



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.

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.ⁱ 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.”ⁱⁱ 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)ⁱⁱⁱ with rates of disconnection higher among American Indian, Black, and Hispanic youth than white youth.^{iv} 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.

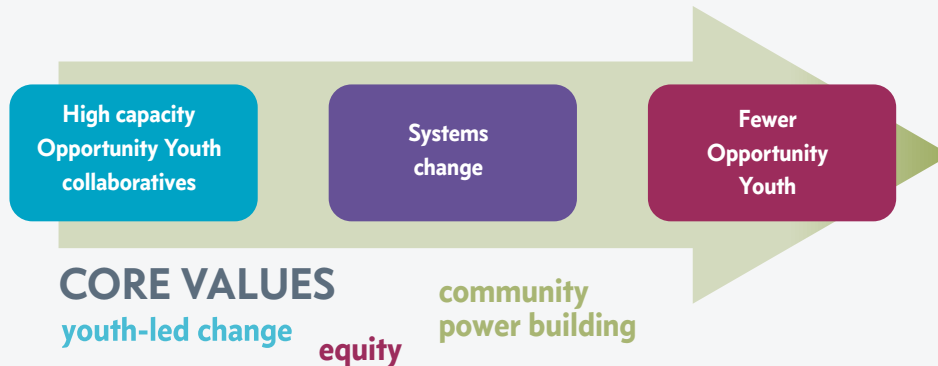
Despite these adjustments, the OYF Network persisted. Collaboratives, backbones, and partner organizations adapted. Several collaboratives prioritized flexibility. Others championed stability. New priorities were elevated, while some initiatives were put on hold. Regardless of approach, the OYF Network's 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.”^{iv} 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.

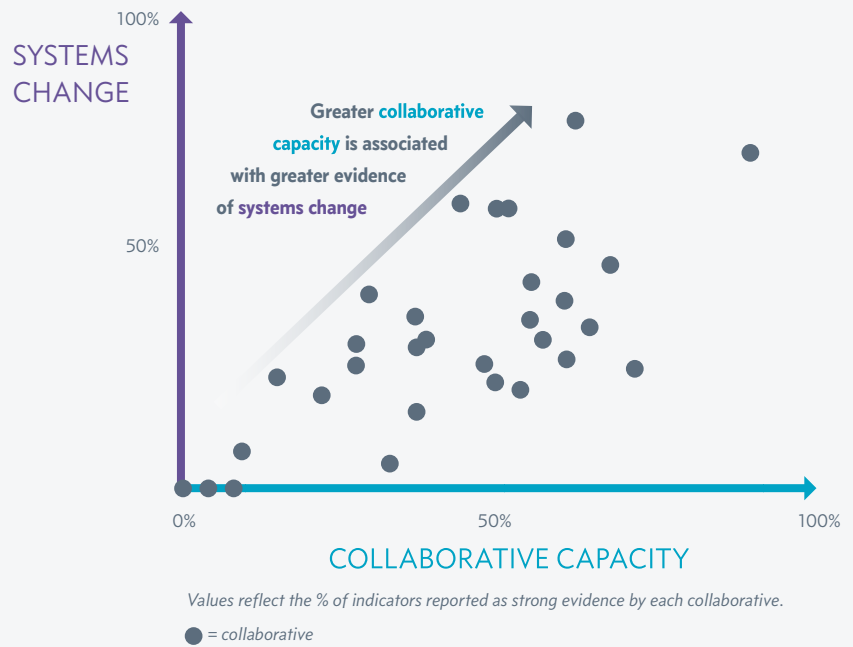
Core Values: The collaboratives’ work of building capacities to shift systems and ultimately improve outcomes for opportunity youth is driven by core values embedded in FCS’s work: equity, youth-led change, and community power building.

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.



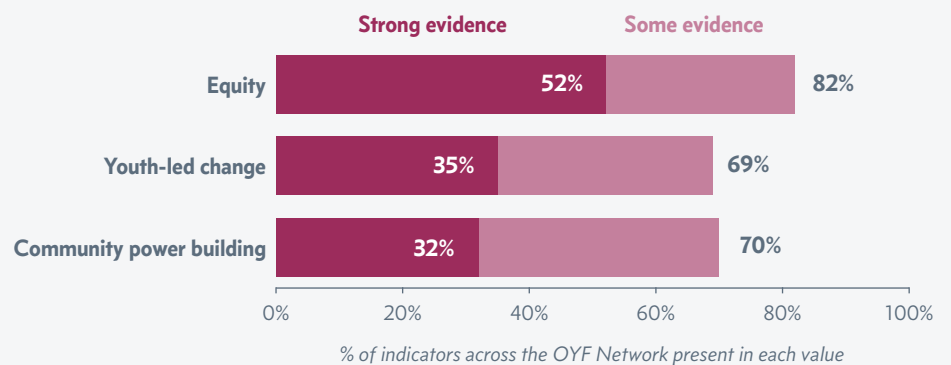
**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
FIGURE 2**
GREATER COLLABORATIVE
CAPACITY IS ASSOCIATED
WITH GREATER EVIDENCE
OF SYSTEMS CHANGE



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.

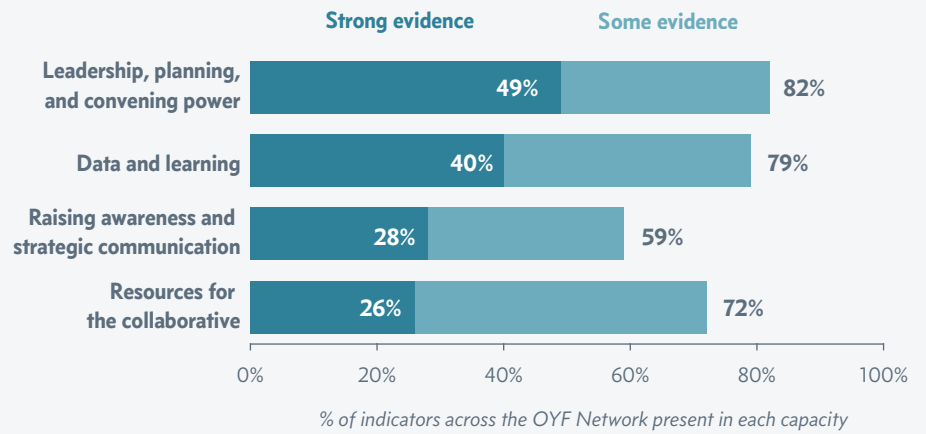
Building Collaborative Capacity

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).



