



THE OPPORTUNITY YOUTH FORUM:  
Seizing the Moment to  
Advance a Movement

2020 Evaluation Report  
for The Aspen Institute  
Opportunity Youth Forum

*Prepared for The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions  
November 2021*

**EQUAL**  
MEASURE

FINDING  
PROMISE  
FUELING  
CHANGE



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*The national context of 2020—including the COVID-19 pandemic, the racial justice movement, economic recession, and the political environment—greatly affected the work of the Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) network. OYF collaboratives, including backbone organizations and partners, adapted their priorities and pivoted their ways of working to meet the pressing needs of youth, families, and communities. Network progress on collaborative capacity and systems change is measured annually by self-assessment. Despite the challenges of the year, average assessment scores remained stable between 2019 and 2020, while key trends in addressing systems change emerged.*

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In 2020, nearly 9 million young people across the United States ages 16-24 were neither connected to school nor work, a dramatic pandemic-driven increase from the previous year.<sup>i</sup> The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (FCS) is committed to working on behalf of these opportunity youth by 1) investing in community-based collaboratives to reconnect young people to education and employment pathways; 2) building an evidence-base for community-driven collective impact; and 3) increasing awareness for the needs of opportunity youth and solutions to reengage them.

In 2012, FCS launched what is now the Opportunity Youth Forum. Since then, FCS has supported a network of communities through a number of funded projects—including efforts focused on improving education and employment connections, youth entrepreneurship, and data use—to mobilize a national movement. In 2020, the OYF Network expanded by seven communities to 33 across 19 states, each “seeking to scale multiple reconnection pathways that achieve better outcomes in education and employment for opportunity youth.”<sup>ii</sup> Together, the communities served by these collaboratives represent about 657,000 opportunity youth (11% of the 5.9 million 16–24-year-olds living in OYF Network communities)<sup>iii</sup> with rates of disconnection higher among American Indian, Black, and Hispanic youth than white youth.<sup>iv</sup> In 2020, OYF collaboratives reported providing services to 59,000 young people. The OYF collaboratives, in full, work collectively to build a national movement to improve outcomes for opportunity youth.

In 2020, Equal Measure conducted its fifth annual evaluation to explore the status of the OYF Network and the communities in which they operate to better understand areas of strength and opportunities for additional focus and learning. This report details network-wide findings drawn from data collection among 30 of 33 communities participating in the OYF Network in 2020. We collected quantitative data for this report through a self-assessment administered to OYF Network communities in February 2021. We collected qualitative information for this report through the same assessment, as well as through interviews with leads from the collaboratives. Taken together, the evaluation findings reveal insights into the capacities of the OYF Network and the systems that collaboratives are working to change—all within the context of the challenges and upheavals of 2020.



## Collaborative Response, Recovery, and Resilience

In March 2020, the spread of the global COVID-19 pandemic had reached a tipping point in the United States. The pandemic would spread through each state, city, and community with unprecedented impacts on daily life. The shock catalyzed an economic recession, as businesses and consumers tried to navigate new health and safety protocols. Against this background, the nation wrestled with its own racial reckoning and history of systemic racism in the aftermath of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, among too many others. Meanwhile, a highly polarized nation stared down a contentious, hostile, and significant presidential election in the fall.

In all of this uncertainty and trauma, young people were especially affected. A move to a virtual world caused shockwaves through the jobs, internships, programs, and classes on which young people relied. Many young people lent their ideas and voices to racial justice protests around the country. The economic and political stress of the moment was compounded by its impact on young people's families and communities.

The events of 2020 also acutely affected the work of the OYF Network's collaboratives. Partners adopted new youth engagement and recruitment strategies, as many models relied on in-person program delivery. Program providers shifted their focus to address the immediate and pressing concerns faced by families affected by the pandemic, supporting emergency relief efforts including food distribution, housing stability, laptop and wireless hotspot provision, and pandemic-related information and resources. Organizations adapted to a rapidly changing funding landscape. Backbone organizations found new ways to convene and organize community partners from the public and private sectors in supporting youth amid the uncertainty.

