding of the interconnected nature of societal systems.

Finally, in Session 10, we discussed the logistics of the Data Walk event, offering a unique opportunity for community stakeholders to engage interactively with study data and preliminary findings. This final phase was a testament to the project's overarching goal: to translate collaborative research into practical, community-driven solutions that reconnect young individuals with the support and opportunities they need to thrive.

6 Contextualizing Young People's Experience

A total of 74 young people between the ages of 14 and 26 who were not connected to school, work, or other prosocial supports, participated in the study. Understanding how geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic factors intersect with young people's experiences of disconnection is important. The brief demographic survey following the interviews helped shed light on how demographic profiles may have shaped lived experiences.

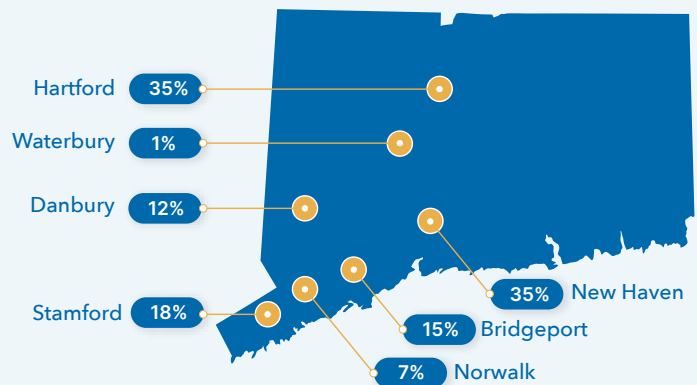
Demographic Profile of Study Participants

The research team sorted the participants by city, race and ethnicity, age, gender, and highest educational attainment for the distribution across the seven cities. Due to the variations in the sample, racial and ethnic categories were condensed and categorized. Exhibits 6-10 show participant demographics by geographical location, race/ethnicity, age, gender, and educational attainment, respectively.

EXHIBIT 6

Interview Participant Total by City (n = 74)

Most participants lived in or were from Hartford, with substantive participation of at least nine or more participants from Stamford, Bridgeport, New Haven, and Danbury.



The majority of participants identified as African American, belonging to the African diaspora, or Latino(a)/Hispanic. This aligns with findings from the recent BCG (2023) and MDRC (2024) studies that indicated that Black and Brown youth are more likely to experience disconnection.

EXHIBIT 7A

Race of Interview Participants (n = 74)

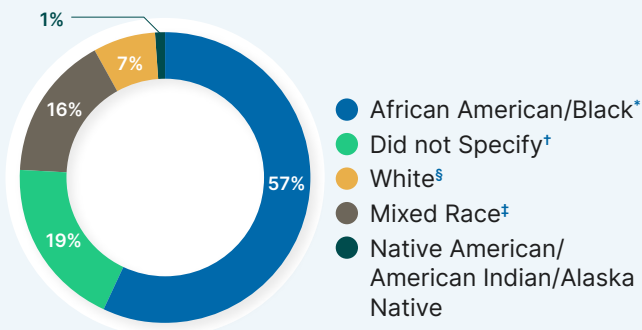
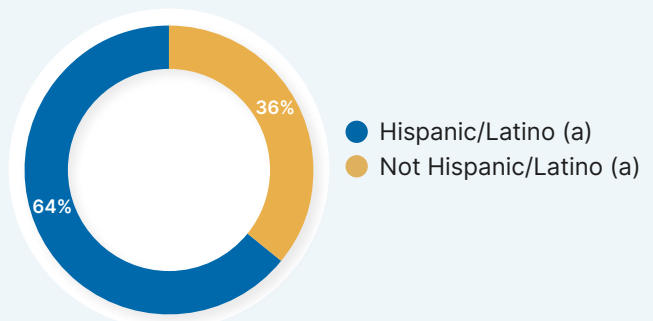


EXHIBIT 7B

Ethnicity of Interview Participants (n = 74)



* African American/Black includes participants who identified as African American, Haitian, and Jamaican.

† Did not Specify includes participants who did not specify their race and those from the Brazilian and other Latin American diasporas.

‡ Mixed Race includes participants who identified with two or more races.

§ White includes White Americans and other self-identified participants but does not include Latino/Hispanic participants.

EXHIBIT 8

Participant Age by Cohort (n = 74)

There is representation from youth aged 14–26. Most participants belonged to the late adolescence age group (18–21 years old).

- 12** 14–17 years old (Early/Mid Adolescence)
- 39** 18–21 years old (Late Adolescence)
- 22** 22–26 years old (Early Adulthood)
- 1** Missing

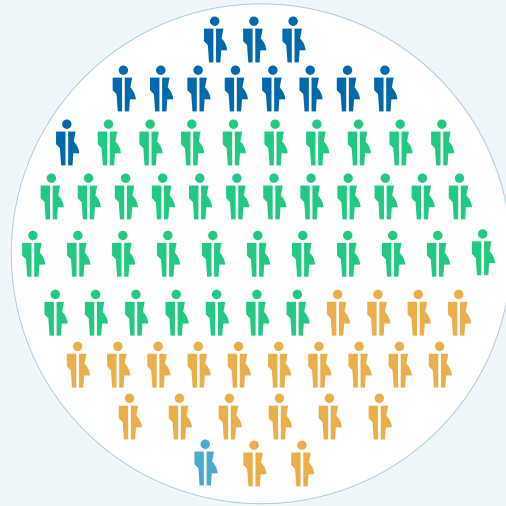
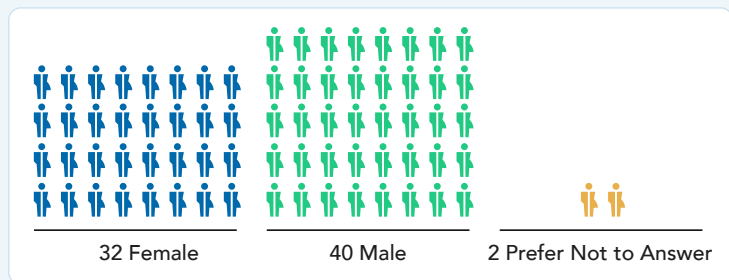


EXHIBIT 9

Participant Gender Identities (n = 74)

Both men and women participated, with more male participation. This also aligns with BCG (2023) and MDRC (2024) reporting, indicating that young men are more likely than women to experience disconnection nationally and within Connecticut.

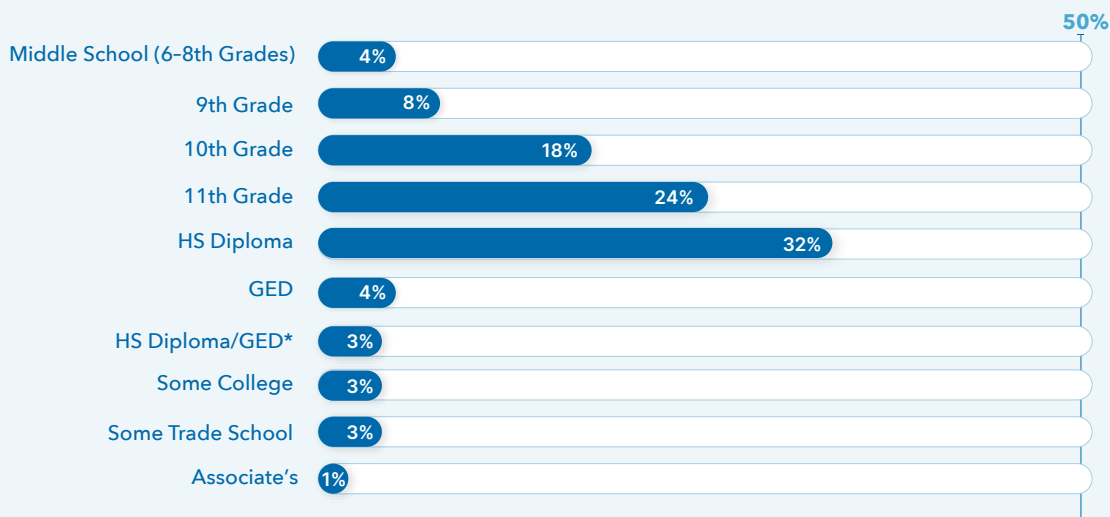


The form offered a range of gender identity options, including genderqueer/ gender non-conforming, intersex, transgender male/transgender man, transgender, and transgender female/transgender woman.

EXHIBIT 10

Highest Educational Attainment (n = 74)

Almost half of the participants had a high school diploma or GED and 54% disconnected from school at some point between middle school and eleventh grade. The remaining few left school during college, community college, or trade school.



*Participants did not specify whether they received a general education diploma or a high school diploma.

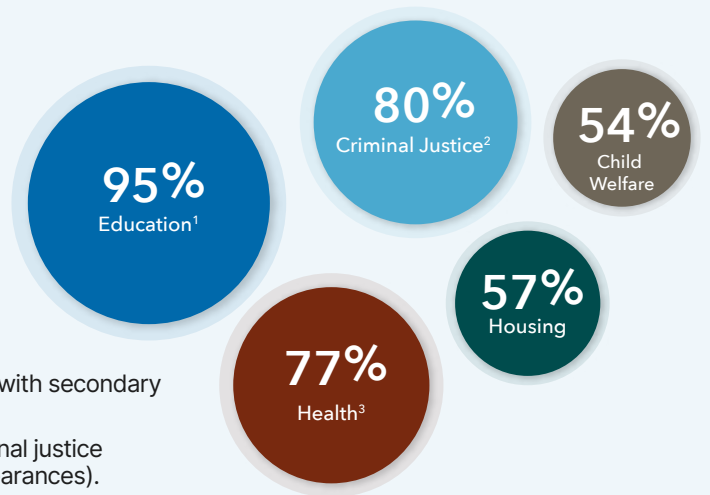
Study Participants' Engagement With Systems

To shed light on the experiences of participants engaging with these systems, Exhibits 11-13 provide an overview of those who reflected on their experiences interacting with specific systems and the number of systems participants typically engaged with. The research team coded interviews for direct or indirect engagement occurrences to understand youth interactions with various systems (education, criminal justice, housing, child welfare, and health). In forthcoming sections, we further discuss young people's experiences interacting with these systems and the impacts of those interactions on their lives.

EXHIBIT 11

Percentage of System Interactions (n = 74)

This table illustrates the percentage of interview participants who discussed engagement with each system. Education is the system that most participants discussed, followed by criminal justice, which includes direct involvement, such as arrests or interactions, and extends to situations where participants cooperated with law enforcement or acted as witnesses, including cases involving their loved ones. Participants had a choice of which system(s) to reflect on during interview discussions.



- Interactions include academic or non-academic engagements with secondary and post-secondary educational institutions.
- Interactions include indirect and direct involvement in the criminal justice system (e.g., visitations, witness testimony, arrests, court appearances).
- Interactions includes indirect and direct engagement with the healthcare and insurance systems inclusive all dimensions of well-being (i.e., physical, mental, and emotional).

EXHIBIT 12

Central Tendency of Systems Interaction

Participants generally interacted or engaged with 4 systems.



EXHIBIT 13

1:1 Participant System Interactions (n = 74)

This table displays the percentages of participants who interacted with multiple systems, highlighting the overlap between different system interactions among the 74 participants. It is structured to show the interaction rates between the Education, Criminal Justice, Child Welfare, Housing, and Health systems.

	Education ¹	Criminal Justice ²	Child Welfare	Housing	Health ³
Education ¹	95%	77%	51%	53%	72%
Criminal Justice ²	77%	80%	50%	50%	61%
Child Welfare	51%	50%	54%	41%	45%
Housing	53%	50%	41%	57%	47%
Health ³	72%	61%	45%	47%	77%

- Interactions include academic or non-academic engagements with secondary and post-secondary educational institutions.
- Interactions include indirect and direct involvement in the criminal justice system (e.g., visitations, witness testimony, arrests, court appearances).
- Interactions includes indirect and direct engagement with the healthcare and insurance systems inclusive all dimensions of well-being (i.e., physical, mental, and emotional).

7 Deeper Look into Systems Young People Interact With: Understanding the Web of Systems Impacting Young People

This research study sought to understand how experiences with systems have shaped the lives of young people — particularly those between the ages of 14 and 26 who were not connected to school, work, and other prosocial supports. To foster environments where young people can thrive, delving into the intricate web of systems they interact with daily is imperative. These systems — **education, criminal justice, housing, child welfare, and healthcare** — play pivotal roles

in shaping their experiences, opportunities, and outcomes. This section aims to provide an overview of each, highlighting the workings of each system, the organizations commonly involved in each, and the systems' collective impact on young people's ability to survive and thrive in Connecticut, in particular young people between the ages of 14 and 26 who were not connected to school or work.

EXHIBIT 14
System Interactions: By Gender, City, and System

This table presents data on system interactions across five systems (Education, Criminal Justice, Child Welfare, Housing, and Health) categorized by gender (Female, Male, and Prefer Not to Identify) and city (Bridgeport, Danbury, Hartford, New Haven, Norwalk, Stamford, and Waterbury). It shows the number of interactions for each gender group within each system and city, along with the total number of interactions for each city and the overall total.

	Education			Criminal Justice		
	Female	Male	Prefer Not To Identify	Female	Male	Prefer Not To Identify
Bridgeport	1	7	0	2	8	0
Danbury	3	5	1	0	2	0
Hartford	16	10	0	15	10	0
New Haven	3	6	0	2	5	0
Norwalk	1	4	0	1	4	0
Stamford	4	7	1	3	6	0
Waterbury	1	0	0	1	0	0
TOTAL	29	39	2	24	35	0

	Child Welfare			Housing			Health		
	Female	Male	Prefer Not To Identify	Female	Male	Prefer Not To Identify	Female	Male	Prefer Not To Identify
Bridgeport	2	3	0	2	2	0	2	5	0
Danbury	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	4	1
Hartford	11	5	0	15	2	0	16	7	0
New Haven	3	3	0	3	3	0	3	5	0
Norwalk	1	3	0	1	3	0	0	3	0
Stamford	4	4	0	5	4	0	5	2	0
Waterbury	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
TOTAL	22	18	0	27	15	0	30	26	1

Here, we provide an overview of the interconnectedness of these systems, and how they impact young people. We then delve deeper into each of these five systems.

1. **Education: How Missed Opportunities Can Be a Precursor to Broader Disconnection**

Disconnection from school often served as a precursor to broader system disengagement, setting the stage for a troubling trajectory of interactions with other systems. Missed opportunities to provide resources and supports to young people within the education system, for a number of reasons (e.g., systemic inefficiencies, resource limitations) hindered its efficacy in addressing some of the multifaceted needs of study participants and contributed to youth's disconnection. The consequences of young people's disconnection from the education system contributed to their introduction to other systems — such as criminal justice — which had reverberating consequences. The education system oftentimes served as the point of entry for youth being exposed to the criminal justice system at a young age.

2. **Housing: How Instability Can Exacerbate Vulnerabilities Leading to Extended Disconnection**

Stable housing is the cornerstone upon which young people can build their futures. From rental costs to the financial strain of housing applications to the lack of housing access, the challenges young people experienced around maintaining a safe and stable home created barriers, oftentimes having an impact on various aspects of their lives, such as physical and mental health, school attendance, and ability to maintain a job. Thus, when adequate housing was not available, and young people lacked safe and stable living environments, the repercussions extended far beyond mere housing instability, placing additional burdens on young people seeking to reconnect with prosocial institutions. This instability in safe, secure, stable, and supportive housing weakened young people's ability to pursue (and achieve) their personal aspirations and forced them to rely on familial and social networks for assistance when available. Furthermore, this reliance on familial and social networks often strained these relationships.

3. **Child Welfare: How a Critical Intervention Point Can be a Double-edged Sword for Youth Experiencing Disconnection**

As a critical intervention point, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) holds the power to either improve the lives of young people experiencing disconnection or exacerbate their vulnerabilities and experiences, highlighting the intricate dynamics at play, where intervention by DCF can serve as a double-edged sword. The stories of young parents, particularly mothers, highlighted the multifaceted nature of the child welfare system. While intended to safeguard and protect the well-being of children and families, DCF intervention also runs the risk of inadvertently worsening their circumstances, thereby propelling them further down the path of disconnection and distrust of prosocial institutions. Young parents discussed their apprehension to engage with DCF as the thought triggered uncertainty and anxiety over their lives, even when reaching out for supports such as securing stable housing or employment, due to the potential ramifications based on prior experiences as a child in the system themselves or experiences working with a caseworker as a parent.

4. **Long-term Impacts of Disconnection: How Older Youth Commonly Experience Sustained Disconnection**

The ramifications of youth disconnection transcend the boundaries of school-aged youth, reverberating throughout young peoples' lives and perpetuating a troubling cascade of obstacles. Notably, challenges and recurring system involvement persisted for older youth, shining light on the longevity that systemic inadequacies can have on young people if they are not adequately addressed and resolved early on, ultimately exacerbating their challenges and vulnerabilities. Throughout the interviews, participants' stories revealed the critical role and profound impact of social capital, support systems, and relationships — or the lack thereof — on the trajectories of youth experiencing disconnection.