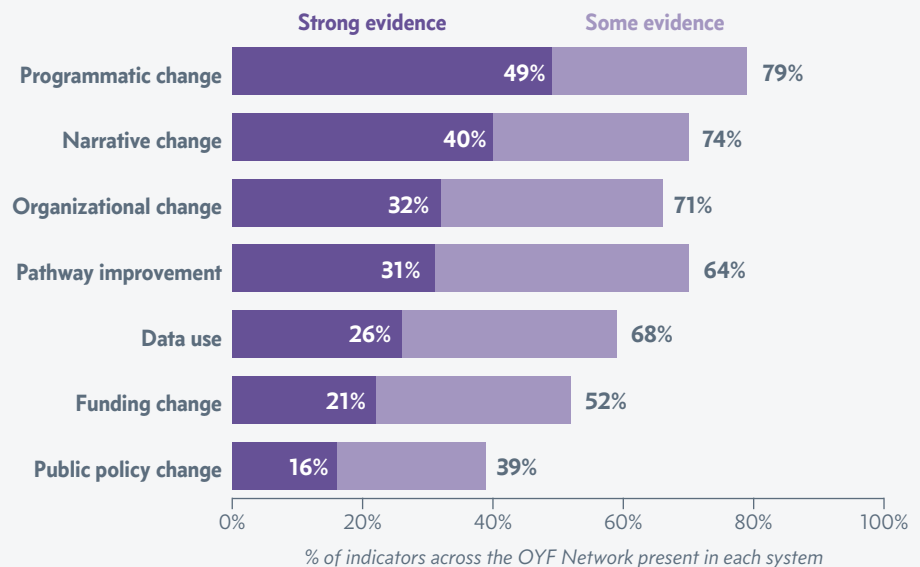
Shifting Systems to Support Opportunity Youth

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.

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

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

ⁱⁱⁱ Data from analysis of 2019 ACS data in development of 2019 Common Measure

^{iv} Calculations based on 35 OYF geographies using 2019 ACS data.

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



INTRODUCTION

In 2012, the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions (FCS) launched what is now the Opportunity Youth Forum “to leverage momentum of the opportunity youth movement, including the call for community-based solutions, coming out of the White House Council on Community Solutions.”¹

Since then, FCS has supported a network of communities through general operating support and, later, numerous projects focused on Opportunity Youth—including improving education and employment connections, youth entrepreneurship, COVID recovery, and data use, to name a few—to mobilize a national movement.

As of 2020, the OYF Network has expanded to 33 communities across 19 states, each “seeking to scale multiple reconnection pathways that achieve better outcomes in education and employment for opportunity youth.”²

In this report, we detail network-wide findings drawn from data collection among 30 of 33 communities participating in the OYF Network in 2020. We focus on collaborative capacity across the OYF Network, as well as the status of the systems changes necessary to advance community-wide outcomes for opportunity youth.

We collected quantitative data in this report through a self-assessment administered to OYF Network communities in February 2021, similar to the process used during the 2019 OYF evaluation. We collected qualitative information for this report through the same assessment, as well as through interviews with leaders from the collaboratives.

In addition to describing the characteristics of the communities, collaboratives, and backbones that compose the OYF Network; the collaborative capacity across the network, and the state of the systems in which these collaboratives operate, we explore how the OYF Network changed from 2019 to 2020. The story of 2020 cannot be told without understanding how the collaboratives responded and adjusted to the COVID-19 pandemic, the racial justice movement, and the economic crisis, and what these meant for opportunity youth. We conclude the report with considerations for how the Forum for Community Solutions and its partners can further support OYF Network members to build their capacity and increase their impact through systems change.

We have structured the report as follows:

- » The Context of 2020
- » The Network at a Glance
- » Opportunity Youth Forum Theory of Change
- » Findings Related to Core Values, Collaborative Capacity, and Systems Change
- » Considerations for the Future of the OYF Network

33 OYF COMMUNITIES AS OF 2020

- Atlanta, GA
- Austin, TX
- Baltimore, MD*
- Boston, MA
- Chicago, IL
- Del Norte County, CA
- Denver, CO
- Detroit, MI
- Flint, MI*
- Greenville, MS
- Hartford, CT
- Hopi Reservation, AZ
- Houston, TX
- Jasper, TX
- Los Angeles, CA
- Maine, Southern Rural
- Minneapolis, MN
- Missoula, MT
- Newark, NJ
- New Orleans, LA*
- New York, NY
(multiple collaboratives)
- Oakland, CA
- Philadelphia, PA
- Phoenix, AZ
- Pueblo of Jemez, NM
- Pueblo of Taos, NM
- San Antonio, TX
- San Augustine, TX
- San Diego, CA
- San Francisco, CA
- San Jose/Santa Clara County, CA
- South King County, WA
- Tucson, AZ

**Did not participate in the 2020 self-assessment*



THE CONTEXT OF 2020

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, with the number of opportunity youth more than doubling from 2019 to 2020.³ A move to a virtual world caused shockwaves through internships, programs, and classes on which young people relied. Youth summer employment programs were cancelled entirely or enrolled far fewer youth than in typical years. High school graduating classes sent far fewer youth to college than previously, and community colleges lost historic numbers of students due to COVID-19 and recession. 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 collaboratives. Partners were forced to adopt 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, 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.

While the challenges of the year were serious and consequential, they offered an opportunity for collaboratives to reimagine their work, relationships, and purpose. Collaborative organizations forged new working agreements. Backbones prioritized community response efforts by convening partners and facilitating resource collection and information sharing. Organizations sought and leveraged new funding streams to aid in resource distribution. Collaborative partners found new ways to use data to not only monitor the impact of the pandemic on opportunity youth, but share information with community groups. They further leaned into the expertise of young people who were motivated by the impact of the pandemic and racial justice reckoning on themselves, their families, and their communities.

While the nation has not yet turned the page on the pandemic, the *resilience* of the OYF Network—demonstrated by prioritizing the needs of the young people they serve, despite the most challenging of circumstances—proved to be the most essential and critical capacity.



THE NETWORK AT A GLANCE

Opportunity Youth in the OYF Network

Of the 5.9 million 16- to 24-year-olds living in OYF Network communities in 2019 (pre-pandemic), 11% or about 657,000 young people, were disconnected from work and school.⁴ The rates of disconnection were even higher among some racial and ethnic subgroups, with 27% of American Indian youth, 17% of Black youth, and 13% of Hispanic youth disconnected from school and work, compared to 8% of white youth.⁵ Nationally, the number of teens and young adults disconnected from work and school fell from 14.7% in 2010 to 10.7% in 2019. However, youth disconnection rates increased dramatically during the pandemic. Measure of America estimates that in May 2020, as many as nine million young people were out of school and out of work nationally, more than twice as many as in 2019.⁶

The OYF Common Measures—developed as part of the Forum’s [Equity Counts](#) initiative—provide further understanding of the opportunity youth landscape by examining disconnection from each segment of the education-to-work pipeline. Based on these rates across the OYF communities in 2019, among all 16- to 24-year-olds, we see the following rates:

- » High school disconnection: 12%
- » Postsecondary disconnection: 21%
- » Workforce disconnection of those who’ve completed postsecondary: 11%⁷

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF OPPORTUNITY YOUTH IN OYF COMMUNITIES, 2019 (pre-pandemic)

GENDER

Male	52.4%
Female	47.6%

AGE

16-19	26.1%
20-24	73.9%

RACE/ETHNICITY

Hispanic, any race	41.5%
Black or African American	25.5%
White	22.8%
Asian or Pacific Islander	4.7%
Two or more races	3.0%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	2.1%
Other race	0.4%