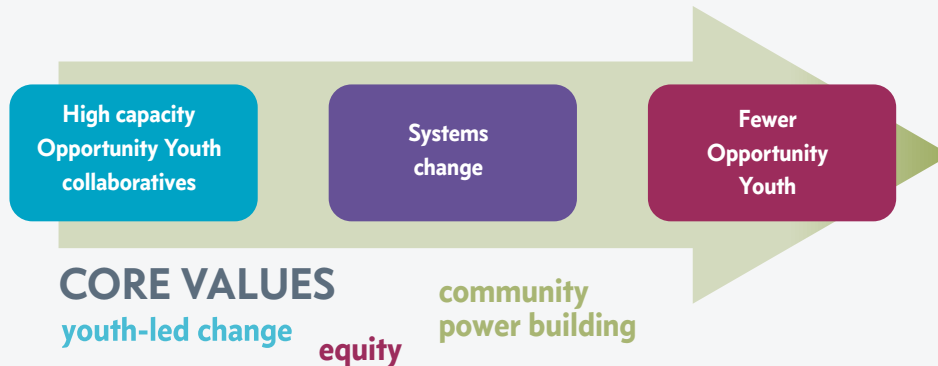
Despite these adjustments, the OYF Network persisted. Collaboratives, backbones, and partner organizations adapted. Several collaboratives prioritized flexibility. Others championed stability. New priorities were elevated, while some initiatives were put on hold. Regardless of approach, the OYF Network's ways of working were influenced by the demands of the moment. However, its steadfast commitment to young people never wavered.

## Organizing for Systems Change

Core to the OYF's theory of change is an understanding that broken and inadequate systems—including institutions, public policies, and resource allocation—are the source of youth disconnection. Therefore, in addition to engaging current opportunity youth to connect (and reconnect) to career and education pathways, work must also be done to change the systems that initiate and perpetuate youth disconnection. At the center of this work, OYF collaboratives and their cross-sector partners utilize their assets, resources, and infrastructure to shift systems, altering the path for young people in their communities. As collaboratives increase their capacity, they increase their ability to influence systems.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FIGURE 1  
SIMPLIFIED OYF THEORY OF CHANGE



The critical elements of the Opportunity Youth Forum’s theory of change are summarized below:

**Collaborative Capacity:** OYF collaboratives require appropriate infrastructure and processes to carry out their opportunity youth agenda. These capacities include: 1) leadership, planning, and convening power; 2) data and learning; 3) raising awareness and strategic communication; and 4) raising resources for the collaborative.

**Systems Change:** Young people face systemic barriers in connecting to education and employment pathways. To support young people and their communities, collaboratives must “shift the conditions that hold the problem in place.”<sup>iv</sup> Collaboratives work toward seven areas of system change: 1) programmatic change; 2) organizational change; 3) pathway improvement; 4) narrative change; 5) data use; 6) funding change; and 7) public policy change.

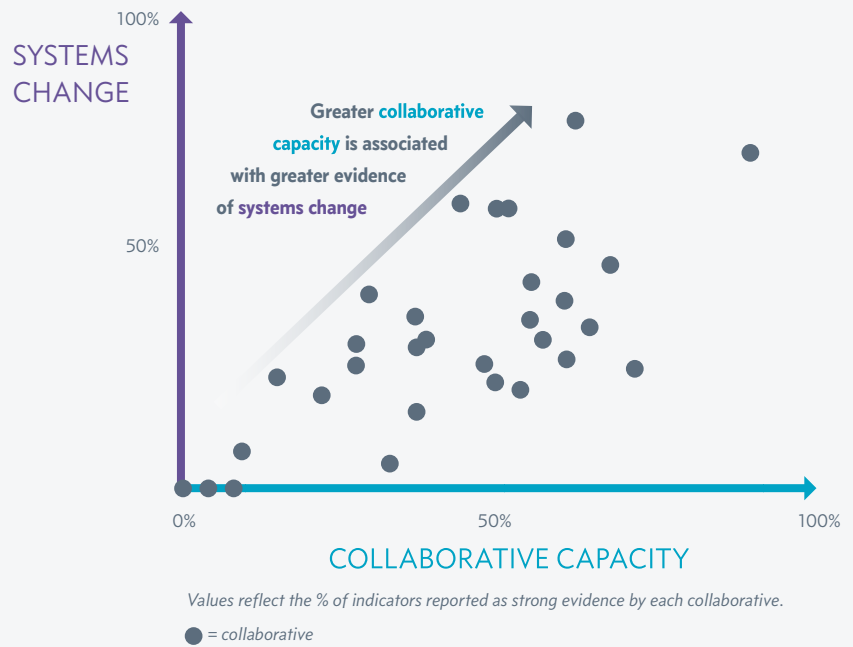
**Core Values:** The collaboratives’ work of building capacities to shift systems and ultimately improve outcomes for opportunity youth is driven by core values embedded in FCS’s work: equity, youth-led change, and community power building.