This report delves into the intricate web of factors contributing to youth disconnection and its far-reaching consequences, while also highlighting the urgent need to strengthen weak spots in the social safety net to support these youth as they navigate life and engagement within these systems to reconnect to school and work. By addressing these systemic barriers and enhancing access to resources and support services, young people can gain more stable financial security and economic freedom. Even more so, interventions aimed at fostering meaningful connections and support systems can mitigate the often long-term consequences of disconnection, ultimately facilitating the reintegration of youth into educational and workforce opportunities.

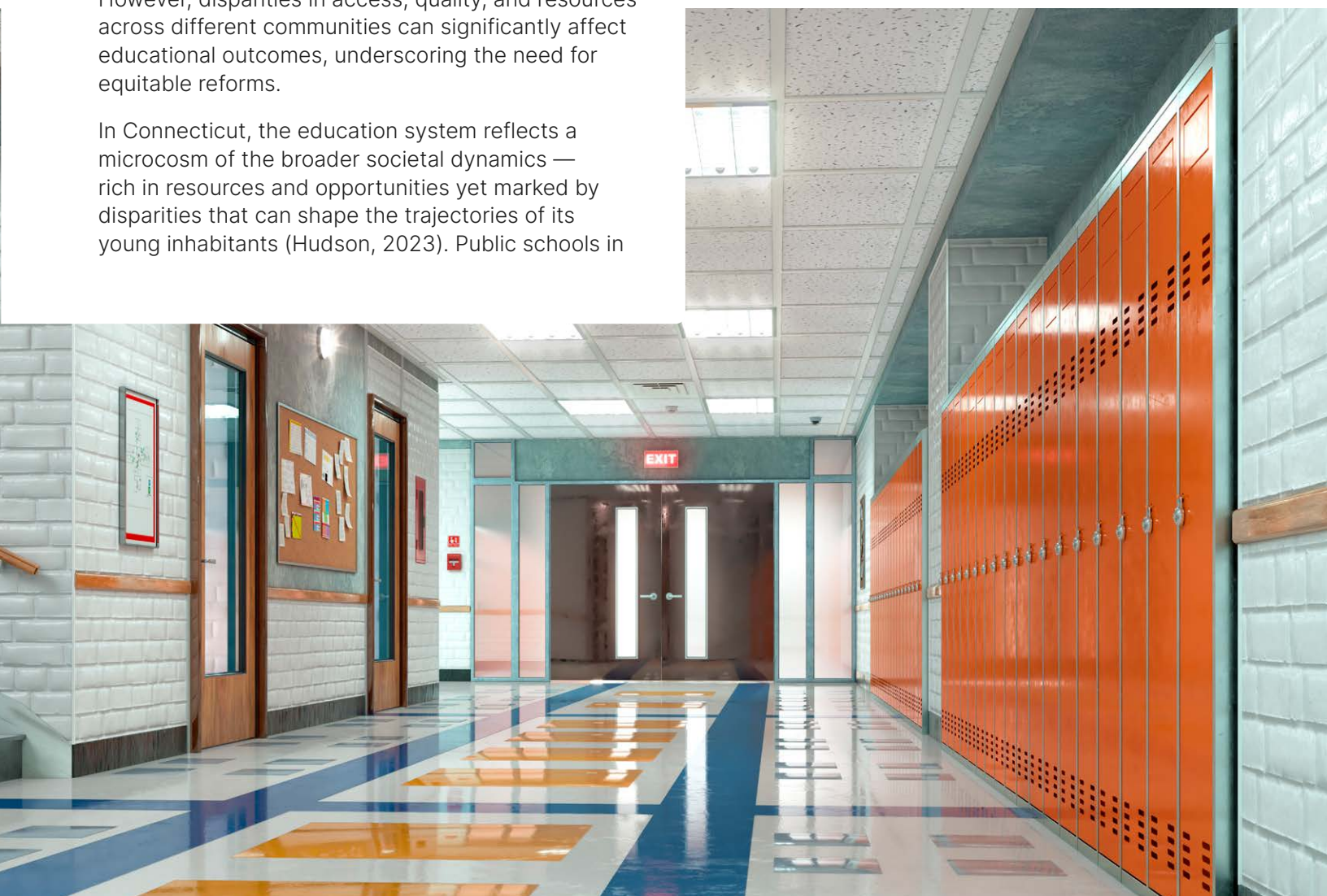
The Dual Faces of the Education System

The education system is a beacon of hope, offering knowledge and opportunities that can pave the way to a brighter future. It serves as the cornerstone of personal and professional development for young people. The system encompasses a broad spectrum of institutions, from early childhood centers to higher education and vocational training facilities. This system's primary goal is to equip young individuals with the knowledge, skills, and critical thinking necessary to navigate life's challenges and contribute meaningfully to society. Various organizations play crucial roles within this system, including public and private schools, charter schools, colleges, and educational nonprofits. These entities work together to provide a structured learning environment that fosters intellectual growth and social development. However, disparities in access, quality, and resources across different communities can significantly affect educational outcomes, underscoring the need for equitable reforms.

In Connecticut, the education system reflects a microcosm of the broader societal dynamics — rich in resources and opportunities yet marked by disparities that can shape the trajectories of its young inhabitants (Hudson, 2023). Public schools in

affluent districts boast advanced STEM programs, arts initiatives, and college preparatory resources, setting their students on a path to higher education and promising careers. Conversely, schools in under-resourced areas struggle to provide basic educational needs, let alone the enriched curricula or extracurricular programs that foster a love for learning and a vision for the future (Fleisig & Curran, 2023).

For young people between the ages of 14 and 26, especially those disconnected from work and school, this disparity in educational quality and access is not just a hurdle but a chasm separating them from their more fortunate peers. The journey through the education system for these individuals is fraught with barriers — lack of access to quality teaching, insufficient support for learning differences, and a curriculum that often fails to reflect their lived experiences or engage their interests.



Education System Interactions as the Onset of Youth Disconnection: Unveiling Missed Opportunities, Systemic Failures, and Cross-system Engagement

For many youth, the journey toward disconnection often began with a negative experience within the education system, which varied from negative peer interactions to negative staff–student relationships to issues of intellectual and academic rigor, such as not feeling challenged or not receiving the academic support needed to succeed.

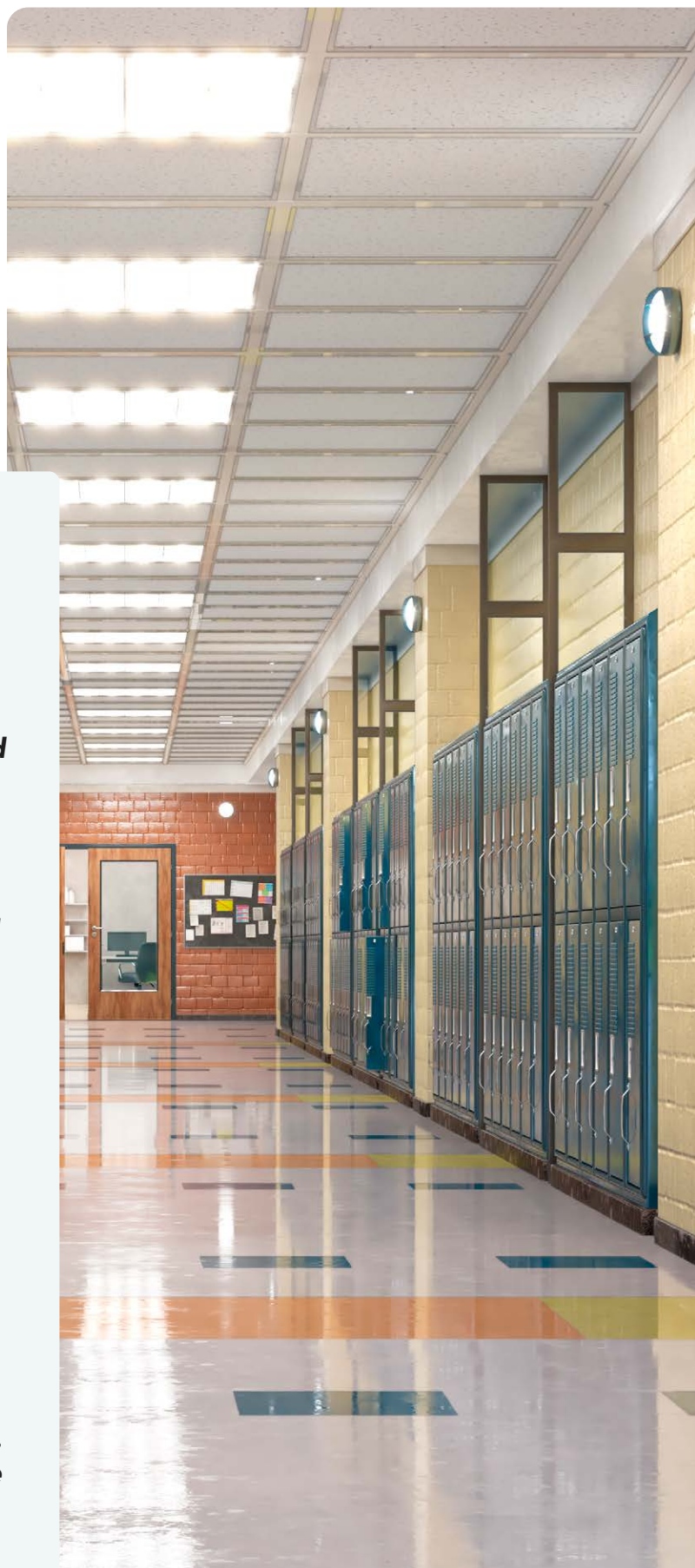
Limited access to quality education, exacerbated by other disparities, such as navigating complex family dynamics, left many youth grappling with whether school was for them or worth their time. For instance, study participants stated:

“Well, COVID fucked a lot of shit up. And then I was in a behavioral school on top of that. And I was trying to tell everybody I'm like, yeah, you got me in a class of kids that are not on my learning level. You guys are teaching me stuff I already know. I'm acing everything I'm doing. I want to learn something. And I let you people know that and no one was really doing anything to help change the situation. And at that point I'm like, put me in public school or something. But no one was going for it. So, I dropped out.”

➤ 18-year-old White Young Woman from Hartford

“A lot of things could have been done differently. I thought when I was still in school, a lot of stuff could have been done differently. And I think about it all the time.... I don't like the way I-- look how I turned out; I got a record. I got to go to this fucking program probation shit that they making me go to. Shit. I can't even be going there sometimes because it's just too much”

➤ 19-year-old African American Young Man from Bridgeport





The experiences of disconnection were further nuanced by cultural, racial, and linguistic differences, as evidenced by the accounts of immigrant participants.

For many of these youth, their cultural, racial, or linguistic identities complicated efforts to build connections and effectively navigate the system. The lack of transitional resources and services often led to social isolation, academic regression, and or behavioral conflicts.

These narratives highlight the dire need for more culturally, racially, and linguistically responsive interventions, especially in communities with high immigrant populations, such as Danbury. As interviewees noted:

“One of the most challenging part about school was definitely English, not just learning the language, but the class, like, literature, grammar.”

> 17-year-old Brazilian Young Man from Danbury

“Yeah, like my Portuguese made it harder for me. Made it very hard for me. Like if you have a Brazilian class, then I will take it, like a Portuguese class, then I will take it.”

> 21-year-old Brazilian Young Man from Danbury

“I feel like it would have been a better experience if I knew English because I would have a good time, you know, with my friends or something. But I never had friends in school when I came. It was very hard for me.”

> 25-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Norwalk

“I remember some Americans used to be like, “oh, speak English,” like bully me because I didn't speak English. But it was like nothing to me because I knew I would learn English sometime.”

> 16-year-old Hispanic/Latino Young Man from Danbury

Education as the Great Connector: Connecting Youth to Wraparound Supports and Social Services

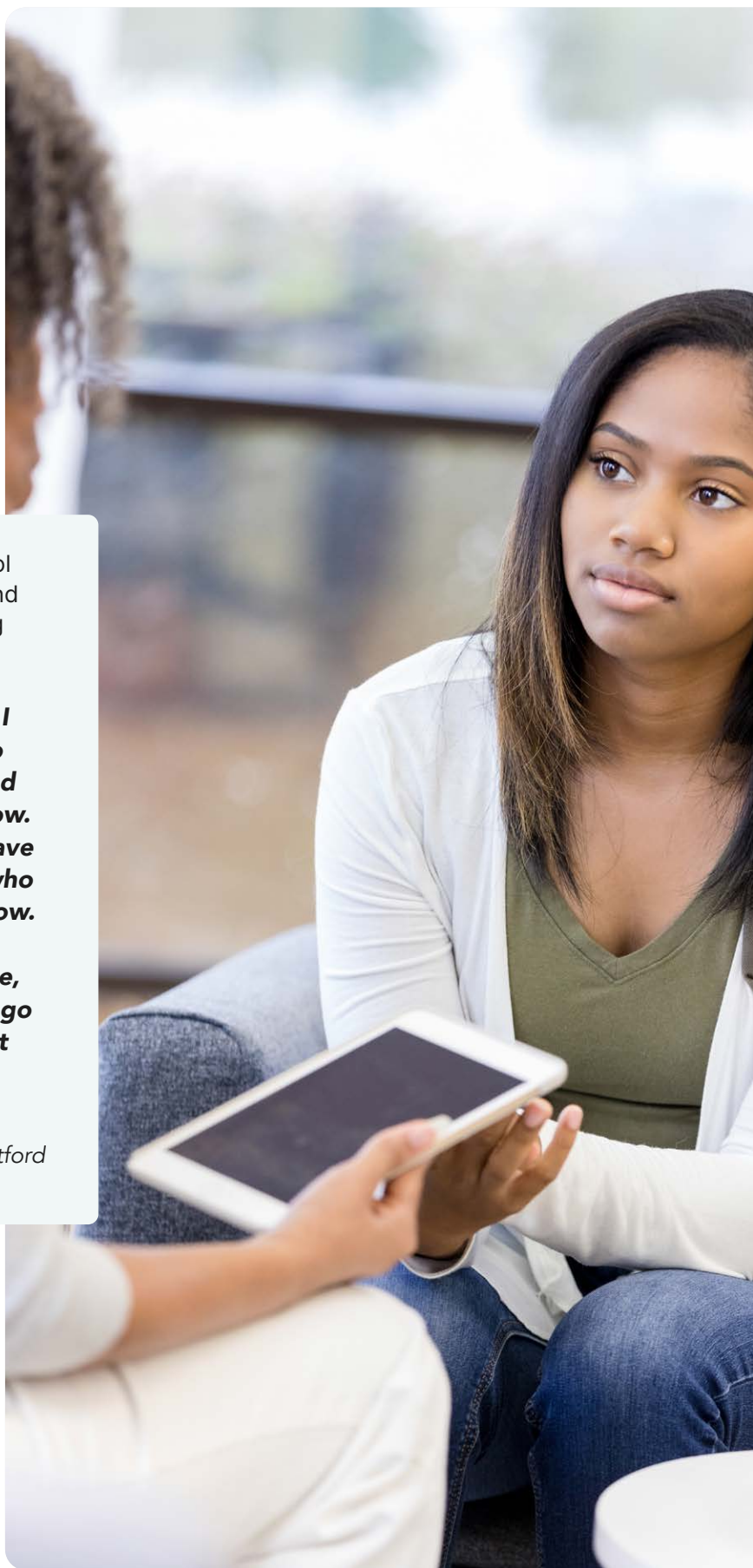
Although the education system serves as a primary site of disconnection, it also harbors opportunities for empowerment, connectivity, and reconnection. Despite the education system triggering disconnection for many youth, it also served as a point of connection for others. Our research revealed that for some, it was the great connector — connecting youth to vital social services and support networks. In addition, some who had disconnected from school expressed a desire to reconnect to minimize other system engagement and positively alter their life paths.

For instance, one interviewee recounted how school could have supported her in achieving her goals, and her observations of how school helped other young people thrive.

“I wanted to be on the block all the time until I started catching them charges back-to-back to back-to-back. And I was like, damn, see, if I had finished school, I could have had a job right now. I'd have been somewhere else. Like I would have been like somewhere else. Like I got friends who I went to school with, who are my age right now. They got their own apartments, jobs and they starting their families or whatever. Feel me like, and I'm still on the block. I want to be able to go to college one day. I want to be able to do shit like that. I should be in college right now.”

> 19-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

These connections to education, resources, and opportunities are particularly critical given that when youth disconnect from school, their interaction with other systems soon followed. Findings from “Connecticut’s Unspoken Crisis: Getting Young People Back on Track” (BCG, 2023) corroborate this reality, revealing the prevalence of major barriers that hinder reconnection to school once disconnection occurs.





Young people uplifted that a critical asset of the education system was that it helped them connect to caring adults. They shared favorable memories of connections with supportive adults in the school setting, such as teachers, paraprofessionals, school counselors, or social workers.