INCOME LEVEL

200% of poverty line or less	55.3%
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EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Less than high school	24.1%
High school diploma or GED	50.6%
Some college	16.2%
College degree	9.1%

NATIVITY

Born in another country	13.9%
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CHILDREN

Opportunity youth with children	4.5%
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Source: American Community Survey data, 2019



Collaboratives across the OYF Network have been working to lower these disconnection rates and reconnect opportunity youth to education and employment. In 2020, a subset of partners across the OYF Network reported serving approximately 59,000 youth—both opportunity youth and youth at risk of disconnection. Of these youth, about 33,000 were 16- to 24-year-olds who are not in school and not working (“opportunity youth”).⁸ Because of reporting challenges, these numbers are likely much higher. These totals are lower than the numbers of youth served in 2019, likely due to the impact of pandemic stay-at-home orders. Collaboratives had reduced ability to directly serve and interact with opportunity youth and young adults, as summer youth programs were canceled and workforce programs served fewer young people. Although collaboratives served these youth through a variety of programs and services provided by partner organizations in 2020, the systems change efforts across the OYF Network affect all 657,000 opportunity youth.

While siloed state and local data systems, as well as collaborative and partner data capacity, pose challenges to accurately capturing opportunity youth outcomes, a subset of collaboratives reported youth outcomes among partners in 2020 (Table 1). More than 15,000 young people (about 26% of those served) participated in an internship or work experience connected to a pathway, while almost 6,000 (10%) enrolled in postsecondary education in 2020.⁹

TABLE 1:
OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH SERVED BY A SUBSET OF COLLABORATIVES IN 2020*

NUMBER OF YOUTH WHO	ALL YOUTH	OPPORTUNITY YOUTH
Earned a high school diploma or equivalency	5,462	2,608
Participated in an internship or related work experience connected to a pathway	15,663	2,931
Completed an apprenticeship	138	0
Enrolled in postsecondary education	5,854	1,405
Enrolled in career/industry training programs	3,197	1,531
Earned postsecondary credentials	625	515
Obtained employment	2,441	1,768

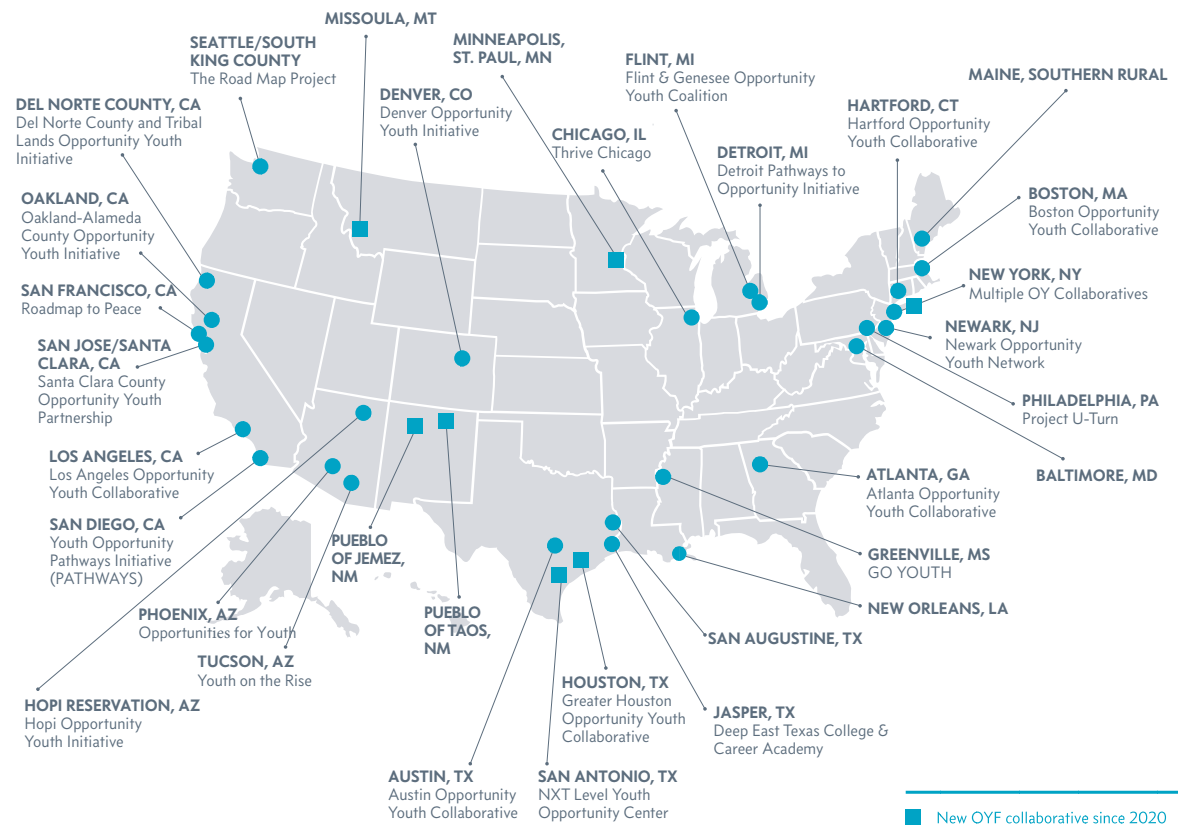
*Note: Between 14 and 20 collaboratives, of 33 total, reported these data depending on the outcome.



Characteristics of OYF Network Communities, Collaboratives, and Backbone Organizations

The 2020 OYF Network represents a diverse set of 33 collaboratives¹⁰ bringing cross-sector partners together to improve education and employment outcomes for opportunity youth. While partners involved in the OYF Network share a common vision, the communities in which they operate, the collaboratives leading this work, and the backbone organizations coordinating these efforts vary greatly. Overall, the community, collaborative, and backbones of the OYF Network resemble the 2019 network, with the addition of new urban, rural, and tribal sites.

FIGURE 1
OYF COLLABORATIVES IN 2020





COMMUNITY CHARACTERISTICS

Communities served by OYF Network collaboratives span the United States across urban and rural geographies. In 2020, the OYF Network expanded to include more tribal communities (see sidebar). The location of these collaboratives helps create a strong, diverse cohort of learning opportunities and provides an important context to the work. While their goals are the same, communities must tailor their strategies to the local context.

Collaboratives primarily focused their opportunity youth efforts on a single county or city, rather than a more targeted set of neighborhoods or a broader region spanning multiple counties. Forty-two percent (14 collaboratives) described their geographic scope as a single city or county. However, the nature of these cities and counties varied greatly, not only in their geographic locations across the country as seen in Figure 1, but also in their population size and density.

The OYF Network remained mostly urban, though it continued to expand to rural and tribal communities. A clear majority of the OYF Network sites served urban areas: 12 communities were described as only urban and 26 communities included urban areas (urban only, or a mix of urban, suburban, and rural/small town). However, six collaboratives served only rural or small-town communities, and six additional communities served rural or small-town areas as part of their broader geographies.