The OYF model is anchored by the belief that OYF communities will be able to connect (and reconnect) more young people to school and work as they make gains across all three domains: collaborative capacity, systems change, and core values.

For the second consecutive year, **collaboratives with greater capacity are statistically more likely to see greater evidence of the systems change necessary for opportunity youth to succeed.** This finding reinforces the notion that investing in collaboratives—increasing their resources, building their data infrastructure, boosting the capacity of personnel—can lead to sustainable improvements in youth outcomes.



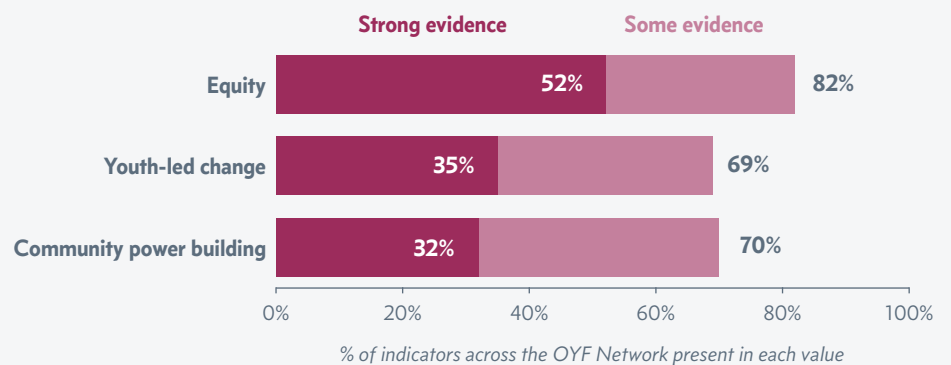
**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
FIGURE 2**  
GREATER COLLABORATIVE  
CAPACITY IS ASSOCIATED  
WITH GREATER EVIDENCE  
OF SYSTEMS CHANGE



## Embedding Core Values

Equity, youth-led change, and community power building are core values of the OYF, and are embedded across its efforts to build collaborative capacity, improve local systems, and build pathways to reconnect youth to education and employment. While the network continues to commit to these values, the backdrop of 2020—including the COVID-19 pandemic, increased attention on systemic racism, and political and economic turbulence—influenced the ways collaboratives incorporated these values into their work.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
FIGURE 3**  
EVIDENCE OF EQUITY  
WAS MOST COMMON  
ACROSS THE OYF  
NETWORK





### **A deeper focus on equity**

The OYF Network has been committed to advancing racial equity in communities since its founding. In 2020, collaboratives showed the greatest evidence of equity among the three core values and made the most progress in equity-related practices from 2019 to 2020. Collaborative membership was more diverse and reflective of local communities. Equity was also more embedded in opportunity youth strategy, as collaboratives grappled with racial disparities and the need to target strategies to population subgroups. The narrative about opportunity youth more strongly elevated the importance of addressing race and equity. All these positive changes were strongly influenced by the racial justice uprisings of 2020, which brought greater attention to racially unjust systems, including those that attempt to serve opportunity youth.