"I had this counselor named [counselor's name], and he was always supportive; he was there. Even when I felt like I was failing, and I wasn't doing something right he always talked me up. Like he always filled my head with positivity. I had this teacher [teacher name] She always gave me leeway on my work like, she didn't let me like half ass it, but she gave me leeway. So, with the help of her and then [teacher name], my other teacher, and having that support system and really make you wanna get up and go do it like you have to do this for you."

> 19-year-old African American Young Woman from Bridgeport

"My English teacher, since English wasn't my best part of my high school, going to say, career. She helped me a lot. She helped me write my college essay. My junior year English teacher, and also my senior year English teacher. So, she helped with a lot of things, not just in class."

> 17-year-old Brazilian Young Man from Danbury

"Oh my, during my sophomore year, I had this awesome English teacher. She would go out of her way to teach us a lot of stuff that probably wasn't even on the syllabus. So, on the curriculum. So, it was awesome. She would go on calls with us. She would help us reading stuff that, that even the Americans would have problems with, like Shakespeare and stuff. So, it was awesome. I think a teacher like that would be great."

> 19-year-old Brazilian & African American Young Man from Danbury

"The teachers welcomed me...how they were like helping me with my work and stuff that motivated me to graduate because I was failing severely. I was considered a junior, almost a sophomore. So that motivated me to complete my goal of graduation. I gained all the credit that I needed, and I got extra credit for how I fixed my behavior and all that, and boom, I walked the stage."

> 18-year-old Hispanic/Latino Young Man from Hartford

Some participants also discussed how these adults supported them in challenging times:

“My principal helping me out through my ups and downs, coming home from jail, getting back on track. I didn't know if I'd graduate. A lot of the stuff... But they helped me. My principal helped me out a lot.”

➤ *17-year-old African American Young Man from New Haven*

“But when they did arrest me for that, I did like a day because the principal, everybody wrote me letters, everything, came to my court. A lot of people showed up and supported me and the judge let me go because they wanted me to graduate. I was graduating that same week and I had to do my midterms. So, he wanted me to be there.”

➤ *17-year-old African American Young Man from New Haven*

However, what young people shared shed light on two key considerations regarding their support network. First, they commonly recounted past relationships that were not part of their support system at the time of the interview. Second, young people's connectedness to caring adults was often a single or small set of individuals in the school setting — reflecting a limited network of support within the education system.

Systemic inefficiencies and resource limitations often impeded the education system's potential to equalize opportunities for all students. Although the education system offers vital hubs for accessing and connecting to services and cultivating meaningful connections with caring adults, the efficacy of these resources and supports are often inadequate due to a lack of resources — this has led to missed opportunities for intervention. Our findings underscore the critical missed opportunities for the system to act as an intervention point for addressing disconnection. Thus, this cascading impact highlights the urgent need for proper resourcing and targeted interventions within educational settings to prevent and address disconnection at its onset. These instances of missed opportunities amplified the youth's risk of future disconnection and entanglement with other systems.



Criminal Justice: Early Interactions Within the School System and Beyond

The criminal justice system, encompassing law enforcement, courts, juvenile and adult facilities, and legal aid services, plays a complex role in the lives of young people. While designed to uphold legal standards and ensure public safety, its interactions with youth, particularly those from marginalized communities, can have profound and lasting impacts. The system's approach to juvenile offenses, policing practices, and rehabilitation efforts are critical areas requiring careful consideration and reform to prevent long-term harm and promote positive outcomes — especially given that those from marginalized communities often face systemic barriers that can lead to disproportionate rates of arrest, sentencing, and incarceration. Furthermore, past studies, as well as our study, highlight the role that the school system commonly plays within the larger criminal justice system.

Education System as a Gateway to the Criminal Justice System

The education system has played a pivotal role in youth's interactions with the criminal justice system. For many participants, their first connection to criminal justice started in school or was the reason for leaving school. Rather than resolving school-based infractions internally through educational interventions, punitive measures and involvement with local law enforcement agencies frequently exacerbate young people's entanglement with the criminal justice system. Consequently, many young individuals found themselves ensnared in a revolving door of interactions with law enforcement, initiated through the education system.

School-based incidents were escalated to involve law enforcement agencies, particularly impacting African American youth. This connection represents a troubling pattern wherein education institutions served as conduits to the criminal justice system, perpetuating cycles of early and enduring system engagement for numerous youth. Instances of police engagement with school-based infractions underscore the early criminalization of youth, with disciplinary actions morphing into criminal justice involvement. Moreover, these encounters left everlasting impacts on young people's trajectories, perpetuating cycles of system entanglement and diminishing their prospects. Numerous young people recounted their initial encounters with the criminal justice system beginning within the education environment, resulting in accelerated disengagement and school attrition

and leading to a perpetual cycle of poverty and criminalization extending beyond the education system.

These narratives underscore the profound harm inflicted upon youth due to the interconnectedness of these systems, highlighting a gradual erosion of trust in the education system due to its complicity in the criminalization of youth.

A 23-year-old White Young Woman from Hartford recalled her school introducing her to the criminal justice system after an incident in which she kicked a school cross guard for making her feel uncomfortable. She stated:

"They call me down to the office. You kicked this lady? The school pressed charges on me because she worked for them."

While a 26-year-old African American Young Man from Stamford recalled being referred to the criminal justice system at the young age of nine, after accidentally "poking" a teacher with a pencil during an altercation with another (White) student. He recalled,

"I had got in a fight, and I had to use the pencil...I ended up [accidentally] poking the teacher because, like, she was trying to stop the fight and got in the way. And they arrested me for poking her with a pencil. I was only nine. I was in fourth grade... They brought me to [a] juvenile [detention center]."

Unfortunately, instances like these are central to the school-to-prison pipeline. A study by Skiba et al. (2011) highlights disparities in disciplinary actions, showing that Black students are disproportionately subjected to harsher punishments, compared to their White counterparts for similar school-based infractions. Such discriminatory practices and unequal treatment of students within educational settings contribute to the over criminalization of Black youth, laying the groundwork for their entanglement with the criminal justice system at an early age. However, not all interactions were the result of violent interactions; some of the referrals to the criminal justice system simply stemmed from attendance issues.

One example illustrates this trajectory: a 26-year-old African American Young Man from Stamford was sent to juvenile for truancy, stating,

"I was in juvenile in high school as well for like truancy, not going to school, not showing up, not being where I was supposed to be at."

The interconnectedness of the criminal justice and education systems is multifaceted. Other instances of alignment between the systems were reflected in the environment and culture schools created.

An 18-year-old African American Young Man from Norwalk shared:

“Just off the fact, like, I've been to multiple different schools from different counties, different states. You know, mostly older schools in Florida, you start your morning off, you come to school, there's police officers outside, you get pressed down, you gotta walk through a metal detector. Even after that, you can't even go to the bathroom without the police or the security guard escorting you going to the bathroom.”

Thus, by further perpetuating these environments and practices, these interactions had lasting impacts on youth lived experiences far beyond the education system.

While not representative of all youth, the education system represents a sobering indictment of systemic inequities directly connected to both the education and criminal justice systems. By elucidating the interconnectedness of their school-based experiences and interactions with law enforcement, participants underscore some of the systemic consequences of engaging law enforcement agencies in school-based disciplinary interactions and brought light to the urgent need for holistic reforms aimed at dismantling this detrimental cycle and interconnectedness of these two systems. Moreover, the complicity of schools involving law enforcement in school-based infractions further exacerbates the cycle of criminal justice involvement, highlighting the need for restorative educational approaches and support networks to reduce the likelihood of early criminal justice system engagement for youth.

Distrust in the Criminal Justice System

Given early interactions with the criminal justice system grounded in the school setting and other interactions that interviewees or their loved ones experienced, young people expressed that they do not trust that the criminal justice system is fair and just. When youth were asked to reflect on their experience with the criminal justice system, most discussed their experiences with law enforcement. Specifically, several reported that they had a negative experience with law enforcement that impacted their current viewpoint of police officers. For example, some stated that because their experience with law enforcement involved someone they cared about (i.e., friend, family, neighbor), it impacted their viewpoint that people can get in trouble with law enforcement just for being associated with a person. This fueled their distrust because law enforcement often treated their loved ones negatively as well as themselves in the process.

Youth that have a mistrust in the system were less likely to seek help for services or resources from law enforcement. This feeling of mistrust is often perpetuated by media that highlights the disproportionate way Black and Latino drivers are treated during traffic stops in Connecticut (Turner, 2023). Despite Black and Latino youth feeling distrust in law enforcement, current research suggests religious and social institutions (e.g., youth groups, schools) that work collaboratively with the justice system have the potential to improve youth perception (Fine et al., 2019). This emphasizes the need for systems, such as criminal justice and education, to collaborate to deliver consistent information about services and resources needed to connect back to school and work.

Although most of the youth perceived their previous experience with law enforcement negatively, one participant stated that their experience reaffirmed their belief that there were still good police officers out there:

“It [a particular experience] made me know that there's good officers outside in the world. I've never been the type of person that think like all, especially White officers, are bad. I don't think that. I still don't think that to this day.”

> 21-year-old African American & Hispanic/
Latino Young Man from Hartford

Several youth also stated that despite the prevalent perception that all police officers are bad, there are good police officers in the system:

“The justice system in general impacts youth. I would say, it’s going to be negative only based off a small proportion of cops that become the whole image and that changes the whole youth’s look on the whole system. I think that has a big impact on kids because it makes them move in a type of way, thinking every cop is out there for them when it’s really not. But that small but big portion of people in law enforcement or the justice system who make it look bad in general impact this generation as a whole.”

➤ 19-year-old African American Young Man from Bridgeport

These findings highlight the need to invest in strategies to engage with youth in a meaningful way that improves their perception of law enforcement. Consistent with research conducted by Harris and Jones (2020), the findings highlighted the relationship between direct and vicarious experience with law enforcement and lower levels of respect, trust, and confidence in the police’s ability to protect and serve the community. Recent research demonstrated that improving youth perception of law enforcement resulted in more youth willing to cooperate with police officers and file police reports (Sheeran et al., 2023).



Barriers to Reintegration: The Shadow of the System

Youth perceived the criminal justice system as broken and not effective at rehabilitating offenders.

Several expressed concerns that they felt the system was designed to punish them by placing them in jails and creating a system where arrested youth become repeat offenders as opposed to rehabilitated people.

For example, one participant reported that once they are in the system, the consequences follow them for the rest of their lives. It impacts future employment as well as opportunities to improve their current lifestyle. Representative quotes are below:

“I feel like they’re coming so hard at me, it’s not like I’m a criminal. You already had me on a bracelet while I’m pregnant. You already keep ruining my life. I can’t really do stuff because I want to go to school and get my EMT and y’all know that and y’all don’t give a shit, y’all just care about ruining lives. Let’s just ruin her reputation or career.”

› 21-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

“If you’re under parole or probation in the state of Connecticut, you can’t leave the state unless you have permission to leave the state because they feel like – because you’re a fugitive, they think that you’re gonna go out and do something different or whatever the case maybe. They like to keep you stuck and you can’t even better your life in this state.”

› 24-year-old African American Young Man from New Haven

“I feel like whatever you say, if you are in the system once entered after first encounter, repeat, not to change, is set to repeat. It’s like a chain reaction.”

› 26-year-old African American from Stamford

Additionally, youth argued that the justice system does not care about them as people and treats them like animals instead of providing support to better themselves. Youth also stated that they felt they were treated unfairly because of the color of their skin, which further perpetuated their mistrust of law enforcement:

“They [law enforcement] treat you like animals. They give you years in there. They’ll definitely take your life from. They’ll take your life from you. They wanna see you sit in a cage.”

› 26-year-old African American Young Man from Bridgeport

“I mean, I feel like the officers are on the Black kids rougher because they know he smoke or he drink or he play with guns or whatever. It’s a certain stereotype or he has money. I mean, that certain stereotype the police officer looks at us in a way it’s hard to explain.”

› 26-year-old African American Young Man from Stamford

Past studies have shown that punishing people in jail and prison is not an effective strategy for reducing crime (Bryant, 2023). These findings highlight the need to utilize a restorative justice approach to rehabilitating youth by identifying strategies to repair harm caused by crime and conflict as opposed to punishing them and further perpetuating the unfair treatment of traditionally underrepresented populations (Pointer, 2021). This is particularly critical for young people who may already be experiencing disconnection in other ways, such as from school, work, and other social supports — and for those who are not experiencing disconnection to ensure that interaction with criminal justice does not ultimately propel them into disconnection.

Furthermore, young people struggled exiting the system once incarcerated, further exacerbating disconnection from education and employment opportunities. Several reported that their negative experiences with law enforcement were associated with the feeling of being punished for their actions as opposed to addressing the root cause of the problem. Youth also stated that being incarcerated changed their perception because it made them realize that they did not want to be incarcerated again.

Whereas other youth argued that the criminal justice system is not effective at helping them improve their lives to break the cycle of being in and out of jail for the rest of their life:

"I feel like people do change and the system nowadays are just messed up. They don't give people chances. And instead of helping us young people, they sit there and they do what they do to us. That's why we'd be running away going to jail doing dumb shit, because the system is just all bad."

➤ 21-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

The research regarding incarceration of youth shows that it is not an effective strategy for rehabilitating youth, reducing delinquent behavior, helping young people succeed in education and employment, or reducing the racial and ethnic disparities experienced by traditionally underrepresented populations (Mendel, 2023). Additionally, research suggests that placing youth in a juvenile justice system can cause more harm than good and does little to protect the communities in which they reside (Juvenile Law Center, 2024).

Despite the negative outcomes associated with incarceration, some youth reported that they had a positive experience with the criminal justice system. Specifically, one reported that he developed positive relationships while being incarcerated, and that resulted in a support system that helped improve his life.

Other youth reported that their experience with the criminal justice system allowed them to realize that they never wanted to be incarcerated again:

"So, I feel I got like I got off fairly, did some community service. I thought about that and I'm like that's not who I want to be."

➤ 26-year-old African American Young Man from Norwalk

"It taught me that I'll never go back there again and to stay out of trouble, and take care of myself. Don't worry about anybody else."

➤ 22-year-old African American Young Man from Stamford

Ultimately, young people who have negative experiences with the criminal justice system are more likely to experience frequent exclusion and accumulated disadvantage, such as reductions in access to support and services, which can lead to the reoccurrence of delinquent behavior (Novak & Fagan, 2022). Consistent with the research, several youth reported that they felt the system was designed for repeat offenders because the environment doesn't support positive behavioral changes or provide support to develop prosocial skills that would help them transition into everyday life.

Housing: The Foundation of Stability and Opportunity

Along with understanding the role of the education and criminal justice systems in the lives of young people, it is also critical to recognize the role of the housing system. Safe and stable housing is the foundation upon which young people build their lives. The housing system governs housing availability, affordability, and quality through policies, regulations, and services. It plays a crucial role in ensuring young individuals have the security and stability needed to pursue education, maintain health, and achieve personal growth. Furthermore, safe and supportive living environments enable young people to connect to school, work, and other prosocial institutions (Cunningham & MacDonald, 2012).

Organizations involved in this system include housing authorities, affordable housing developers, and tenant rights organizations. They work together to address challenges such as homelessness, housing insecurity, and substandard living conditions. Efforts to expand access to affordable, quality housing are essential for removing barriers to success and enabling young people to thrive.

Visualizing the housing system as a structure of interconnected rooms, each representing different aspects of housing (affordability, stability, quality), illustrates the foundational role of safe and stable housing in supporting young people's lives. However, when these break down, youth face instability before adulthood or experience inaccessible and unaffordable housing as a young adult, and homelessness and housing insecurity present significant challenges (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Our findings reveal the critical need for systemic reforms. Youth discussed the lack of affordable market rate housing, an ineffective housing safety net, strained relationships with friends and family who provide informal housing support, and all too frequent experiences with homelessness. Addressing these issues is paramount for housing to fulfill its role as a foundation of support rather than a source of instability.

Substantial Gaps Young People Navigate in the Housing System

Rent costs are too high, and even applying for housing can be expensive. Youth in Connecticut are facing many of the same housing pressures as people across the nation. Rising rents are increasingly raising the barrier to entry for new renters. In 2023, at the state minimum wage of \$15 per hour, a person would have needed to work 69 hours a week to afford a 1-bedroom apartment (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2024). The limited number of subsidized affordable units in the state further restricts the options for young people. These limitations impacted the youth in our study; some discussed difficulties finding affordable housing. High rent posed one concern for youth navigating the housing market in Connecticut.

In addition to rent, incidental costs also pose a barrier to entry for young renters:

"I went through hell [to find an apartment]. Like hell. And I still don't even have it yet. Like, the apartment is \$1,000 and you gotta go through a trillion things to get an apartment... like, all types of background checks and you gotta pay all types of fees. And it's crazy. How you want \$1,000 in rent plus a \$75 background check, plus a \$50 application fee."

> 25-year-old Latina Young Woman from Hartford

"I just know one rent is gonna be the one whole SSI check."