COLLABORATIVE CHARACTERISTICS

Communities in the OYF Network are served by cross-sector collaboratives working to connect youth to education and employment opportunities. The variation across these communities is reflected in the range of collaborative ages, sizes, and areas of focus.

Longevity of Youth-focused Collaborative Efforts: Across the OYF Network, collaboratives have spent a median of seven years focusing their work on opportunity youth, the same as in 2019. Most collaboratives in the network fall into one of two groups: almost one in three collaboratives (30%) are newer to opportunity-youth focused work, with less than five years of experience; while over half of collaboratives (58%) have 5-10 years of experience working with opportunity youth. The remaining 12% of collaboratives have spent more than 10 years on opportunity youth work.

Collaborative Size: The median number of partner organizations in each local collaborative in 2020 was 19 partners, slightly less than the median in 2019 (25 partners). New collaboratives overall had fewer partners in 2020 than returning collaboratives (median was 17 partners vs. 21, respectively). However, the number of partners varied widely across collaboratives, with three collaboratives identifying between 90 and 100 organizations as partners. This wide variety in collaborative breadth reflects the diversity of geographies and partnership environments present in the OYF Network. Collaboratives most often engaged community-based organizations, with 15 community-based organizations engaged in communities across the OYF Network, on average, similar to 2019. Government, higher education, and K-12 education institutions were less likely to be engaged, with four of each partner type participating in collaboratives, on average.

AN EXPANDING AND CHANGING NETWORK

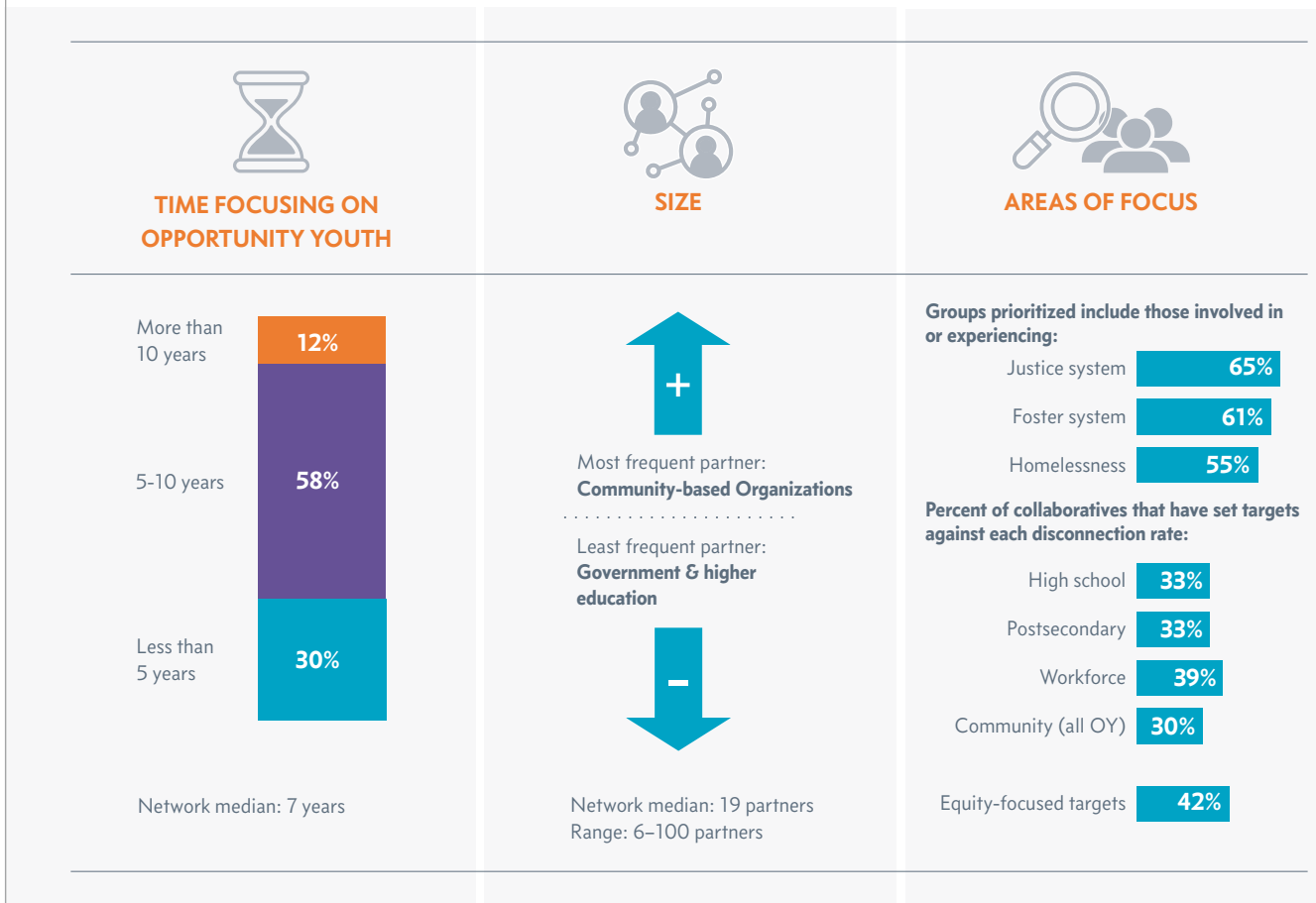
From 2019 to 2020, 10 collaboratives joined the OYF Network and participated in the evaluation.

- » Three tribal sites joined the OYF Network, two of which participated in the evaluation: Pueblo of Jemez and Pueblo of Taos
- » Collaboratives are increasingly prioritizing young people who experience homelessness, live in public housing, and have or are expecting children.



Areas of Focus: Depending on the needs of their communities, collaboratives often focused on specific populations and reconnection to particular segments of the school-to-work pipeline. In 2020, at least half of collaboratives reported actively prioritizing at least one of the following: youth involved in the juvenile justice system, foster youth or youth transitioning out of foster care, and youth experiencing homelessness. More collaboratives focused on youth experiencing homelessness in 2020 than in 2019 (11 collaboratives in 2019 vs. 17 in 2020), as well as on young people residing in public housing (3 collaboratives in 2019 vs. 9 in 2020), and youth with children or expecting children (8 collaboratives in 2019 vs. 15 in 2020). Furthermore, in 2020 more collaboratives focused on connecting youth to postsecondary education and the workforce (46% and 52% reported “a lot,” respectively) compared to connection to high school/equivalency (18% “a lot”).

FIGURE 2
COLLABORATIVE CHARACTERISTICS SNAPSHOT



BACKBONE CHARACTERISTICS

The backbone organization—the lead coordinating organization supporting the collaborative—is a critical component of the collective impact model, providing a structure and team to coordinate the work of the collaborative.

Initiative Focus: Approximately three in four backbone organizations’ opportunity youth work in 2020 happens as part of a broader initiative (73%), while about a quarter of backbones focus specifically on opportunity youth (21%).