### **A continued commitment to youth-led change**

While strong evidence of youth-led change—the OYF Network’s inclusion of young people in design, strategy, and decision-making—declined slightly in 2020 due to pandemic stay-at-home orders, collaboratives have laid a strong foundation of youth engagement in opportunity youth efforts. There remains a solid commitment from the collaboratives and in the communities to youth-led change, and to a culture attentive to the needs and assets of opportunity youth. Youth voice continues to remain part of collaborative planning and implementation, though youth involvement in interpreting data or influencing policy or funding decisions was less common.

### **Increased need to build community power**

2020 was a challenging year to engage community members, many of whom were suffering from health and economic distress. Community power building—strengthening the power of marginalized communities and those most affected by the systems that collaboratives are trying to change—was the least prevalent of the three values in 2020 and declined from the previous year. As communities begin to recover from the pandemic, and continue to grapple with racial justice, they can build on the community power building vision that exists in collaboratives across the OYF Network to strengthen community awareness and involvement.

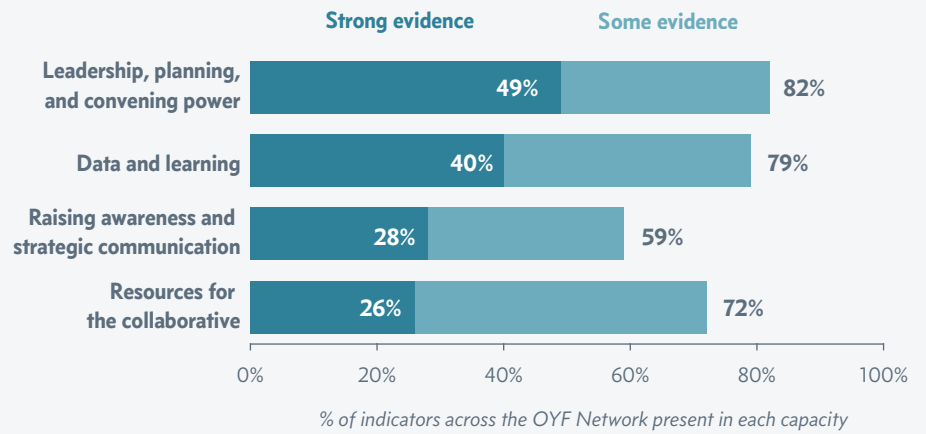
## **Building Collaborative Capacity**

Collaborative capacity consists of the infrastructure and processes necessary for the collaborative to carry out its opportunity youth agenda. As in prior years, collaborative capacity varied across the OYF Network in 2020. Some collaboratives were just beginning to establish the structures and processes necessary to carry out their work, while others had well-established processes with robust infrastructure. Overall, capacity scores across the network decreased slightly from 2019 to 2020, in part due to new collaboratives with lower initial capacity joining the network. The ability to build capacity was also challenged by the national and local context of 2020, as the focus for many collaboratives switched from longer-term planning efforts toward emergency planning and responding to immediate needs. Even with the variation across communities, key themes about how collaboratives built and advanced their capacities in 2020 emerged.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY  
FIGURE 4

IN 2020, LEADERSHIP, PLANNING, AND CONVENING POWER WAS THE STRONGEST CAPACITY IN THE OYF NETWORK



### Sustained strength in leadership, planning, and convening power

The ability to convene diverse stakeholders around a common agenda, and to build structures and processes to work together, is a strong and foundational capacity across the OYF Network. As work with stakeholders outside the collaboratives—such as regularly communicating key activities and progress, and sharing data with policymakers—became challenging in 2020, collaboratives focused on building internal capacities. Progress on internal capacity building included clarifying roles and responsibilities for collaborative partners and improved the capacity of internal collaborative communications (primarily using virtual platforms) among partners and working groups to share resources and problem solve—allowing collaboratives to address emerging pandemic needs among young people and their families.