> 18-year-old White Young Woman from Hartford

Background checks, application fees, and security deposits all pose additional up-front costs. Formal housing supports, from nonprofits, philanthropy, and national programs, are critical to making housing affordable. Yet, youth reported substantial barriers to accessing these funds, which are already limited due to decades of policy neglect at the state and federal levels (Shapiro et al., 2016).

Formal housing supports are an important mitigating factor, but their impact is limited by funding and barriers. Young people attempting to access formal housing support reported experiences with high barriers to entry, long waitlists, and slow-moving bureaucracy. Research corroborates this; Housing Choice Vouchers often have long waitlists, if the list is open at all (Kim, 2022). In Connecticut, many vouchers go unused due to difficulty finding willing landlords and bureaucratic hurdles to their use.

Our interviews revealed the struggles youth face in accessing support, which led to issues such as frequent moves, reliance on informal housing support, and long-standing housing instability or homelessness.

While nonprofits offer supports for youth in trying to access affordable housing, insufficient funding for vouchers and a lack of available units limits the impact of this support:

"It's so hard to get into it. And I feel like it should not be like that, especially if people are trying to get people's house from a program like this or a shelter, it should be, I feel a little easier just because there's people out here that really need that shit. They should really make more programs for people to have their babies with them too as well."

> 19-year-old African American Young Woman from Hartford

"When you sign up [for housing assistance], like you be on a waiting list forever and then you got to go through a whole long process before you even get to get anywhere. And then I feel like it should be like quicker ways to be able to go out there."

> 20-year-old African American Young Man from New Haven

"I feel like with Section 8 [housing choice voucher program] they pick and choose who they do and don't want to give housing to. It's not right. I feel like everybody who's going through stuff, they should get accepted and not have to wait years."

> 21-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

Housing Instability as a Barrier for Connecting to Other Systems

When young people did not have stable and supportive housing, it was hard for them to focus on achieving other aspirations, and they often had to turn to family and friends for help. Housing is more than a matter of shelter. Stable housing has well-documented impacts on other outcomes for youth, including physical and mental health, school attendance, and educational outcomes (Brennan & Galvez, 2017; Brennan et al., 2014; Hernández & Swope, 2019). Therefore, when housing systems break down, or youth are denied a safe and stable home, the impacts are far-reaching. The evidence from our study supports this conclusion. Participants commonly reported facing these challenges with housing — and broader housing challenges are reflected in Connecticut's long-standing battles with affordable housing access. A Connecticut Housing Authority needs assessment (2023) placed the low-income housing unit gap at 169,000 affordable units. This lack of affordable housing had cascading impacts on the youth in our study.

Young parents, particularly mothers, expressed fears that housing instability would lead to negative interactions with Connecticut's Department of Children and Families (DCF). One of the systems that housing interacts with most directly is child welfare. Unstable or unhealthy housing can cause negative interactions with the DCF or even losing custody.

Multiple young mothers discussed fear of DCF involvement beginning or being escalated by their housing situations:

"When people do the 211 call and say certain things, next thing you know DCF's involved. When it's really not even their fault or anything, but they're not doing anything bad. They just want to take a different route to get in housing because not every way to housing out here is pretty nice."

> 19-year-old African American Young Woman from Hartford

"I need to get out of my grandma's before I have my baby. And then I kept thinking of a situation like, when my daughter would be here if I didn't want to give birth and they [DCF] start looking into my background like, you live with your grandma, and so I need my own apartment."

> 21-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

Homelessness is a significant barrier for youth trying to get back on their feet and reconnect to school or the workforce. A

number of young people discussed how experiencing homelessness is a major destabilizing force in many aspects of their lives. The lack of stable housing can make it difficult to find and maintain employment. Seeking housing support through shelters may also pose a range of barriers for young people documented in this and other studies, such as challenges with shelter access and transportation and the lack of youth-oriented shelters (Ha et al., 2015).

Study participants also noted experiencing issues with shelters keeping off hours or requiring nightly check-ins, pointing out that even accessing temporary shelters can consume significant amounts of time and energy.

"So they put me in a little halfway house or whatever. I was in a halfway house, but I kept getting kicked out of halfway house having to start over, go back in there, reapply to get back in there and stuff because it was too far from where I hang out. They kick you off the compound and send you to go do whatever. You just can't be here between the hours of seven o'clock and nine o'clock, 9 PM. You can't be in that area, so they send you away. Where I'd be at is all the way on the other side of town, take me an hour to get back."

> 25-year-old African American Young Man from New Haven

"I'm working with the connection program now, the program that you can only get with DCF. And they've been really struggling trying to help people get apartments, so yeah."

> 21-year-old Hispanic/Latino & White Young Woman from Hartford



Housing Instability Impacts Young People's Relationships

Long periods of housing instability forced youth to tax their relationships for informal housing support.

The failures of the formal housing support system forced youth to seek other means of survival. Often, this required relying on an extended network. At times, this reliance showed the value of community in youth's lives, as a network of family, friends, and loved ones stepped up. In other moments, youth strained their relationships.

Housing unstable youth worry about wearing out their welcome. Even when friends and family were supportive and willing to provide housing, youth reported worrying about burdening their network, particularly when these supporters had children of their own. Some faced continued instability out of fear that they would impose on their network.

These informal supports are often the last lifeline before experiencing homelessness.

"If people do offer me help, I never want to feel like a burden because I'm like, no, no, no, it's okay. Take care of you and I rather just stay outside for my benefit rather than them because I don't want people to worry but then my other friends get mad and they're like, you don't know, you should, you know."

› 26-year-old African American Young Woman from Stamford

Furthermore, when informal supports fail, youth were faced with impossible choices. Some reported experiencing abusive or unsafe conditions while living with family or friends.

In such circumstances, they may have to choose between continued abuse, sleeping outside, or staying in halfway houses.

"As long as I know I can find a way to clean myself, whatever little money I have, I'll probably buy wipes or like soap or like deodorant, clean myself up, and I'm good like the next day, but it's just a matter of being outside, that I don't like because there's so much craziness out there."

› 26-year-old African American Young Woman from Stamford

"So, I went to Malta House in Norwalk. That's a mother and children's shelter. I left. After that, I went to my mother's house. That was another mistake. I should have never did that. Because she was just so mentally unstable, and I didn't grow up with her. So, I should have known that and every day she'd be telling everyone they got to get out and they got to find their own place."

› 24-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Stamford



Housing Goals and Aspirations

Many youth wanted to move out of the homes of their parents, family members, or friends and into a place of their own. Many of the young people in the study had short- or long-term goals focused on their housing situation. The most common goal was to get housing that was their own. For some, this meant being able to move out from their parents' or other family members' homes. For others, having their own place meant not having to share space with roommates and relief from the interdependence with others that characterized their current living situations.

Despite the financial barriers, youth aspire to homeownership. Despite the challenges of affordability, many youth remained optimistic about achieving their housing goals. Another common goal was to purchase a house.

For some, this presented as a part of the life cycle; housing stability presented as a prerequisite for building a stable family of their own.

"I have my own apartment. By the time I'm 31, I'm 26 now. By the time I'm 31, 32, I should have my family, I should have my house... My main goal is to have a house or have an apartment for me so I can start my family. I don't want to have none. I can't have a roof over my baby head and water leaking, you feel me? ... I got a house, my baby or she can stay there or whatever, the car come next after."

> *26-year-old African American Young Man from Stamford*



Child Welfare: A Spectrum of Support and Instability

In Connecticut, the Department of Children and Families (DCF) plays a pivotal role in child welfare. It is tasked with safeguarding children through services like foster care, adoption, and preventive interventions. Despite its efforts, challenges persist, including systemic barriers that hinder the successful integration of youth into societal structures like employment and education. Here we seek to illuminate the complexities of Connecticut's child welfare system, acknowledging its successes and identifying critical areas for improvement. The aim is to foster a deeper understanding of the system's challenges and opportunities, encouraging policy dialogue and collective action to enhance the safety and well-being of children throughout the state.

Before the Intervention: How DCF Enters the Home

At a young age, before even starting school, some young people navigated the complexities of the foster care system. For these young children, entry into foster care often occurred in the earliest years of life due to various distressing circumstances within their family environments. Primary factors included abuse (physical, emotional, and sexual) and housing instability. These conditions posed significant risks to the child's safety and developmental well-being, necessitating state intervention to ensure their protection (Lahad, 2017).

"[Since] probably about 13 to 14... I mean, we've [my siblings and I] have always had DCF throughout our whole life, but I didn't really get taken in until about that time."

> 20-year-old African American Young Woman from Hartford

"I grew up in the foster care system, I was three, I got taken away when my parents' rights were terminated."

> 24-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Stamford

"Foster mom, I call her my grandmother. She took me in when I was four. I stay with her."

> 26-year-old African American Young Man from Stamford

"I've been in foster care all my life."

> 26-year-old Native American/American Indian/Alaskan Native Young Woman from Stamford

The role of schools and educators as mandated reporters is a critical component in the child welfare ecosystem, serving as a frontline defense and support in identifying and reporting concerns to DCF. As mandated reporters, educators have a legal obligation to report any suspicions of child maltreatment to the appropriate authorities, a responsibility that underscores the importance of their position in safeguarding the well-being of children.³ This role is particularly significant given the unique vantage point educators have in the lives of young people, often allowing them to observe signs of distress or harm that may not be visible to others.

Due to this societal safety net, many young people entered DCF because teachers or other school employees reported suspected abuse.

"He [my dad] didn't know how to beat a child. He just used all his force type stuff. And so, the school ended up calling DCF."

> 22-year-old African American Young Woman from Hartford

"He [my stepdad, my mom's boyfriend] would, like, hit us when I was a kid; he would beat me up, he would beat up my siblings and all that. I would go to school with like bruises on my face and all that."

> 20-year-old African American Young Man from Bridgeport

In some cases, young people's parents or parental figures were also their first abusers. This is critical because it diminishes the network of support that young people can turn to and has the potential to create long-term trauma. Despite this, many young people still expressed love and support for the family members who abused them, highlighting the complicated dynamics of these relationships. A couple of young people also discussed how they saw this cycle of abuse perpetuated in their lives, experiencing intimate partner violence.

³ "Any school employee shall report when, in the ordinary course of their employment or profession, they have reasonable cause to suspect or believe that any person who is being educated by the technical high school system or a local or regional board of education, other than as part of an adult education program, is a victim of abuse and the perpetrator is a school employee." May 2023, Citation: Gen. Stat. §§ 17a-101; 53a-65, U.S. Children's Bureau and Child Welfare Information Gateway. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/mandatory-reporting-child-abuse-and-neglect-connecticut/#:~:text=Any%20school%20employee%20shall%20report,adult%20education%20program%2C%20is%20a>



During the Intervention: Young People's Concern of the Risk of the Child Welfare System Making Things Worse

DCF is tasked with a mission of paramount importance: protecting children from abuse and neglect. Though interviewees discussed how, at times, the flaws within the system led to outcomes that failed to protect and, in some cases, exacerbated the vulnerabilities of the young people it aims to safeguard.

Some participants reported feeling retraumatized by the investigation process. Investigations, while crucial for identifying abuse and neglect, are fraught with challenges that can further traumatize young people (Smith et al., 2009). The lack of trauma-informed practices during these investigations underscores the urgent need for approaches that preserve children's psychological well-being while ensuring their physical safety.

"You can't really say nothing. You can't really express yourself how you want to, at least. They made me go to programs, though, and demonstrate on like dolls, and it was a lot of that growing up."

➤ *20-year-old African American Young Woman from Bridgeport*

Additionally, some young people reported that the discrepancy between identifying abuse and implementing actionable interventions often left them in limbo, questioning the efficacy of the investigative process itself. Some developed trust issues or mental health conditions after the abuse they disclosed went unaddressed.

Participants who were mothers frequently revealed a tension between the necessity for resources and the fear of negative consequences. Expressing the need for assistance, such as housing support, was about managing the current DCF case and the risk of precipitating a new case by revealing a lack of stability.

"I told teachers, DCF worker, they did nothing about it. Told my mom, she told them about it, still nothing. Basically, that's really it because they just kind of messed up. They choose to not do anything."

› 14-year-old African American & White Young Man from Bridgeport

"A lot of my mental health and stuff, it came from me moving to home, to home, to home, from school to school, to school. So, now I have a hard time letting people in and trusting people 'cause I've met so many people, and then they just leave. So, it's like, is this person gonna leave too? And then, all the trauma having to get to know new people over in the school and now I don't like to be around a lot of people and stuff like that because I was always moving, and I've lived in almost every town in Connecticut."

› 24-years-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Stamford

Consequently, many women avoid seeking help to prevent additional investigations or interventions, which could lead to judgments of parental inadequacy or even the removal of children from their care.

"It was just like--so I don't talk to social workers because even before that day, I was speaking to that social worker about private stuff. I would go to her sometimes. So when she did that [reported], like, "This is why I don't trust people." That's why I'd be careful what I say when I go to therapy because they will call those authorities so quick. She called DCF for my dad. Thank God they threw the case out because he's a single father. He's already won all three custody cases of his kids for a reason."

› 22-year-old African American Young Woman from Hartford

This fear is grounded in the reality that admitting to circumstances like homelessness could be interpreted by DCF as an inability to provide a stable environment for their children.

The societal stigma attached to asking for help exacerbates these fears. Women navigating these systems must balance the need to maintain an image of competence and stability with the reality of their situations.

This balance is often influenced by societal expectations that women should be able to manage both their own and their children's well-being effectively. Admitting to struggles such as homelessness can challenge these expectations, potentially leading to societal judgment and increased scrutiny from child welfare agencies.

After the Intervention: The Precarious Transition to Independence and Long-term Impacts of Engaging with the Child Welfare System

Young people reported that when aging out of the system, they were ill-prepared for the transition to independence, lacking the necessary life skills, financial stability, or emotional support to navigate the challenges of adulthood. Some interviewees reported the need for stronger transitional support and shared that they experienced homelessness, unemployment, and mental health challenges after transitioning out of the child welfare system.

These experiences emphasize the need for a structured transition plan to mitigate these risks.

"They just wanna make sure my kids are all right. They don't really care about anything else. Yeah. Because at that time when they were involved, I was at the shelter, and I needed housing and help with housing and stuff. And I know they give clothing vouchers and stuff because I've been to DCF but they didn't wanna do any of that for me."

> 24-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Stamford

"You know, they never really helped me out with anything. It was more so just they provided a placement, a home I could stay in, but they never really helped me out with my needs, like healthcare needs or physical needs or anything like that."

> 19-year-old African American & Pacific Islander Young Man from Norwalk

"Yeah. So I went home to home to different group homes, through all that, it was crazy and then, I just got out and just left and now I'm a mother."

> 26-year-old Native American/American Indian/Alaskan Native Young Woman from Stamford

The absence of adequate support not only jeopardizes the ability of these young adults to thrive but also increases the likelihood of their future children becoming entangled in the foster care system. Children of parents who aged out of DCF care were more likely to enter foster care themselves.

This intergenerational cycle was fueled by the instability that many former foster youth face, including inadequate housing, limited employment opportunities, and unresolved psychological issues.

"She's [my daughter] enough for me to change my life 'cause at one point I had DCF in my life too, and I did everything to not have them taken because I didn't want them to grow up in the system because the system is a very fucked up place."

> 24-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Stamford

"Well, I can't say. I went to foster care with my sister because my grandma took us there. My daughter was in foster care for a year. But she's with my child's father, and I'm sure she is good."

> 21-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

"Because they [DCF] were worried about my stability and having a roof over my head and all of that. And again, I just turned 18 last year in November, and the adoption [of my child who was in the system] was at the beginning of this year. So, it was kind of hard for me. The timing of everything was hard."

> 18-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

In exploring the stories of young people involved in the child welfare system, gender differences also emerged, which may be attributed to broader societal norms and expectations. Among those who have shared their DCF experiences, men and women provided contrasting perspectives that highlight how deeply gender can influence the way people process and discuss their interactions with child welfare.

Men's narratives about DCF and foster care often revolved around their personal experiences, detailing the circumstances that led to their entry and life within the foster homes during childhood. These accounts frequently described the circumstances that led them to engage with the system.

However, it's striking that men, when discussing their roles as fathers, rarely mentioned their children's involvement with foster care or their own dealings with DCF. The apparent separation of roles could result from societal pressures that encourage men to suppress emotional expressions and maintain a composed demeanor, particularly when discussing challenging personal circumstances. **When it comes to discussing traumatic, abusive, and other negative experiences, men often tended to gloss over painful details,** which could be attributed to societal pressures that valorize stoicism in men, discouraging them from displaying vulnerability or openly discussing the emotional complexities of their personal and family lives.

"Yes, I did [have experience with the system], unfortunately. But I was a minor. So, I didn't really know I was in DCF custody and all of that. So, it was hard for me either way to get my son because, like I said, I was on the run for a lot of years. So, yes, it was... it's kind of hard for me."

> 18-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

"I was when I caught my first case. I was 12. She [my mom] locked me up because I ran away; they put me in foster care. I ran away from the foster care."