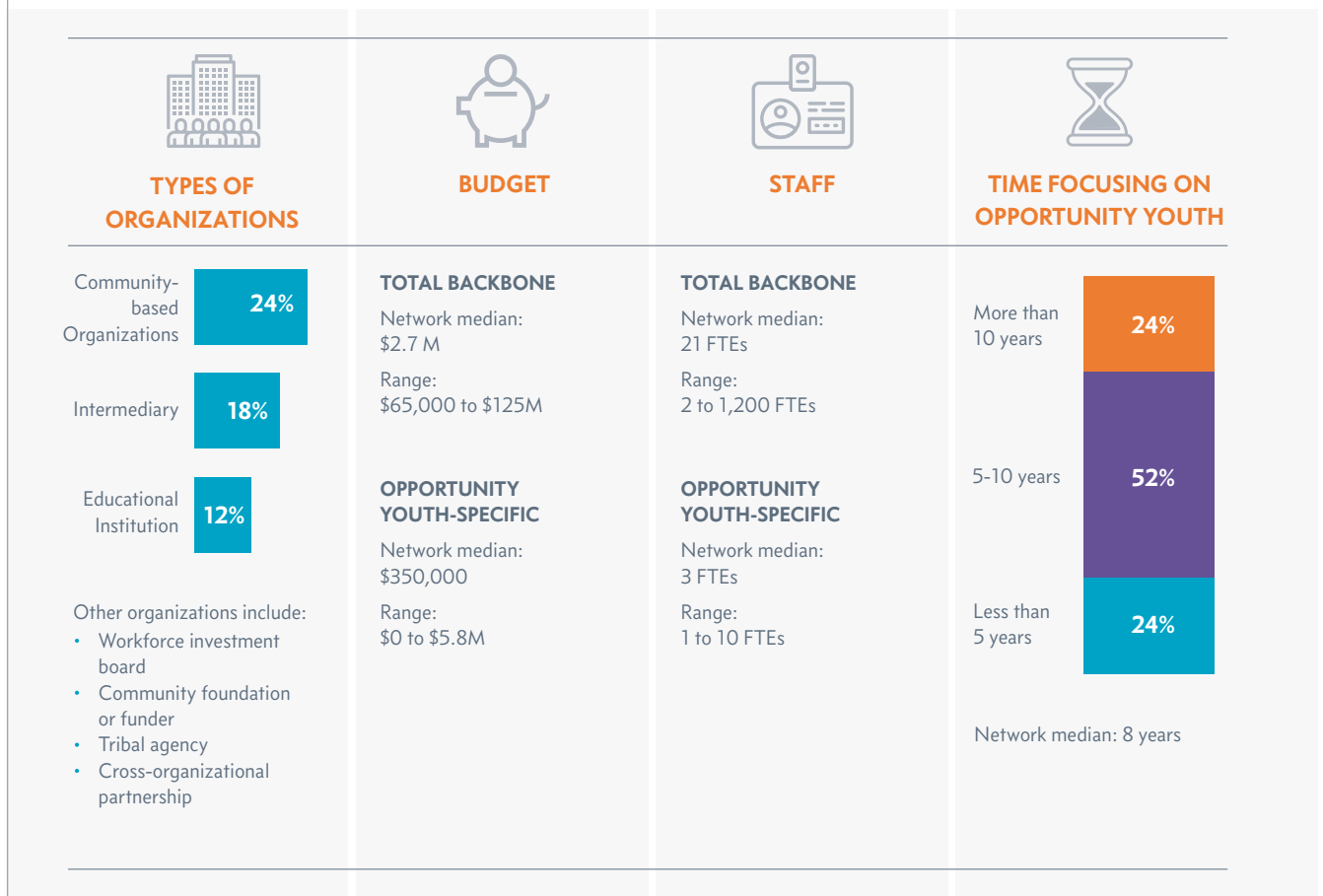
Types of Backbone Organizations: Various types of organizations have assumed the role of OYF backbones in their collaboratives. While about a quarter of backbones are community-based organizations, a smaller percentage are intermediaries (18%), education institutions (12%), community foundations or funders (9%), or workforce investment boards (9%). Other types of backbones include tribal agencies or cross-organizational partnerships.

Budget Size: Backbones vary widely in total organizational budget and the amount of their budget dedicated to opportunity youth. Backbones have a median organizational budget of \$2.7 million and a median budget specifically for opportunity youth work of \$350,000. However, there is a very wide range across organizations: total organizational budgets ranged from \$65,000 to \$125 million, and opportunity youth-dedicated budgets ranged from \$0 to \$5.8 million.

Staffing: Paralleling variations in budget, the number of staff that backbones dedicated to this work varied greatly. Backbone organizations had between one and 12,000 full-time-equivalents (FTEs)¹¹ working for them, and they dedicated one to 10 FTEs specifically to opportunity youth-related work. The roles of staff focusing on opportunity youth were primarily related to programmatic or pathways work, and collaborative facilitation and leadership. On average, backbones dedicated about 0.6 or fewer FTEs to policy, fundraising, data, and communications.

Years Focused on Opportunity Youth: Backbone organizations have spent a median of eight years focusing on opportunity youth. While a slight majority (52%) have been working for 5-10 years, there is an even split of newer and older backbones, with 24% spending more than 10 years and 24% spending less than 5 years working on opportunity youth efforts.

FIGURE 3
BACKBONE CHARACTERISTICS SNAPSHOT





OYF THEORY OF CHANGE

Organizing for Systems Change

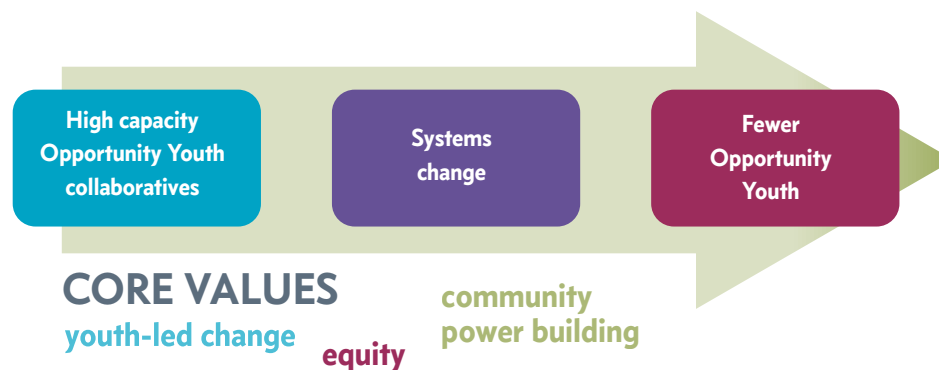
Since the OYF Network's inception, an underlying assumption of using the collective impact model to connect opportunity youth to education and career pathways is the belief that disconnected and inadequate systems are at the source of youth disconnection. To successfully engage and re-engage young people, systems of individuals, programs, organizations, policies, and resources must change. And by investing in the development, learning, and support of cross-sector collaboratives to change these systems, youth outcomes—connection to education and workforce pathways—will improve.