### Enhanced data collection and use

With pandemic-related limitations to engagement of external stakeholders and the community, collaboratives used the opportunity to focus on internal structures and processes, including the critical role of data. Many collaboratives took advantage of opportunities to build internal data capacity—to train staff and partners, improve access to relevant data to inform decisions about strategy, and establish measures to track progress. Collaboratives had the opportunity to focus on aspects of data use that are often overlooked, such as using data for internal purposes and building capacity to monitor collaborative progress and assess partnership health. Collaboratives' growth in these internal data uses suggests a greater level of comfort and sophistication with data emerging across the OYF Network sites.

### Continued financial stress

Raising financial resources for opportunity youth-focused efforts continues to be a challenge. Funding for backbone support remains an obstacle for many collaboratives, as in-kind support and support to broader collaborative efforts—rather than the backbone organization—remain more common. However, the number of backbone organizations reporting financial support from partners increased from 2019 to 2020; primarily among backbone organizations well-suited to meet immediate needs of opportunity youth through housing, food, and technology-related resources (including laptops and internet access).



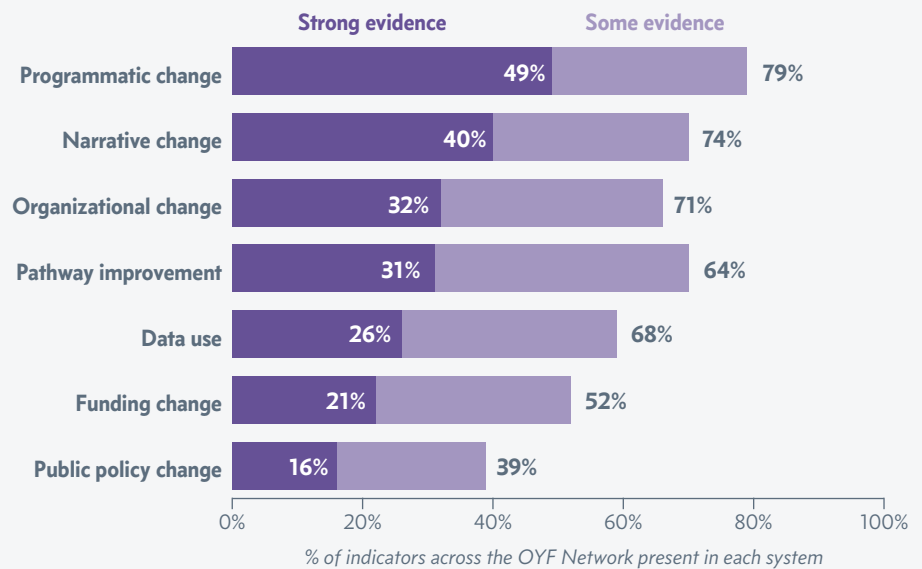
## Shifting Systems to Support Opportunity Youth

In addition to engaging in activities to improve the lives of opportunity youth today, OYF collaboratives are engaged in systems change designed to address the barriers that opportunity youth face at the root of the issue—challenging the very systems that create and perpetuate these barriers. The opportunity to affect systems change is varied, and often depends on a collaborative’s context. Access to funding and partners, strength and age of relationships, and staff capacity can affect the extent to which organizations engage in systems change, as can the national and political climate. Both the pandemic and increased community consciousness of racial inequity influenced the way collaboratives impacted systems in 2020. Overall, evidence of program change and narrative change was strongest in the OYF Network, while evidence of funding change and public policy change was lowest.

While system change scores in the OYF Network remained stable from 2019, the network’s engagement in systems change shifted in 2020 in critical ways.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FIGURE 5

IN 2020, THE OYF NETWORK SAW THE GREATEST EVIDENCE OF PROGRAM CHANGE COMPARED TO OTHER TYPES OF SYSTEM CHANGE



### Collaborative partners adapt programs to meet the demands of the pandemic

Like the rest of the world, collaborative partners in the OYF Network turned their attention in 2020 to responding to and supporting recovery from the pandemic. Driven by the pressing needs of young people, partners, and broader system actors, collaboratives adjusted their focus and priorities. Amid uncertainty in implementing programs, partners prioritized organization and program stability, and were less likely to grow or expand their reach. They continued to modify their programs—adopting supports for young people and navigating new health and safety regulations. Young people’s mental health and basic needs were elevated as priority areas, as organizations sought programmatic partnerships to support these efforts. Collaboratives also supported partners and their rapid switch to virtual programming. While raising funds remained a challenge for the network, some collaboratives observed increased financial support for pandemic recovery, particularly from private funders.