> 23-year-old White Young Woman from Hartford

Contrastingly, women provided narratives that incorporated both their childhood experiences in foster care and their adult dealings with DCF, discussing their long-term experiences with the system. The stories of young women did not merely recount personal experiences but also highlighted how these interactions impact their roles as mothers and the well-being of their children. This broader emotional scope in women's narratives may stem from societal norms that accept and expect women to express emotions and assume the role of primary emotional caretakers.



Positive Foundations: Highlighting the Strengths of Connecticut's DCF

In the complex tapestry of child welfare, DCF represents a crucial pillar of support and advocacy for young individuals and their families. After examining the various challenges faced by this system, it is equally vital to acknowledge the strengths that mitigate these difficulties and illuminate pathways toward substantial improvement. These strengths, embedded in the DCF's daily operations, underscore a commitment to nurturing and safeguarding the well-being of the state's most vulnerable citizens.

One of the significant strengths of Connecticut's DCF was its role in bridging the gap between young people and community-based organizations. In some instances, rather than providing services, DCF directly and indirectly connected youth to external programs and resources that met their diverse needs. These organizations, specializing in services ranging from educational support to mental healthcare, were equipped with the resources to assist in various aspects of youth development.

By leveraging these community connections, DCF ensured that young people received comprehensive, specialized support that was accessible and impactful.

"We had a DCF caseworker at the time, and she put me in [local community-based organization name] at 17. And that's when I had gotten into the program to the school. I was going to school, but then I was slacking. I had no kind of motivation."

> 22-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

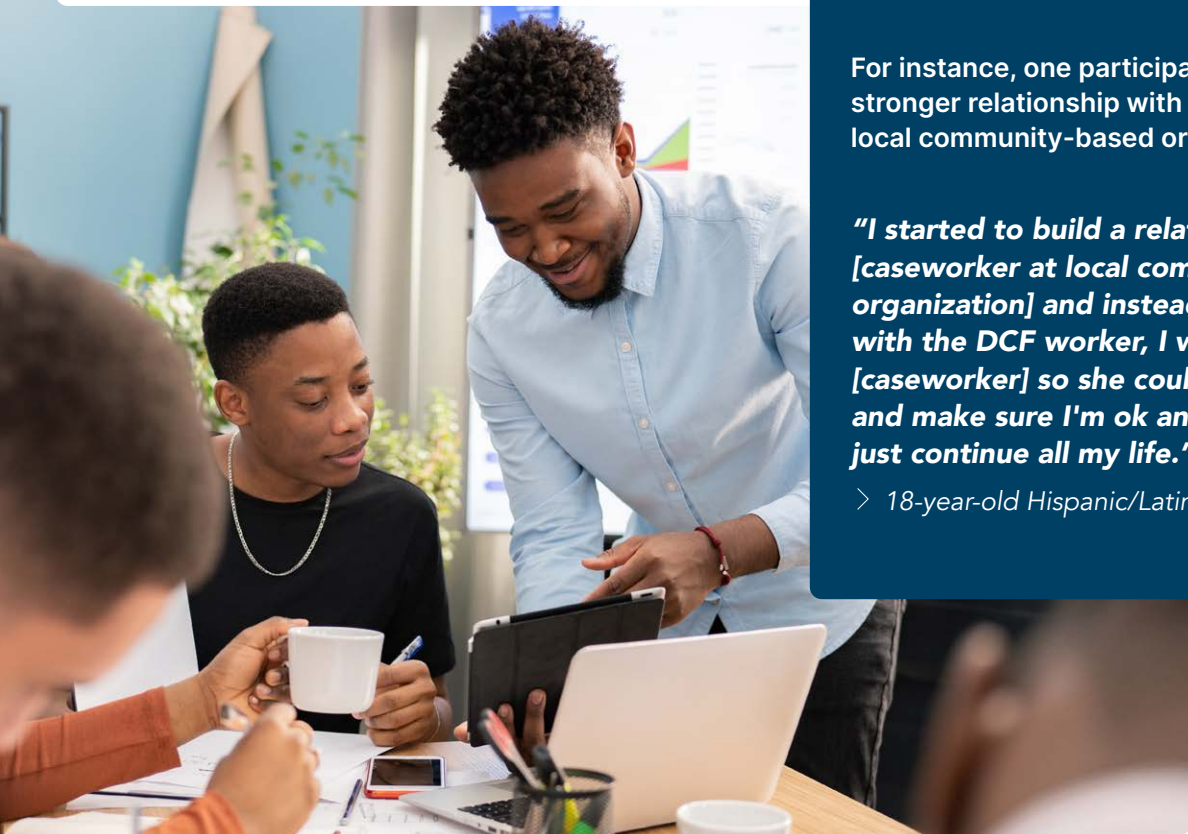
"I started going through what I was going through and [name of caseworker at local nonprofit organization] was just showing me she was just there...like she just wanna be there. Even if it was just a talk or, you know, to check on me or so. [Name of caseworker] showed me a lot... Like I thought this shit was going to be something else. They cool as hell here [name of non-profit organization]. They do try to help. They do their best"

> 19-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

For instance, one participant described building a stronger relationship with her case manager at a local community-based organization than at DCF:

"I started to build a relationship with [caseworker at local community-based organization] and instead of me meeting with the DCF worker, I would just meet with [caseworker] so she could do a wellness check and make sure I'm ok and all of that and then I just continue all my life."

> 18-year-old Hispanic/Latina Woman from Hartford



Although good and supportive group homes were rare, they represented a critical support component when they met high standards.

The benefits were substantial when young individuals found placement in high-quality group homes. These provided structured and nurturing environments where youth could receive consistent support, engage in life skills training, and prepare for independent living. The positive impact of these environments was significant, offering a space where personal growth and stability were prioritized.

"I think the group homes and stuff was where I got the most support and the help I needed like the Residential Treatment programs and the group homes...when you do get that good foster parent, my last foster home when I was aging out, she was great. She made sure I had everything I needed from essentials and services and stuff like that."

› 24-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Stamford

"There was this one lady that took like really good care of me when I got there, like I was going to school. I was fresh home from detention. I got to choose the clothes that I wanted, the shoes that I wanted, and she was real sweet, and she treated me like her own, and I left her house because I wanted to be outside so bad."

› 20-year-old African American Young Woman from Hartford





The variability in the performance of DCF caseworkers was notable, but the impact of dedicated caseworkers had been profoundly positive. These professionals often went beyond their formal duties to advocate for, mentor, and support their charges, building lasting relationships that were pivotal for the youth. Study participants reported that good caseworkers focused on de-parentifying children, creating opportunities for them to play and be kids — activities crucial for normal social and emotional development. This attention to allowing children to enjoy their childhoods highlighted the potentially transformative impact of committed personnel within the child welfare system.

"If it wasn't for my old DCF worker [staying] in contact with my old worker from here [local community-based organization], she don't work here no more. Then I feel like I probably would have still been sitting here not being qualified for certain shit because I'm not a citizen here. That was a major hiccup for me in a lot of ways, and I feel like when they hit the wall, they were just like, "Oh, she don't qualify because of this", and then that was it."

> 19-year-old African American Young Woman from Hartford

The Healthcare System: Promoting Holistic Well-being

Accessible and equitable healthcare, encompassing physical and mental health services, stands as a cornerstone for the well-being and resilience of young individuals that are not connected or lack ties to educational, occupational, and other supportive institutions. The system includes various services, from primary care and mental health support to emergency and specialized treatments. When healthcare systems are attuned to the specific needs of young people, offering comprehensive care addressing both physical and mental health, they emerge as invaluable resources fostering holistic development and empowerment. However, the prevailing reality for many youth is a landscape characterized by formidable barriers, including prohibitive costs, limited-service accessibility, and the pervasive stigma surrounding mental health.

Overcoming these hurdles demands a concerted commitment to transforming healthcare into a conduit for well-being rather than a chasm exacerbating isolation and disconnection among young individuals. Notably, in Connecticut, accessibility to healthcare, epitomized by programs like HUSKY, emerges as a significant protective factor for youth. HUSKY's

provision of free or low-cost public insurance has proven instrumental, with our research revealing widespread awareness of and successful engagement with HUSKY among young people, facilitating their access to essential healthcare services.

According to a report by the Connecticut Health Foundation, Connecticut had one of the lowest uninsured rates in the country, a result of the state's commitment to getting people insured with some level of insurance (CT Health Foundation, n.d.). But state residents were still uninsured. In 2021, approximately 179,600 Connecticut residents were uninsured, or 5.1% of the population (CT Health Foundation, n.d.). To combat, HUSKY insurance coverage was expanded to improve access and better quality of life outcomes for low-income families and children in the state (CT Health Foundation, n.d.).



Access to Insurance as a Key Protective Factor

One significant protective factor for youth was the accessibility of healthcare in Connecticut. Within our research study, we found that many young people indicated that they had insurance coverage from HUSKY or another form of insurance and access to reliable healthcare. The access of comprehensive HUSKY coverage emerged as a significant factor contributing to positive healthcare experiences.

For example, youth expressed satisfaction with HUSKY systems, noting that coverage extends to their entire family and alleviates financial concerns associated with medical care.

"HUSKY is good. They cover all. Me and my kids are all on HUSKY together. So, I have no issue with HUSKY. It's been great."

> 18-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

Youth also reported that having good relationships with trusted healthcare providers contributed to them keeping up regular check-ups and preventive care.

Moreover, positive interactions with healthcare professionals fostered trust in the medical field, one participant stating that they have been going to their primary care provider for years.

"I don't really get sick and stuff like that... I've been going to the same doctor for years, you know, go for the daily checkups get a physical."

> 19-year-old African American Young Man from Stamford

Participants expressed assurance that their providers will advocate for them even when interfacing with other departments of the healthcare system, such as insurance companies.

For instance, one participant reported a profound sense of confidence and trust in their providers across various facets of the healthcare system. This trust reflected a belief that their providers will actively ensure their needs are met and will go beyond the standard protocols to ensure their patients' well-being.

"I literally just ran out of medication. I kind of need it tonight... and then she [behavioral health center staff member] was like, give me a minute and then she called them [insurance provider] up and then literally 10 minutes later I got a text from my pharmacy being like your prescriptions being filled, it'll be ready in like an hour."

> 17-year-old White Young Woman from Waterbury

"So they [insurance provider] don't want to cover it and then [behavioral health center name] has to fight them and they eventually cover it."

> 17-year-old White Young Woman from Waterbury

Challenges in Navigating the Healthcare System

In contrast, some youth expressed encountering challenges while navigating the healthcare system, facing obstacles such as financial barriers, notably high medication costs and insurance denials, which have significantly obstructed their access to essential healthcare services.

One highlighted their experience, underscoring the domino effect that healthcare costs can have when young people are not able to afford their medication:

"I'm diabetic, so I depend on insulin, and the prices went up a lot. There was even one time my insurance refused to pay for it because of the price. And I had gotten sent to the hospital for [condition redacted] because I wasn't getting my insulin that I needed. I believe I only had like 24 units left that were going to last me, like a day. That's it. And I went two days without insulin because my insurance didn't want to pay for it. So, that led me to the hospital. They gave me insulin. I actually lost, I believe, 37 pounds because of that. I was in the ICU [intensive care unit] for a week or two."

> 18-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Man from Hartford

These issues are especially critical because they highlight both the need for a stronger social safety net as well as the challenges that young people experience when they may not have help from family, their immediate social network, or other support services to help them navigate these challenges — or may not feel comfortable and empowered to turn to their network.



Moreover, feelings of being dismissed or unheard by medical staff highlight communication gaps and a lack of empathy within healthcare interactions, exacerbating feelings of vulnerability and dissatisfaction.

For instance, several young people noted experiencing their needs not being met, including experiencing long wait times for assistance, discontinuation of medication leading to withdrawal symptoms, or encountering mistreatment during medical care:

"They [the healthcare system] are bad for business. I tried calling them to schedule an OB appointment. This clinic is going to tell me they are booked out like it's a fucking hotel."

> 19-year-old African American Young Woman from Hartford

"I'm going through withdrawal symptoms and everything, and they would just put me back on it [medication name]. So, it's kind of messing up my head a little bit as far as that."

18-year-old African American Young Man from Norwalk

Challenges Faced by Undocumented Youth

While the majority of the youth in our study expressed satisfaction or comfort with the healthcare system or HUSKY coverage for meeting their health needs, a few encountered challenges, particularly concerning access for undocumented young people. As of January 2023, undocumented children ages 12 and under gained access to HUSKY coverage through Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Furthermore, in July 2024, this age limit for undocumented children will rise to 15 years old (CT Health Foundation, 2024). Despite recent expansions aimed at providing coverage for undocumented youth, challenges still persist. For instance, many undocumented youth reported being unfamiliar with the U.S. healthcare system and its complexities, such as copays and other fees.

One participant shared their experience of initially finding healthcare services to be "kind of expensive" before learning about insurance options like HUSKY.

"When I got here with my family, we went to, like, I wanna — yeah, like a hospital, I don't know, for exams, right? And it was like kind of expensive to be honest, but after like two months we find out about the insurance."

> 16-year-old Brazilian Young Man from Danbury

Additionally, some undocumented youth expressed frustration with long wait times to schedule appointments, which contrasted with their experiences in their home country, where they could often be seen immediately. This frustration can be attributed to their families encountering difficulties navigating the system to obtain coverage, with approval times varying. Language barriers also emerged as a significant challenge, hindering access to proper guidance and resources.

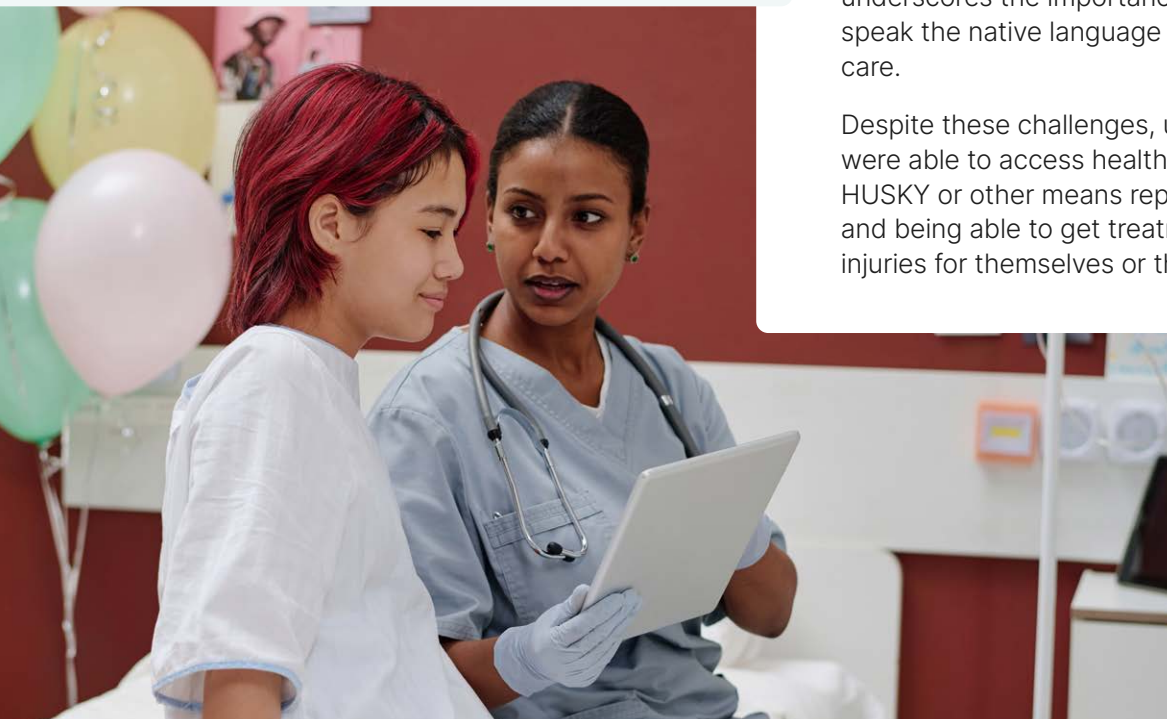
Many found themselves in need of translators, with one mentioning having to act as a translator for a friend.

"I've been there to help my friends out with something, and they do speak Spanish... little Portuguese. That's good. But what they [the healthcare system] should focus more on is getting translators of different languages... to provide services as quickly as possible."

> 21-year-old Brazilian Young Man from Danbury

Struggles with mental health were also identified as a significant challenge for undocumented youth, with feelings of homesickness, lack of community, and bullying due to language barriers, often resulting in isolation or dropping out of school. While some were able to access therapy services, there remained hesitation due to a lack of trust in providers. This underscores the importance of having therapists who speak the native language of the individual seeking care.

Despite these challenges, undocumented youth who were able to access healthcare services through HUSKY or other means reported receiving good care and being able to get treatment for conditions or injuries for themselves or their family members.



Impact of Trauma on Young People

Trauma was a consistent theme among the youth we interviewed. Fear, loss, anger, desensitization, and resilience were the consistent themes in the interviews. For many of these young people, the healthcare system felt like a place devoid of care and empathy, leading them to seek compassion from sources outside the realm of health professionals, such as doctors or therapists.