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

1. **Collaborative Capacity:** The infrastructure and processes necessary for the collaborative to carry out its opportunity youth agenda.
2. **Systems Change:** "Shifts to the conditions that hold a problem in place"¹²—in this case, disconnected pathways and inequitable conditions that prevent young people from achieving education and employment outcomes.

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

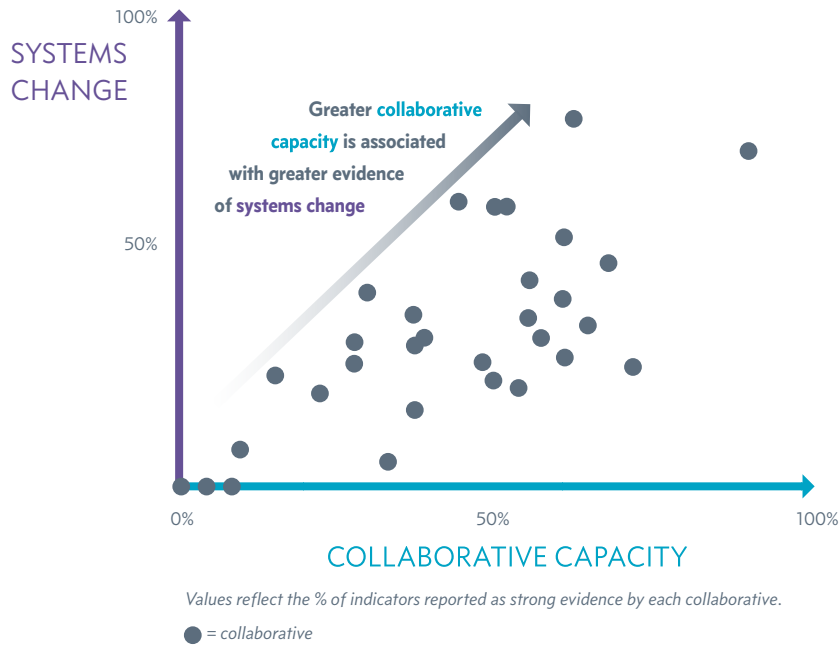
FIGURE 4
SIMPLIFIED OYF THEORY OF CHANGE





Collaboratives with greater capacity are statistically more likely to see greater evidence of the systems changes necessary for opportunity youth to succeed.¹³ Figure 5 illustrates the relationship between each OYF community's collaborative capacity and evidence of systems change, as measured by the 2020 self-assessment. These findings reinforce the need to invest in and build the "collaborative muscle" necessary for creating systems that promote success for opportunity youth.

FIGURE 5
GREATER COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY IS ASSOCIATED
WITH GREATER EVIDENCE OF SYSTEMS CHANGE





A Note about Methodology

We drew findings in this report from the 2020 OYF self-assessment and interviews with collaborative leads. The self-assessment focused on four areas: 1) Community and Opportunity Youth Collaborative Characteristics; 2) Collaborative Capacity; 3) Changes in Programs, Organizations, and Systems (i.e., Systems Change); and 4) Youth Outputs and Outcomes. The assessment also included questions about Youth Healing.

We followed the same methodology as the 2019 OYF Report.¹⁴ In the assessment of collaborative capacity and systems change, we asked collaboratives to rate the presence of a number of indicators on a scale from 0 to 3 (0=does not describe us, 1=somewhat describes us, 2=describes us well, and 3=describes us very well). Using the four-point scale in this assessment allows us to examine indicators with more nuance and detail, as well as set a “quality standard” for capacity and systems change.

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

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



CORE VALUES

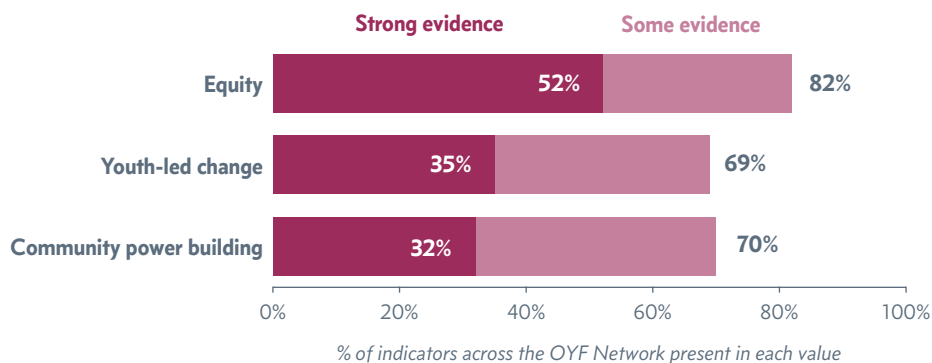
Equity, youth-led change, and community power building are core values and strategies embedded in the OYF work. Collaboratives are incorporating elements of these priorities into their infrastructure and processes, as well as into their efforts to change local systems that affect opportunity youth. In 2020, collaboratives showed strengths in incorporating equity into their work, including having diverse membership reflective of the local community, and understanding disparities and the need for targeted opportunity youth strategies. Collaboratives also made the largest gains in equity from 2019 to 2020, building on the national racial justice movement. Embedding youth-led change and community power proved to be more challenging in 2020, with pandemic restrictions limiting direct engagement. However, as pandemic restrictions loosen, there is evidence of a strong commitment and vision to elevating youth engagement and community power in the opportunity youth work that collaboratives can build upon.

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. They serve as priorities in how collaboratives organize for action as well as what successful systems change includes.

These core values are a unique and differentiating feature of the OYF Network compared to other collaborative networks. The communities share these values, and are taking action to embed them in their work. Among all OYF communities in 2020, 74% reported indicators of equity, youth-led change, and community power building embedded within collaborative capacity and systems change work—as at least “somewhat present,” while 41% indicated they were “strongly present.”

In 2020, collaboratives showed the greatest evidence of equity and made the most progress in equity-related practices from 2019 to 2020—from 42% of equity indicators showing strong evidence to 52%. This growth was tied to the prominence and increased attention to equity resulting from the racial justice movement in 2020. The OYF Network’s ability to act on the value of youth-led change decreased slightly, while the network’s ability to leverage community power was limited. These changes are likely due to challenges engaging young people and community members due to the pandemic and stay-at-home orders. Collaboratives with more resources, namely those with larger backbone budgets devoted to opportunity youth efforts, demonstrated statistically greater incorporation of core values overall—and in equity and youth-led change—compared to less-resourced backbones.¹⁵

FIGURE 6
IN 2020, EVIDENCE OF EQUITY WAS MOST COMMON ACROSS THE OYF NETWORK





Equity

Collaboratives continue to increase the diversity of their membership. In 2020, 77% of collaboratives reported that their members reflect their communities (e.g., race, ethnicity, age), while 58% reported that members with decision-making authority reflect the diversity in the community. Notably, more collaboratives reported strong evidence of this diversity in membership in 2020 compared to 2019 (52% in 2019 to 77% in 2020). Every collaborative reported at least some evidence of this representation, indicating that collaboratives were thinking more deeply and purposefully about equity in their membership.