### Increased data use to support recovery efforts

Among the elements of systems change, the OYF Network made the greatest improvement in using data to improve systems. These gains were driven by collaboratives’ use of data to drive decision-making, inform systems-wide practices and individual programs, and advocate for policy changes. Data were also used to align message, vision, and information among disparate organizations and sectors. Against the backdrop of a generational pandemic, access to clear, useful information was critically important. Collaboratives leveraged existing data infrastructure to support pandemic recovery. Data were used across systems to: 1) monitor the impact of the pandemic on young people; 2) facilitate resource distribution; and 3) document learning for future program modification.





## Evolving national dialogue creates opportunity to address racial equities

OYF collaboratives have long been champions for racial equity. However, an increased national focus on racial injustice created opportunities to more explicitly center systemic racism in conversations with sector and system partners, opening a door to shift public mindsets, dispositions, and negative stereotypes of opportunity youth. Collaboratives described system actors who had previously avoided naming race and equity as priorities now doing so intentionally. Collaboratives continued to emphasize the extent that system-level failures influence the education and career outcomes of young people.

## Future Considerations

2020 was a challenging year for collaboratives across the OYF Network. Despite these challenges, the year offered collaboratives opportunities to reset and refocus. The collaboratives also saw progress in key areas as they adapted to immediate community needs emerging in real time. Systems, as well, responded to the urgency of 2020, as system actors throughout the network began to give racial inequity the attention it deserves. The moment elevated new ways of thinking and doing as collaboratives reimagined collective impact work. With these lessons in mind, we offer several considerations for FCS to advance the future of the OYF Network.

- » **Leverage the current context to raise awareness of collaboratives' roles in leading on pressing social issues.** The events of 2020—including the pandemic, recession, and racial justice movement—had a profound impact on the lives of young people and provide an opportunity to help funders understand the role of collaboratives in a different light. The changing narrative about racial inequity and workforce needs across the U.S. offers new opportunities for FCS and collaboratives to connect their work to broader social issues taking root in the mainstream, and open doors to new funding opportunities and financial stability.
- » **Help collaboratives apply lessons learned through the pandemic to future work.** The pandemic forced collaboratives to think differently about how community needs are met and brought increased attention to mental health, housing, and food security, among other issues. The lessons born from this crisis can inform and inspire program design and partner engagement—among other collaborative functions—throughout the network. These lessons point to opportunities to increase collaborative support and technical assistance in important areas, including prioritizing youth mental health needs and equipping collaboratives for flexibility and community responsiveness.
- » **Consider how to meet the needs of an expanding and increasingly diverse network of collaboratives amid a shared vision for collaborative capacity and systems change.** As the OYF Network grows, membership continues to become increasingly diverse (e.g., urbanicity, demographic makeup, stage of maturity). The addition of such sites to the OYF may signal a need to offer greater direction for what effective opportunity youth-focused efforts and systems change “look like.” Though diversity and contextually driven approaches guided by core values are strengths of the OYF, site variation places new demands on technical assistance and the OYF learning agenda. Initiatives aimed at meeting unique community needs, such as the tribal community of practice and data enhancement grants for rural and tribal communities, offer examples of how targeted technical assistance can support network-wide goals. A roadmap of supports that honor the unique nature of collaboratives' work, and provide a consistent vision for essential capacities and systems change, can help collaboratives chart a clear path that enhances their work while unifying efforts nationally.

<sup>i</sup> <http://measureofamerica.org/youth-disconnection-2021/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/opportunity-youth-forum/>

<sup>iii</sup> Data from analysis of 2019 ACS data in development of 2019 Common Measure

<sup>iv</sup> Calculations based on 35 OYF geographies using 2019 ACS data.

<sup>v</sup> John Kania, Mark Kramer, and Peter Senge (FSG), “The Waters of Systems Change,” May 2018.

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