"Fuck the hospital. Fuck all that. They don't really care. And I wish there were more people who care. I've gotten more sympathy from strangers on the street than people who have their badge to be a psychiatrist or a therapist."

➤ 26-year-old African American Young Woman

Lack of trust within institutional settings or in health professionals may stem from experiences of feeling powerless or unheard. One young person conveyed why they stopped seeking help, describing how their experience in a mental hospital further deteriorated their mental health, raising questions about the effectiveness of the care provided.

"I don't want to go back there. That shit crazy. I ain't gonna lie. It's like they basically don't let you do nothing, and you don't got power or nothing. I don't know how they help you in here. Because me, I felt like I was going crazier in there than I was the day they made me go in there."

➤ 21-year-old African American & Hispanic/Latino Young Man from Hartford

The complexities of mental health issues are often connected with experiences of trauma, such as domestic abuse, familial issues, or loss. These experiences make it challenging for many to properly navigate their emotions and seek support. Some may turn to medication or drugs for temporary relief, yet the underlying issues go unresolved. These coping mechanisms can be cries for help.

"I overdosed, so I was sent to the hospital to get it out of me, and then they sent me to a mental hospital, and I was only there for like 17 days. And then, yeah, came home. It was intentional. I know I was just mad at everybody."

➤ 16-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Bridgeport

Some of the youths' accounts reveal the isolating effects of mental health struggles, with many describing feelings of detachment from others and a reluctance to seek support. Despite their longing for connection, they find solace and comfort primarily in solitary activities or in the presence of a trusted companion, such as a romantic partner, child, or pet.

"It's just people. Everyone has their own tendencies. They have their own characteristics. And me, I'm not a people person. I know how to talk to people. I know how to interact with people. But for me to like them and for me to actually wanna be around all the time, no. Because even with my friends and my best friend of 12 years, I tell her, "No, leave me alone. No chilling. No nothing. I wanna be home with my baby. I'm like, "No, I'm not going nowhere." My baby is... that's my best friend for real. She's the only one I can't escape. She's with me everywhere."

➤ 22-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

The complexity of their emotional experiences often led to a sense of alienation from their inner circles (friends and loved ones), exacerbating feelings of loneliness, depression, or other negative mental health symptoms. One young person noted, not expressing how he felt, even with his mother:

"I don't really talk to people about it. Like I said earlier, I keep it bottled up. My mom barely knows. I have anxiety."

➤ 20-year-old African American Young Man from Bridgeport

Therapeutic Benefits of Sharing Experiences

Many of the youth either sought out or were provided behavioral or mental health services. For some, therapy or anger management groups provided effective tools for managing their emotions and navigating daily challenges. For others, therapy was a source of suspicion or distrust. Despite the pervasive nature of trauma and some initial reluctance to therapy, the young people in the study found comfort in engaging with our interviews. Many noted experiencing a therapeutic effect from sharing their stories and appreciated the opportunity to be listened to and have their feelings validated. For many, having someone attentively listen to their stories without judgment served as a source of relief and healing. Furthermore, the interview process provided them with a space to process their feelings and emotions, particularly in response to certain narratives. This experience encouraged some young people to consider participating in therapy or to be more open in sharing their feelings.

Several youth reflected on their experiences, the impact of therapy on their lives, and how it helps them cope with the symptoms of trauma. They spoke of their eagerness to pass on the lessons learned from therapy to others, emphasizing the importance of empathy, understanding, and self-reflection in supporting one another's mental health.

"I just think of how impactful the change was for me. When it comes to people, like now I feel like when people want to express themselves, I really sit back and think because whatever they might have taught me in there [therapy], I could probably teach somebody else to whatever they are going through."

> 19-year-old African American Young Man from Stamford

We found out that youth were recommended to engage in programs such as therapy or anger management by either their schools, the justice system, or DCF. These programs serve as proactive measures to address issues related to anger and impulse control. While some youth initially sought help managing their anger, many found these programs

to be unexpectedly beneficial, providing them with valuable tools and strategies for navigating their emotions more effectively.

One common challenge for youth that engaged in therapy, was a lack of trust or comfort with their assigned therapist. Noting, feelings of being misunderstood by the therapist would create further disconnection and unease with the process of overcoming their personal struggles.

"It's been on and off. I've been to a few different doctors [therapist] because I don't always like talking to people, like I said. And I don't always trust all of them."

> 24-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Stamford

Some young people struggled with adjusting to the concept of therapy itself, as it can be unfamiliar compared to their usual experiences. This made it challenging for them to fully engage with their therapist, leading some to disengage or seek alternative means of expressing themselves. For instance, one young person explained how she sought support independently.

"The only therapy support system and the only mental support systems I ever had was a book and a pen. That was the only time that I was listened to or understood because of my own words and my own writing."

> 22-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

Overall, the stories of young people underline the therapeutic value of sharing experiences, highlighting the need for safe spaces where individuals can openly express themselves without fear of judgment.

8 Looking into the Future: What Young People Hope for Themselves

Despite the challenges many young people faced, most shared aspirations and were hopeful about their future. For many, employment and educational attainment are a means to getting what they ultimately value, such as financial security to allow them to care for themselves and their families.

How Young People Define Success for Themselves

The definition of success for these youth was deeply personal and contextual, shaped by their individual experiences, aspirations, and values. Their definitions commonly reflected their resilience, resourcefulness, and determination to transcend the limitations imposed upon them by societal norms and structural inequalities. Their aspirations served as beacons of hope and motivation, guiding them through adversity and toward a brighter future. This hopeful view is promising and critical to recognize, especially given that studies have shown that despite the extreme inequality of income and opportunity in the U.S., feelings of well-being are a critical metric to predict future life outcomes (Graham, 2023).

"I say success means to me when I'm wealthy enough, my kids or my future generation wouldn't have to worry about anything. I feel like that's real success."

> 21-year-old Hispanic/Latino Young Man from Hartford



Goals and Aspirations: Getting Back on Track

Youth commonly defined success as “getting back on track.” For them, this meant many things regarding the goals and aspirations they hoped to work toward. Overall, the most common goals were 1) doing better for their children, 2) giving back to others, 3) becoming more financially stable, 4) furthering their education, and 5) wanting to move to another place.

Doing Better for Their Children: Participants, particularly mothers, discussed wanting to do better for their children’s sake. They are motivated by their responsibilities, goals, and aspirations for their children, which drives them to overcome personal shortcomings and strive for self-improvement. Family unification is a core piece of their aspirations, but for some, this was challenging because one or multiple children were part of the child welfare system and in foster care.

Young parents in the study noted having to work to overcome personal and situational challenges by seeking therapy, improving mental health, and gaining stability to create a better environment for their children.

“My only goal right now is just to get better and get my baby back.”

> 22-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

“... My kids is where my motivation is. So, the more I think about my kids, the more I think about what I want for my kids and what I want for myself. It makes it so much easier.”

> 20-year-old African American Young Woman from Hartford

“I want to go back for full custody. I'm just trying to get there first. I'm trying to get rid of this case and then get my life together, go see a therapist, and do what I got to do. But I don't want to wait till it's too late, because she's turning three. Next, she will be four or five.”

> 21-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

Participants have also discussed the necessary steps to plan for family unification, which commonly revolved around financial stability and securing safe and secure housing, making it a priority.

“I want to be so financially stable that I wouldn't need help or support from nobody. Me and my man we got each other, we got our kids, I don't need nothing from nobody. That's how I want to be.”

> 21-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

Giving Back to Others: Participants expressed a compelling dedication to helping others in need, with aspirations to create safe spaces for vulnerable individuals, such as young children and those experiencing homelessness. They also emphasized supporting family members by improving their living conditions and building homes. Additionally, many aim to pursue careers that assist others, particularly children and those with special needs, showcasing their dedication to community and making a positive impact on others.

“Construction would really help me because I really want to build something for the children. I want to build something for the homeless where you don't have to be on the streets no more. I want to do that in every community that I go to. I want to help every community that I can.”

➤ 23-year-old African American Young Woman from Bridgeport

“I do want to go back to school for my LPN license or I do want to get a [inaudible] start somewhere. Well, my dream was when I was younger, I want to help kids like with special needs and stuff or like just babies in general. I don't know, I always had a passion for kids.”

➤ 19-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

Becoming More Financially Stable Participants expressed the importance of being financially independent, aiming to provide for themselves and their families without external assistance. They commonly see financial stability as a combination of long-term planning, securing well-paying and stable jobs, and pursuing entrepreneurial ventures. Many also stressed the need to balance immediate financial needs, such as paying for childcare or buying new clothes, with their broader financial goals, demonstrating a proactive approach to building a secure and successful future.

“I would say again, get a job, probably get some more clothes, probably move in and buy another new apartment, buy an apartment or something like that instead of a house.”

➤ 24-year-old African American Young Man from Stamford

“Consistent job. My own vehicle, a new vehicle. Start looking into an apartment, maybe. Yeah, that's my personal goals besides from life goals.”

➤ 19-year-old African American Young Man from Bridgeport

“And my daughter just started school kindergarten, so I have all this that I have to pay for and everything. So it's like you got to do it and I've been broke all week, because school. So I'm like, I need more money. I like fast money, but I don't like being outside. So it's like I need a job. So that's the point I'm about now, cause fast money ain't always good money.”

➤ 23-year-old White Young Woman from Hartford

The participants who mentioned pursuing entrepreneurial ventures all expressed a desire for their businesses to be recognized by others. They believe that recognition of their businesses and craft makes them more optimistic about achieving their goals.

“I wanna make my nail career for show. I wanna be one of the people that travel all around the cities and do people nails. I wanna be a nail tech that everybody be like, “Okay. No, I want her because that's her. You see her work?” I want people to be like that about me.”

➤ 22-year-old African American Young Woman from Hartford

“[In the next 2–3-years my goal is my] clothing brand done blown up, probably [using that money] in real estate...”

➤ 19-year-old African American Young Man from Hartford

Furthering Their Education: Many participants in the study expressed their desire to return to school or an educational setting to further their education to achieve personal and professional growth. Many plan to return to school to obtain the necessary qualifications and licenses and pursue specific degrees and certifications in fields like engineering, health, law, and other career paths. Participants also noted the importance of completing their basic education, such as either graduating from high school or obtaining a GED, as it serves as an indicator for future educational pursuits.

Additionally, they emphasized its role in achieving life goals like securing housing and attaining financial stability.

“I want to be able to go to college one day. I want to be able to do shit like that. I should be in college right now...”

➤ 19-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford

“I definitely want to go to college. I did want to do law school and I wanted to be an attorney. I wanted to be a defense attorney. But at the same time, I feel like I just want to keep my options open. CNA was a thing that I wanted to do for a long time. And then, yeah. So now, I just feel like I don't really know what I want to do now. I know that because I wanted to do law school for a very long time. But now that I'm opening my options even more, CNA is definitely up there. I just keep my options open.”

➤ 18-year-old African American/Jamaican Young Woman from Hartford

“My goal personally is to finish school, graduate. And then I want to go to school for four weeks at phlebotomy doing phlebotomy, and then I want to work at a clinic part time taking people blood.”

➤ 20-year-old African American/Jamaican Young Woman from Hartford

Wanting to Move to Another Place: Young people spoke about moving or having happy memories in an area they would like to return to. For some, the idea of “making it out” symbolized liberation from the negative cycles of the systemic traumas and violence they faced throughout their childhood and into their lives as teens and young adults. It commonly represented attaining a level of stability and security that allowed them to break free from the constraints of their circumstances and chart their own path toward a brighter future. For instance, some reflected on how they have already recently moved to a different part of Connecticut, where people do not know them as much, and it is “better” because they are out of their previous environment and distant from the people they knew there. However, some also found that the same challenges persisted after moving.

“I see myself down south. Like I said, with my man, me and my stepdaughters and my kids and living life and not have to worry about the drama.”

➤ 21-year-old Hispanic/Latina Young Woman from Hartford



Supports for Achieving Successes

Young people commonly noted supports that could help them achieve their goals. One of the greatest sources of support that was repeatedly discussed was the network of youth-serving nonprofits in Connecticut. Many youth had at least one such connection, and some were receiving services such as mental health services, violence and crisis intervention programming, and housing access support. This connection was commonly made through a particular staff member at the organization. Youth-serving, nonprofit agency connections were especially critical when young people had a strong connection to a particular staff person who held them accountable and repeatedly reached out to them, even when the young person was not responsive — using a relentless outreach approach.

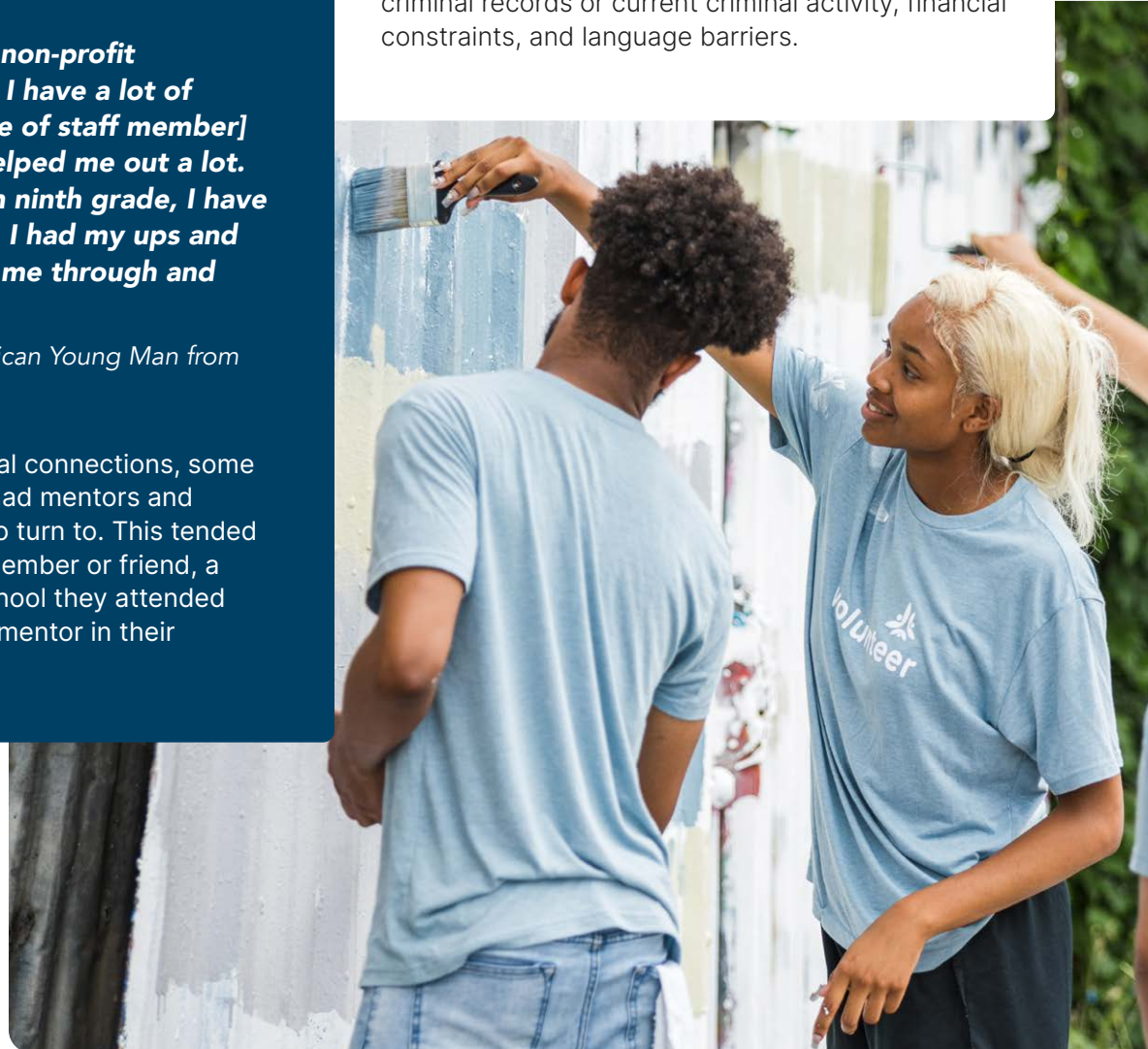
“Here at [name of local non-profit organization], I feel like I have a lot of support here with [name of staff member] and all of them. They helped me out a lot. Ever since I met them in ninth grade, I have known them ever since. I had my ups and downs, but they pulled me through and helped me graduate.”

> 17-year-old African American Young Man from New Haven

In addition to organizational connections, some youth also said that they had mentors and trusted peers and adults to turn to. This tended to include a close family member or friend, a specific teacher from a school they attended in the past, or an informal mentor in their community.