The systems serving opportunity youth are showing greater evidence of, and understanding and commitment to, equity.

From 2019 to 2020, there is more evidence across the OYF Network that stakeholders discussed the challenges of different marginalized groups in their communities and, in particular, they understand racial disparities and the need to target strategies to population subgroups. For example, the Atlanta Opportunity Youth Collaborative is centering equity into its development of a career pathway and youth apprenticeship model. The initiative's strategic plan includes a focus on young people of color. Equity also became a bigger part of the narrative about opportunity youth. In New York, partners have shown greater comfort conducting conversations about race and equity, allowing for more direct language about these topics. Finally, slightly more collaboratives noted local organizations adopted equity-focused goals or policies. These positive changes were strongly influenced by the racial justice uprisings of 2020, which brought greater attention to racially unjust systems, including those that serve opportunity youth.

Equity-related data practices are still emergent across the OYF Network. Only 39% of collaboratives used data to address inequities among population subgroups in 2020. Similarly, 36% of collaboratives reported that systems collected disaggregated data and 29% reported systems used disaggregated data to improve programs for subpopulations of opportunity youth. However, the OYF Network did show progress in several measures of equitable data use between 2019 and 2020. Collaboratives were more likely to disaggregate data to uncover disproportionate outcomes, and systems were more likely to collect and use disaggregated data.

Youth-led Change

The impact of COVID-19 and the stay-at-home orders greatly affected collaboratives' ability to engage youth—in attending meetings, setting goals, informing decisions, shaping the opportunity youth agenda, reviewing data, and supporting communications efforts. Evidence of youth engagement in opportunity youth work across the OYF Network was mostly stable or declined from 2019 to 2020. The network saw strong evidence of 35% of indicators of youth-led change in 2020, compared to 39% in 2019. While a few indicators of youth-led change showed small improvements, most remained the same or declined slightly. Rural collaboratives reported significantly lower levels of youth-led change compared to all other collaboratives (percentage of indicators with strong evidence was 13% in rural communities vs. 40% in all others¹⁶). Logistical challenges of bringing young people together across greater distances in rural areas, and poor internet access limiting virtual engagement, were cited as the most common challenges to youth engagement in rural communities.

Interest and commitment to engaging youth in change efforts was prominent across the OYF Network. At least some evidence of nearly every indicator of youth-led change was reported by the majority of collaboratives. Two-thirds of collaboratives reported strong evidence that collaborative planning included explicit acknowledgement of youth engagement and youth-led change (94% of collaboratives had at least some evidence of this). More than half (55%) of collaboratives reported strong evidence that youth were actively involved in the work of the collaborative (e.g., attended meetings; and participated in work groups, initiative design, and goal setting), with most (81%) reporting at least some evidence of this involvement. A majority of collaboratives also reported that their communities support youth-led change—55% said there is strong evidence that local organizations have a culture that is attentive to the needs and assets of opportunity youth. Nearly all reported at least some evidence.



Collaboratives provided a number of examples of strong youth engagement. In Oakland, in response to the pandemic, young people organized and facilitated virtual town halls and conferences for other young people. Topics included mental health and self-care, education, and personal safety. In Tucson, the Youth Leadership Council organized a voter mobilization effort to register opportunity youth to vote in the 2020 election. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, which affected their initial engagement strategies, the Leadership Council registered more than 500 new voters and collected over 5,000 pledges to vote from registered youth voters through phone and text banking and virtual information sessions. Santa Clara implemented a structural change where young people will govern the collaborative. Young people will be onboarded each summer and join returning members in the governance structure. Adult allies provide support through their social capital and resources.

Youth were least likely to review data or influence policy or funding decisions. Only three collaboratives (10%) reported strong evidence that they regularly engaged young people in reviewing, reflecting on, and making sense of their data. Similarly, only 19% of collaboratives (six) engaged youth in participatory research. These types of engagements of young people with data also declined from 2019, highlighting the impact the pandemic had on working with youth. In addition, youth influence at the systems level was relatively low in 2020, though there were some signs of improvement in influence on public policy. About a third of collaboratives reported strong evidence that youth influenced decisions about public policy (36%) and institutional policy changes (32%). In Missoula, young people supported the passage of a city ordinance protecting LGBTQ community members. Youth advocated to change bullying and harassment policies within the school district to include gender expression and diversity. Young people developed trainings and workshops designed to counter misinformation and stereotypes. In Los Angeles, youth leaders provided testimony to the County Board of Supervisors focused on barriers that foster youth face and the need for employment programs. After the testimony, the Board approved funding for foster youth employment programming.

HEALING'S CENTRAL ROLE

Healing-centered organizing is an important component of youth-led change. The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions has committed to supporting healing-centered approaches to youth-led change, and believes that organizing is much more restorative and healing when it is connected to practices that promote self-care, well-being, and the culture of individuals and communities.¹⁷

In 2020, every collaborative had at least some acknowledgement of trauma in their work with young people. Of the common core elements of Healing Centered Organizing¹⁸, the collaboratives most frequently used strategies related to engaging in community building (74%) and ensuring youth leadership and ownership (71%).

The OYF Network's most commonly reported healing-centered strategies range across multiple core elements:

Engage in critical analysis and fight for structural change	Training and skill development in youth organizing, advocacy, social justice, and/or critical awareness (68% of collaboratives)
Engage in community building	Regularly incorporating celebration and positive acknowledgement (58% of collaboratives)
Ensure youth leadership and ownership	<p>Creating meaningful organizational leadership roles for young people (48% of collaboratives)</p> <p>Facilitating peer-to-peer approaches to build leadership and promote mentorship (48% of collaboratives)</p>



Community Power Building

Evidence of community power building reflected the challenges that collaboratives faced engaging community members and the broader public amidst the pandemic. Community power building—strengthening the power of marginalized communities and those most affected by the systems collaboratives are trying to change—was the least prevalent in 2020, and declined the most from the previous year. In 2020, the OYF Network saw strong evidence of 32% of the indicators of community power-building, down from 44% in 2019. As a positive sign that the OYF Network recognizes the importance of community power building in its work, 45% of collaboratives reported that their vision for opportunity youth work strongly incorporated a community power-building frame, while 81% reported at least somewhat using this framing.

Opportunities exist for collaboratives to more fully engage community members. Only a quarter of collaboratives (26%) indicated strong evidence that the general public knew about the collaborative’s vision, that community members were actively involved in the collaborative’s work, and that community members were actively involved in assessing collaborative progress. The presence of these indicators of community power building also declined from 2019 to 2020. As communities move into pandemic recovery and continue to grapple with racial justice, they can build on the community power-building vision to strengthen community awareness and involvement.