Barriers to Achieving Successes

When asked about barriers to achieving their goals, young people commonly pointed to their caretaking responsibilities, such as caring for their children, siblings, or other family members. Mothers raised issues with the lack of access to trusted, affordable, and reliable childcare as a key challenge. Furthermore, some young people noted their focus on meeting basic needs — such as housing access and food security — as their main priority before they can focus on their future aspirations. Lastly, young people discussed issues with their relationships as barriers. This included relationships with peers who were a distraction, abusive or controlling romantic partners, unsupportive or abusive family members, and a general lack of connections to trusted adults and peers whom they could turn to for encouragement in times of need. Other barriers included past criminal records or current criminal activity, financial constraints, and language barriers.



9 Pushing for Connection Over Disconnection: Recommendations for Building Connection

By addressing the root causes of youth disconnection and amplifying opportunities for empowerment, Connecticut can unlock the potential of all young people to thrive academically, economically, and socially. Policymakers and practitioners must prioritize equity, inclusivity, and opportunity for all youth, ensuring that everyone can pursue a brighter future. Thus, our findings have significant implications for policymakers, educators, practitioners, and funders working to support young people experiencing disconnection from school, work, and other supports.

The recommendations discussed here are particularly pertinent to the systems affecting the daily lives of young people, such as the education, criminal justice, housing, child welfare, and healthcare systems. Young people in Connecticut are navigating unique challenges specific to their lived experiences in addition to broader issues faced universally by young people. Therefore, the effectiveness of these systems can directly influence their ability to succeed and integrate into society. Ultimately, recognizing each of these systems as crucial connectors necessitates investments in resources and supports within and across each system. Thus, implementing these recommendations requires investing in proper resourcing, including financial resources.

The current lack of intentional and equitable coordination across systems often leads to fragmented support, which can exacerbate issues for young people and push them further

into disconnection. When the education system, healthcare providers, and social service supports operate in silos or without trauma-informed approaches, young people fall through the cracks, unable to access the comprehensive support they need. To counter this, a coordinated, multi-system approach is critical. Connecticut can create a seamless network of supports and resources for young people that addresses their multifaceted needs to foster growth, resilience, and long-term success by fostering collaboration and communication between systems and tailoring support specifically to the needs of young people.

The synergy between various systems is crucial to effectively support and uplift young people. Therefore, it is imperative that these systems are well-resourced, adequately staffed, and fully capable of addressing the unique challenges faced by young people so they collaborate to support, rather than criminalize or marginalize.





The Connecticut Education Nexus: Bridging Disconnection Through Restorative Justice and Holistic Support Systems

Highlighted throughout the study as a primary point of disconnection, the education system has immense potential to be a connector and turning point for many youth, offering significant potential as a catalyst for change. However, to effectively reduce youth disconnection, systemic inequities, resource constraints, and the diverse cultural, racial, and linguistic aspects of the community must be addressed to bolster support networks within the system, prioritize the needs of disconnected youth, and cultivate inclusive educational environments that foster belonging and empowerment for all students.

Only through such holistic approaches can we dismantle the pathways to disconnection and pave the way for equitable opportunities and thriving youth experiences.

- **Implementation of Educational Restorative Justice Practices:** The interconnectedness of the education and criminal justice systems have reverberating consequences. A paradigm shift toward educational restorative approaches is imperative to effectively mitigate the effects of and disentangle the interwoven dynamics between these systems. This means moving away from punitive measures to focusing on fostering accountability, healing, and repair within the educational environment. Rather than relying on disciplinary actions such as suspensions, expulsions, or contact with law enforcement, schools and districts would implement policies and practices that promote dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation.

By implementing educational restorative approaches, the education system can create safer and more supportive learning environments that allow for more collaborative partnerships between education and other systems, such as juvenile justice, child welfare, and mental health, to better support youth who interact with multiple systems. Current partnership and resource-sharing agreements must be reevaluated, redefined, and strategically coordinated to reduce instances of the education system relying on the criminal justice system for addressing school-related challenges, as this often leads to over criminalizing young people and entangling them with the justice system at an early age for minor offenses.

These approaches will offer a departure from punitive measures prevalent within the education system, prioritizing principles of accountability, healing, and holistic youth development instead. Research suggests that educational restorative justice practices hold promise in lessening suspension rates and fostering school environments conducive to positive youth development (Gregory et al., 2016).

- **Strengthen Support Networks and Wraparound Services Within the Education System:** Recognizing adverse experiences within the education system can serve as precursors to broader disengagement. We recommend implementing, expanding, and reinvesting in trauma-informed practices within schools, such as working with the New Haven Trauma Coalition, which was developed to address the negative mental and social impacts of adversity, trauma,

and stress on youth and families in the city (Perry & Daniels, 2016). Additionally, training educators in trauma-informed care can help create a supportive school environment that mitigates the risk of re-traumatization and disengagement.

Furthermore, enhancing these wraparound supports and social services within educational settings is essential for connecting youth to vital resources and support networks. Establishing partnerships with community organizations, mental health providers, and social service agencies can ensure that students have access to comprehensive support systems that address their academic, social, and emotional needs.

By leveraging the existing infrastructure of the education system, such as school counselors, to coordinate these services, youth can receive the holistic support necessary to navigate challenges and stay connected to the education system. Leveraging the existing infrastructure would also require investing in expanding resources, such as more school counselors, especially in schools in low-income communities that are already experiencing resource constraints, as outlined earlier in the report.

- **Address Disparities in Access to Quality Education and Support Services:** Implementing culturally responsive practices that recognize and respect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of Connecticut youth can help create inclusive learning environments where all youth feel valued and supported, despite their racial, cultural, ethnic, economic, or linguistic background.

This goes beyond simply acknowledging diversity; it requires educators and practitioners to actively and intentionally incorporate diverse perspectives, experiences, and cultural traditions into their instructional materials, teaching methods, and classroom culture. Our data reflects the importance of this approach, with young people consistently expressing the need for educators who understand and can relate to their lived experiences and backgrounds. By embracing culturally responsive practices, educators can foster greater academic success, promote social-emotional well-being, and empower students to thrive in and outside of the classroom.

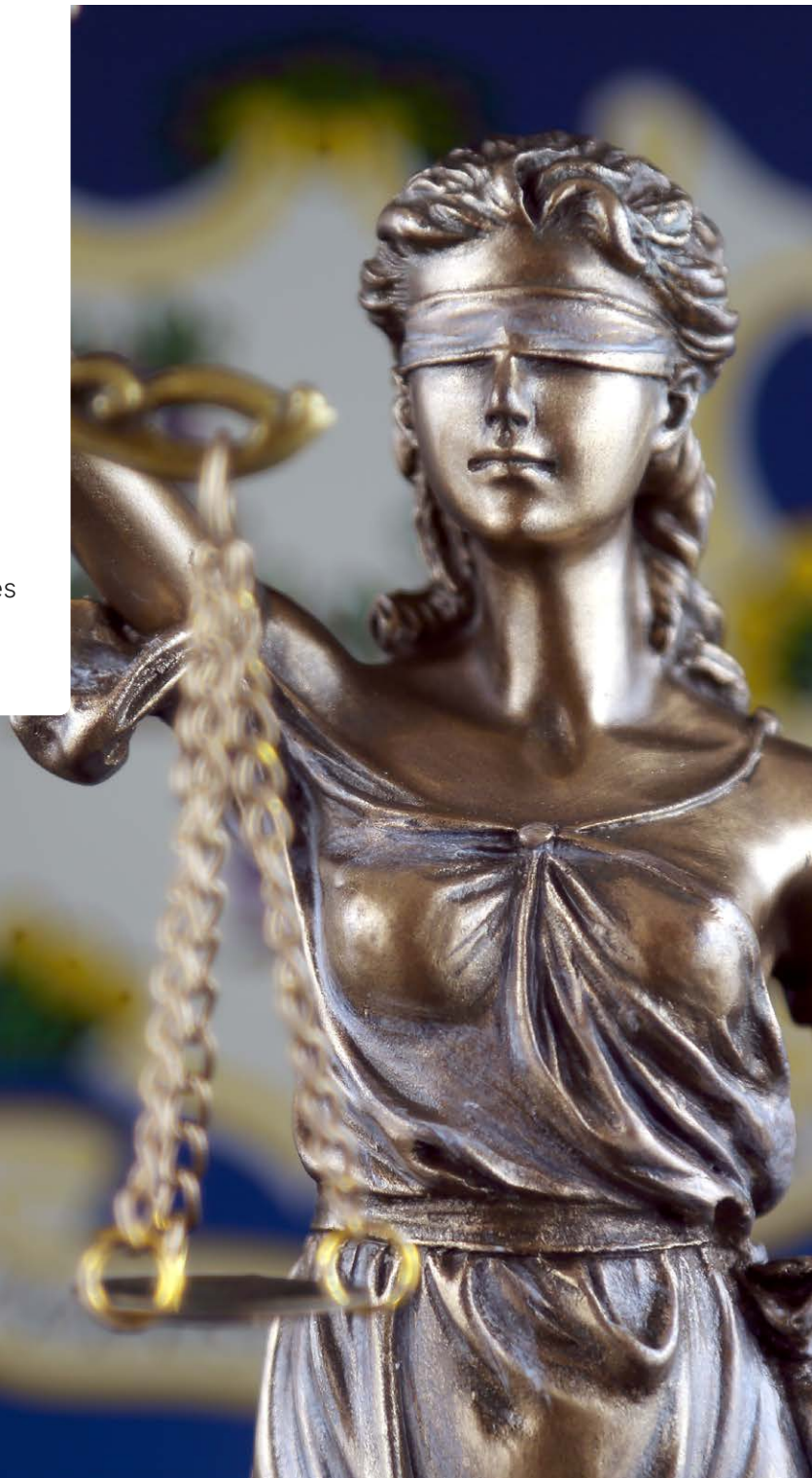
- **Foster Caring and Supportive Adult Relationships:**

Supporting connections between youth and caring adults within (and outside) the education system is crucial for promoting positive outcomes and preventing disconnection. Providing professional development opportunities for educators and creating structures to build and foster strong relationships with youth and serve as mentors and advocates can create a supportive network that empowers youth to overcome challenges and achieve their goals. By investing in the development of caring, supportive school environments and mentoring programs, we can cultivate a sense of resilience and promote positive youth development, ultimately reducing the risk of disconnection and improving outcomes for Connecticut youth.



Transforming Connecticut's Criminal Justice System: Focusing on Equity and Rehabilitation for Youth and Young People

The story of the criminal justice system's impact on young people in Connecticut is one of ongoing evolution. It calls for continued advocacy, policy reform, and community support to ensure that the system serves as a foundation for positive change. By expanding access to diversion programs, enhancing support for reintegration, and addressing the systemic biases that disproportionately affect marginalized communities, Connecticut can move closer to a justice system that genuinely embodies the principles of rehabilitation and equity. In this vision for the future, the criminal justice system in Connecticut becomes a conduit for transformation, empowering young people to overcome the challenges of their past and embrace the possibilities of a brighter, more inclusive future.



- **Promote Innovative Support and Services for Incarcerated Youth.** Youth reported that the current system is not effective at providing support to address the root causes of crime. Additionally, youth stated that they perceived the justice system as a mechanism that makes it easier for them to be repeat offenders but does not provide the support needed to improve their lives to reduce the rate of reincarceration. As participants expressed, the root causes of crime can range from violence at home to childhood abuse to mental illness to poor educational quality. Therefore, it is important to assess the needs of youth to plan the type of community-based services and resources needed to reduce recidivism and support reintegration in the community.

Participants also emphasized their lack of trust in the system and how it impacts their everyday lives. The lack of trust youth exhibited stems from previous experiences. Therefore, support should also be provided to improve youth's perceptions of law enforcement.

- **Utilize a Restorative Justice Approach to Rehabilitating Youth.** Past studies have shown that punishing youth into jail or prison is not an effective strategy for reducing crime and reincarceration (Bryant, 2023). These findings highlight the need to implement a restorative justice approach to rehabilitating youth by identifying strategies to repair harm caused by crime and conflict as opposed to punishing them and further perpetuating the unfair treatment of traditionally underrepresented populations (Pointer, 2021).

Restorative justice focuses on the root cause of crime through non-punitive accountability and seeks to repair harm to the community and the lives of youth by providing support to keep them out of the system. This is particularly critical for young people who may already be experiencing some form of disconnection, such as from school, to ensure the interaction with law enforcement does not propel them to further disconnect from those systems. By elucidating the interconnectedness of school-based experiences and interactions with law enforcement, participants underscored some of the systematic

consequences of engaging law enforcement agencies in school-based disciplinary interactions and brought light to the urgent need for holistic reforms aimed at dismantling this detrimental cycle of these two systems.

- **Further Develop Partnerships with Multiple Stakeholders.** One reoccurring theme within the study data was the need to involve multiple stakeholders, such as parents and caregivers, community members, community-based organizations, and local businesses, to identify and strategize creative ways to improve the justice system for all youth. Empowering parents and caregivers to take on leadership roles to advocate for policy change and dismantle longstanding criminal justice inequities, such as higher rates of police interactions and arrests for Black and Latino youth in Connecticut, has the potential to transform the system.

In addition to parents and caregivers, it is important to include multiple stakeholders who are impacted by the justice system to ensure that the solutions identified are culturally reflective of the needs of youth in Connecticut. Including multiple stakeholders in the decisionmaking process on topics related to the criminal justice system can provide greater insight into the institutional patterns and practices that lead to the disparate treatment of individuals based on race and class. This includes community members and local businesses to address historic inequalities in interconnected social systems like health, housing, and education. Criminal justice reform must happen at every stage of the system, so including multiple stakeholders in the decisionmaking process is vital to reducing racial and ethnic disparities and providing high quality evidence-based services for youth in the justice system.

The Connecticut Housing Landscape: A Foundation of Stability Amidst Insecurity

As in many places, housing in Connecticut is more than just a matter of shelter. It's a cornerstone of stability that affects nearly every aspect of a young person's life, from educational achievements and employment prospects to physical health and emotional well-being. For young people transitioning to independence, the availability of affordable, stable housing is a critical step toward adulthood and self-sufficiency.

However, the path to securing housing is fraught with challenges. Connecticut's high cost of living and a competitive housing market unduly places significant pressure on young individuals, particularly those without stable family support or adequate financial resources. For those aging out of the child welfare system or those with histories of criminal justice involvement, these challenges are compounded by systemic barriers and limited access to housing assistance programs.



- **Expanding the Availability of Affordable Housing**

Options: Given the scarcity of subsidized affordable housing units across the state and nation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024), concerted efforts are needed to incentivize affordable housing development, allocate resources to address the low-income housing unit gap, and foster partnerships with developers and community stakeholders to increase supply. Increasing affordable housing requires both supply-side and tenant-side reform.

Organizers statewide have pushed for zoning changes that would increase the supply of affordable units, including the passage of Public Act 21-29, which added requirements for equitable housing and reduced barriers for multifamily units. More work is needed to increase the supply of market rate and subsidized multifamily units. Thus, to alleviate the burden of high rental costs and financial strain associated with housing applications, policymakers should prioritize measures to enhance housing affordability for young people in Connecticut. This includes exploring initiatives such as rent control, housing subsidies, and affordable housing development programs tailored to meet the needs of youth facing housing insecurity.

- **Creation of More Comprehensive State and Local Housing Support Services:** In addition to the rising cost of rent across the nation, many voucher holders in Connecticut cannot use their housing choice voucher, even if chosen in the lottery (Thomas, 2022). One significant issue is the reluctance of landlords to accept these subsidies, despite being legally required to do so. Often, there is no accountability because young people do not know their rights and are unable to advocate for themselves effectively.

Thus, there is a need to enhance housing stability among youth and young people within Connecticut, which requires comprehensive support and educational services to address underlying issues such as financial insecurity, employment instability, family dynamics, and individual rights and responsibilities. This entails offering financial literacy education, employment assistance programs, and family counseling services to empower young people and strengthen their housing stability, especially for those already residing in subsidized housing.

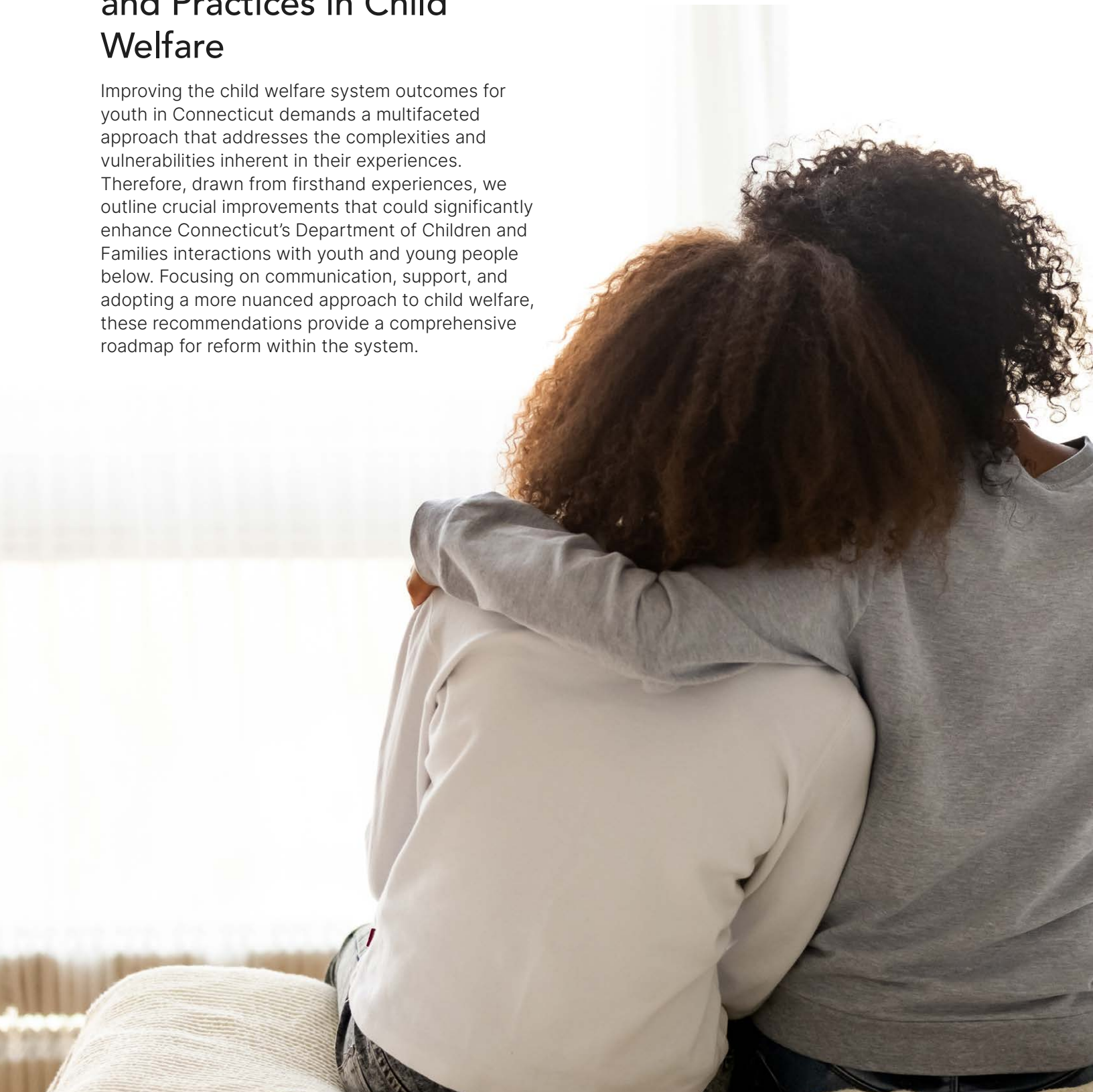
Furthermore, to mitigate the barriers young people face in accessing housing support systems, efforts should be made to streamline processes, reduce bureaucratic hurdles, and expedite access to resources. This may involve enhancing coordination between local public housing authorities, nonprofit organizations, and governmental agencies to ensure timely and equitable distribution of housing assistance.

- **Improving Collaboration Between Housing and Child Welfare Systems:** Given the intersecting challenges of housing instability and involvement with the Department of Children and Families, there is a critical need to enhance coordination between these systems. It is essential to address the fear and apprehension young people may experience in seeking support from either system due to concerns about DCF's involvement in lacking a stable and supportive housing situation. Improving this communication and trust between housing support agencies, DCF, and young people, especially parents, is critical in providing a supportive environment where young people feel safe seeking assistance without fear of punitive measures against their families.

This requires establishing and implementing protocols to prevent housing interventions from exacerbating vulnerabilities and ensuring that young parents receive the necessary assistance to secure and maintain stable housing. By implementing these recommendations, policymakers and stakeholders can create a more equitable and supportive landscape that enables young people to thrive and achieve their goals, ultimately fostering a brighter future for all involved.

Empowering Youth in Connecticut: Transformative Reforms and Practices in Child Welfare

Improving the child welfare system outcomes for youth in Connecticut demands a multifaceted approach that addresses the complexities and vulnerabilities inherent in their experiences. Therefore, drawn from firsthand experiences, we outline crucial improvements that could significantly enhance Connecticut's Department of Children and Families interactions with youth and young people below. Focusing on communication, support, and adopting a more nuanced approach to child welfare, these recommendations provide a comprehensive roadmap for reform within the system.



- **Enhancing Communication and Rights**

Awareness: A key concern highlighted in the data involves the need for better communication, especially when children are removed from their homes. Parents often report confusion about the reasons for their children's removal, their rights, and the actions required to prevent termination of these rights. Ensuring clear and transparent communication from the onset would empower parents, reduce the trauma associated with these processes, and ensure families are treated with dignity and respect.

Additionally, enhancing communication as it relates to transitional supports for youth aging out of the system (such as the Community Housing Assistance Program, Post Secondary Education Fund, Community Housing Employment Enrichment Resources, and Supportive Work Education & Transition Program) is critical to ensuring their successful transition to independence. Implementing structured transition plans that encompass life skills training, financial literacy education, and mental health support can equip young adults with the tools to thrive as independent individuals. Moreover, fostering partnerships with community-based organizations can provide additional support networks and resources to facilitate this transition effectively.

- **Goal Setting and Supportive Resources:** Another critical improvement is for DCF to actively work with young people to set goals and provide the necessary resources and support to achieve them.

- **Maintaining Family Connections:** The feedback also underscores the importance of maintaining family connections during foster care. There is a strong call for more frequent and facilitated visitations, even if supervised. Strengthening these connections can provide essential emotional support and continuity in a child's life, which is often disrupted by the foster care system.

- **Rehabilitation and Trauma-informed Care Over Punishment:** Streamlining access to support services while mitigating the fear of negative consequences is paramount. Many young parents hesitate to seek assistance due to concerns about triggering DCF involvement, fearing judgments of parental inadequacy or even the removal of their children. The current focus on harsh punishments

often leads to recurring negative interactions with DCF. A more rehabilitative approach would potentially break this cycle and offer a constructive path forward for affected youth and their families. Thus, implementing policies and protocols that prioritize support over punitive measures and fostering a more supportive and empowering environment can encourage young people to access the resources they need without fear of repercussions. Recognizing and addressing the widespread impact of trauma and facilitating recovery is essential for reducing additional stressors.



Sustaining a Healthy Outlook for Connecticut's Young People: Prioritizing Affordability and Accessibility in Healthcare

While Connecticut's healthcare system serves as a protective factor for youth, there remains a pressing need to expand access to affordable healthcare coverage, improve trauma-informed and mental health services, and improve culturally responsive care for youth. Expansion efforts should prioritize reducing barriers to enrollment, simplifying application processes, and advocating for policies that make HUSKY more reliably accessible, especially for underserved populations such as undocumented youth. With this expansion, structural barriers to access, such as long wait times and complex insurance processes, must also be addressed.



- **Expand Access to Affordable Healthcare:**

Building upon the success of programs like HUSKY, Connecticut should continue its efforts to expand access to affordable healthcare coverage for youth. This includes advocating for policies that reduce barriers to enrollment and increase awareness of available resources. Despite the availability of programs such as HUSKY, as evidenced by the experiences of study participants, some young people still face significant barriers to enrollment and maximizing the use of their coverage.

These barriers include financial obstacles, such as high medication costs and insurance denials, which can obstruct access to essential services. Some young people, particularly those who are undocumented, also struggle with understanding and navigating the complexities of the system, including copays and other fees, which can deter them from seeking necessary care.

Additionally, challenges such as long wait times for appointments and language barriers further complicate their ability to use their coverage effectively. Addressing these issues is crucial for ensuring that all young people can fully benefit from the robust healthcare resources available.

- **Improve Communication, Empathy, and Cultural Competence in Healthcare Interactions:**

Investing in culturally responsive health resources and addressing language barriers can ensure that all youth receive the support they need. Thus, enhancing communication and empathy in healthcare interactions is critical. Providers should undergo training to improve cultural competence and the delivery of compassionate care. As study findings point to, undocumented youth experienced challenges due to the lack of language accommodations and cultural differences, making it difficult to navigate the healthcare system and other systems.

By creating inclusive spaces for young people that accommodate their cultural backgrounds and needs, culturally responsive care can empower them to engage more effectively and earlier. Investing in initiatives that promote patient-centered care and empower youth to advocate for their healthcare needs can help foster trusting relationships between patients and providers, ultimately improving health outcomes. Thus,

providers, especially those in highly underserved communities, should undergo training to enhance their cultural competence, communication, and ability to provide compassionate care to youth.

- **Enhance Comprehensive Mental Health Services and Support:**

Addressing the significant impact of trauma and mental health challenges youth are navigating requires expanding youth-focused mental health services and support programs across the state. Comprehensive mental health support services are important for addressing the diverse and complex needs of young people as they develop into adults.

These services should be tailored in a way that is familiar to the individual and located within spaces they are comfortable. Services should encompass a range of interventions, such as increasing and prioritizing access to therapy, counseling, and support groups. The aim is to support young people in becoming resilient in their own spaces, foster positive relationships with family and friends, and develop coping skills.

- **Promote Trauma-informed Care:** Recognizing the pervasive nature of trauma among youth, as noted in this study, Connecticut should continue to promote trauma-informed approaches within healthcare settings. This includes training providers to recognize and respond to the unique needs of youth who have experienced trauma, creating trauma-informed environments that prioritize safety and empowerment, and integrating trauma-informed practices into healthcare delivery systems.

Conclusion

The recommendations outlined in this report offer insight for improving outcomes for youth and young people across the state of Connecticut as they engage with various systems, including education, criminal justice, housing, child welfare, and healthcare. By addressing the root causes of disconnection and centering opportunities for empowerment, policymakers and practitioners can prioritize equity, inclusivity, and opportunity for all youth.

Starting with the education system, the implementation of educational restorative justice practices and strengthening support networks within the education system are crucial steps toward reducing youth disconnection. By prioritizing trauma-informed care, addressing disparities in access to quality education and support services, and fostering caring and supportive adult relationships, Connecticut can create inclusive educational environments that foster belonging and empowerment for all youth. In the healthcare system, expanding access to affordable healthcare, improving communication, empathy, and cultural competence in healthcare interactions, and enhancing comprehensive mental health supports are essential for addressing the diverse and complex needs of youth. Promoting trauma-informed care and investing in initiatives that empower youth to advocate for their needs can foster trusting relationships between patients and providers, ultimately improving youth health outcomes in Connecticut.

Within the criminal justice system, updating policies to reflect the needs of the community, providing support and mandates for local law enforcement agencies to implement restorative practices, and developing coalitions to improve community outcomes for youth are critical steps toward creating a more equitable and effective system. Similarly, in the child welfare system, enhancing communication and rights awareness, setting goals, and providing supportive resources, maintaining family connections, and prioritizing rehabilitation and trauma-informed care over punishment are crucial for improving interactions between youth and the Department of Children and Families. By fostering partnerships with community-based organizations and streamlining access to support services, Connecticut can empower young people to thrive as independent individuals.

As it relates to housing, expanding the availability of affordable options, creating state and local support services, and improving collaboration between housing and other systems are essential for addressing housing instability among youth. By prioritizing measures to enhance housing affordability, streamlining processes, and ensuring timely and equitable distribution of housing assistance, Connecticut can create a more equitable and supportive landscape that enables young people to thrive and achieve their goals.

In summary, the recommendations outlined in this report offer a holistic approach to improving outcomes for youth in Connecticut across various systems. Policymakers, educators, practitioners, and community stakeholders must come together to develop integrated strategies that bridge the gaps between education, healthcare, criminal justice, child welfare, housing, and social services. Only through such coordinated efforts can we guarantee that every young person can reach their full potential. By implementing these recommendations, Connecticut can move together to create a more equitable and supportive environment for all young people, ensuring that they have the resources, opportunities, and support they need to thrive and succeed.

10 Future Work

This study highlights the role of various systems and identifies gaps in the research on youth disconnection in Connecticut. Several areas for future work have emerged from these findings.

More Diverse Representation in Sampling

The majority of participants in this study identified as Black, which is representative of the overall population and rate of youth disconnection (BCG, 2023) of the seven cities represented in this study. However, due to limitations in recruitment and data collection in only seven of the state's 169 cities, future efforts could utilize a purposeful sample where participants are recruited based on the desired characteristics to ensure broader and more diverse racial, socio-economic, gender, and geographical representation. Specifically, targeting a sample that reflects the demographics of Connecticut will provide insights that are more representative of the state's youth.

Engagement of Additional Stakeholders

The findings reveal the need to collect qualitative data from multiple stakeholders, including parents, law enforcement agencies, school staff, youth-serving nonprofit employees, and others who interact with youth across the various systems. While this study provides valuable insights from the perspective of young people experiencing disconnection in Connecticut, it was revealed that they are receiving significant support from family, friends, and other positive influencers. Gaining the perspective of those individuals can provide further insight into ways to provide support and resources for youth experiencing disconnection.

Further In-depth Analysis of Disconnection Layers

This study identifies multiple layers of disconnection among youth in Connecticut, providing a brief introduction to their experiences with various systems. The data collected in this report can be analyzed in a multitude of ways that each provide additional information regarding youth disconnection to provide insight into how each system is defined according to youth in Connecticut. This information is useful to ensure that each system is defined in a way that aligns with how youth define them.



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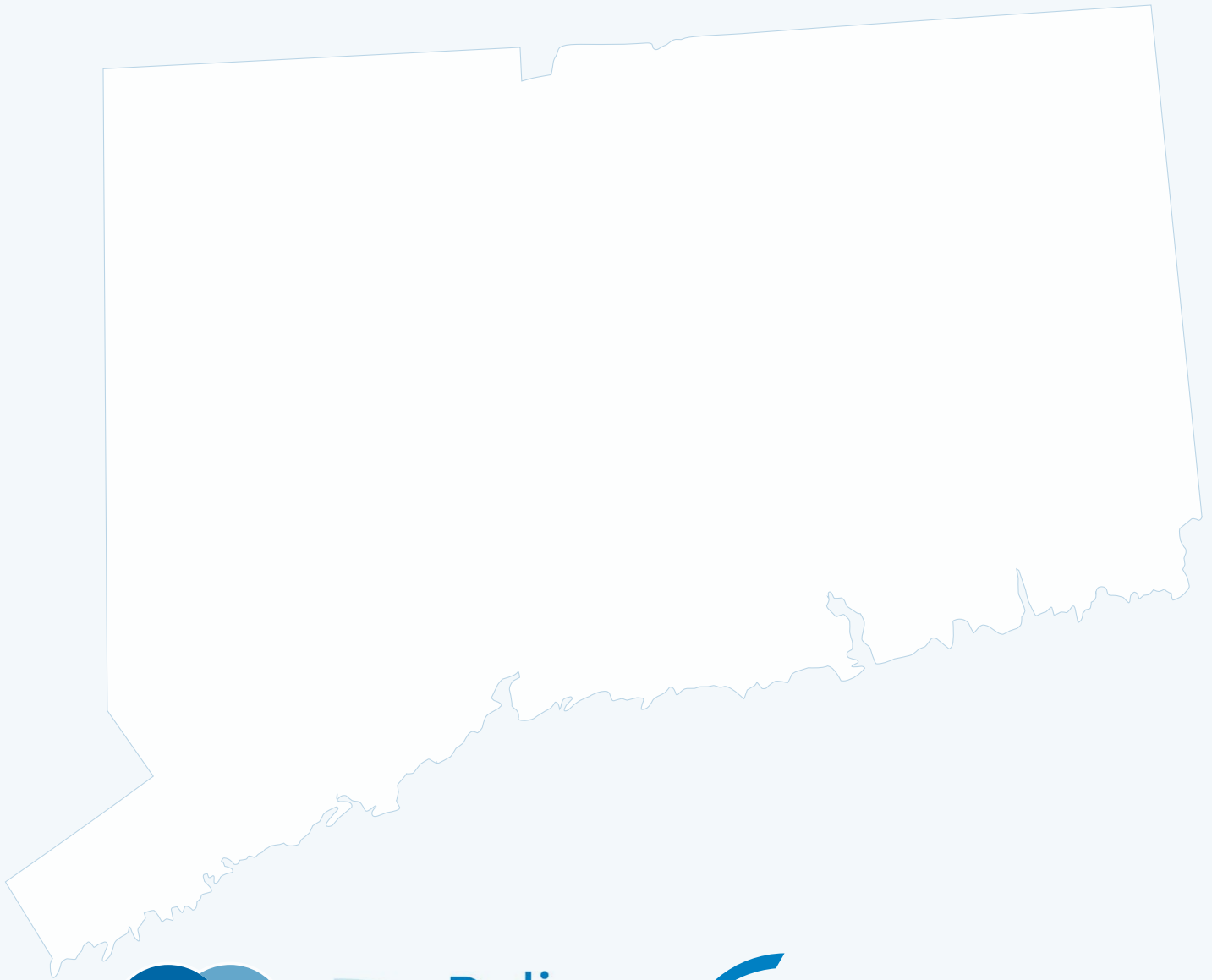
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