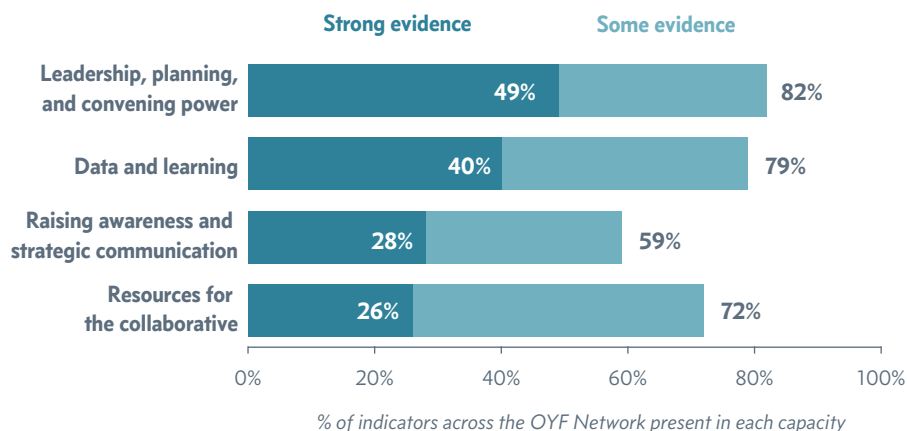
COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY

Collaborative capacity refers to the infrastructure and processes necessary for the collaborative to carry out its opportunity youth agenda. As in 2019, collaborative leadership, planning, and convening power remained the strongest capacity across the OYF Network. Some aspects of data collection and use strengthened in 2020, as collaboratives focused on building capacity, establishing common measures, and using data for internal accountability. In addition, the network showed surprising gains in gathering resources, support, and partner organizational commitment to advance the opportunity youth work. While still the weakest area of collaborative capacity, these gains may have been related to the availability of COVID-19 related funding directed toward immediate community needs. Externally facing strategic communications work was challenging in 2020, particularly among the new collaboratives that joined the OYF Network.

Sufficient capacity is necessary for collaboratives to carry out the opportunity youth agenda in their communities. While the structure of collaboratives across the OYF Network varies, core capacities ensure partners can work together to change systems within and beyond their communities.

Collaborative capacity varied across the OYF Network in 2020, with some collaboratives just beginning to establish the processes necessary to carry out their work and others having well-established processes with robust infrastructure. Many factors can influence the capacity of the OYF Network—including the addition of new members, changing community contexts, and shifts in collaborative priorities. The strength of each capacity in 2020—measured by the percentage of indicators present within each capacity—appears in Figure 7. **Consistent with 2019 results, leadership, planning, and convening power was the strongest element of collaborative capacity across the OYF Network.**

FIGURE 7
IN 2020, LEADERSHIP, PLANNING, AND CONVENING POWER WAS THE STRONGEST CAPACITY ACROSS THE NETWORK





Overall, collaborative capacity of the OYF Network decreased slightly from 2019 to 2020 (strong evidence dropped from 45% to 41%). Some of the decrease can be explained by the lower overall capacity of the new collaboratives that joined the OYF Network in 2020; building capacity takes time and resources. **Examination of the relationships between collaborative characteristics and overall capacity indicates that two collaborative characteristics are statistically related to capacity.**

- 1) Large collaboratives have statistically greater capacity than small/mid-sized or new/re-launching collaboratives.¹⁹
- 2) Collaboratives with larger backbone budgets devoted to opportunity youth efforts were statistically more likely to have greater capacity than those led by less-resourced backbones.²⁰

Among the 22 collaboratives participating in this assessment in 2019 and 2020,²¹ 10 collaboratives increased their capacity²² (six by over 10 percentage points), 11 collaboratives decreased their capacity, and one showed no change.²³ Across the OYF Network, three of the four elements of capacity—leadership, planning, and convening power; data and learning; and raising awareness and strategic communications—decreased or were relatively stable from 2019 to 2020. **Collaboratives’ abilities to gather the resources, support, and partner organizational commitment to advance its work, however, increased slightly (e.g., strong evidence increased from 20% to 26%). We explore these trends in more detail below.**

Leadership, Planning, and Convening Power

At their core, collaboratives require sufficient leadership, planning, and convening power. A primary function of collaboratives—the ability to convene diverse stakeholders around a common agenda—ensures that partners are brought together and organized to fulfill the collaborative’s vision. Likewise, collaborative structures and plans help set up and organize the collaborative for success.

Among the four elements of collaborative capacity, collaborative leadership, planning, and convening power were strongest. Eighty-two percent of these indicators were at least somewhat present in the collaboratives, while about half (49%) were rated as strong. These findings suggest that, as a group, collaboratives across the OYF Network have many of the essential elements for facilitating work in their communities. Strong evidence of leadership, planning, and convening power indicators across the OYF Network decreased slightly from 2019 to 2020 (53% to 49%). This trend is at least in part due to new collaboratives joining the OYF Network, as returning collaboratives saw a slight increase in strong indicators of leadership, planning, and convening capacities (from 52% in 2019 to 53% of indicators in 2020).

Eighty-eight percent of collaboratives reported they had at least some of the capacities (e.g., personnel, technology, data) to support facilitation, planning, implementation, and management of their work.



As externally facing work was limited during the pandemic, collaboratives pivoted toward a focus on internal collaborative functions. Indicators associated with internal and partner accountability saw growth across the OYF Network from 2019 to 2020, while nearly all indicators of community and public accountability—such as regular communication with stakeholders and publicly reporting plans and progress—fell. Collaboratives also reported progress on creating clarity of roles and responsibilities for partners (strong evidence increased from 22% in 2019 to 38% in 2020), while periodic updates among partners and working groups on progress toward goals also became more common.

Focus on internal collaborative functions at Hartford Opportunity Youth Collaborative (HOYC):

- » Collaborative infrastructure offered space for providers to share challenges, solutions, and ongoing opportunities for opportunity youth.
- » Participation in collaborative meetings increased with the switch to Zoom meetings.
- » HOYC partners maintained strong communications—through regular updates at HOYC meetings and posting on the website—about new funding opportunities and spaces in programs, to better serve community youth.

Data and Learning

Collaboratives recognize the need to use data to inform strategies, assess and improve programs, and drive decisions among partners and stakeholders influencing programmatic and funding decisions. In recent years, FCS has implemented and funded Data for Impact, the umbrella initiative for all data-related activities including technical assistance and learning to build capacity to collect and use data across the network. Collaborative capacities around data and learning continue as an area of mixed success, with some clear improvements in core data capacities such as personnel, data availability, and consistent measures. The OYF Network also saw gains in using data for internal purposes, such as for accountability within the collaborative and to assess the health of the partnership.

Among the four elements of collaborative capacity, data and learning was the second strongest; 79% of the data and learning indicators were at least somewhat present across the network, while 40% were rated as strong (Figure 6). Overall, this capacity was stable from 2019 to 2020.

Many collaboratives used 2020 as an opportunity to build their internal capacity to collect and use data. With external-facing efforts limited during the pandemic, collaboratives took advantage of opportunities to focus inward on data capacity. In 2019, about one-third of collaboratives reported having the data they needed to do their work; in 2020 that had increased to 44%. Likewise, about one-quarter (26%) of collaboratives in the OYF Network in 2019 had the personnel to analyze and use data; by 2020 this had increased to 38%.

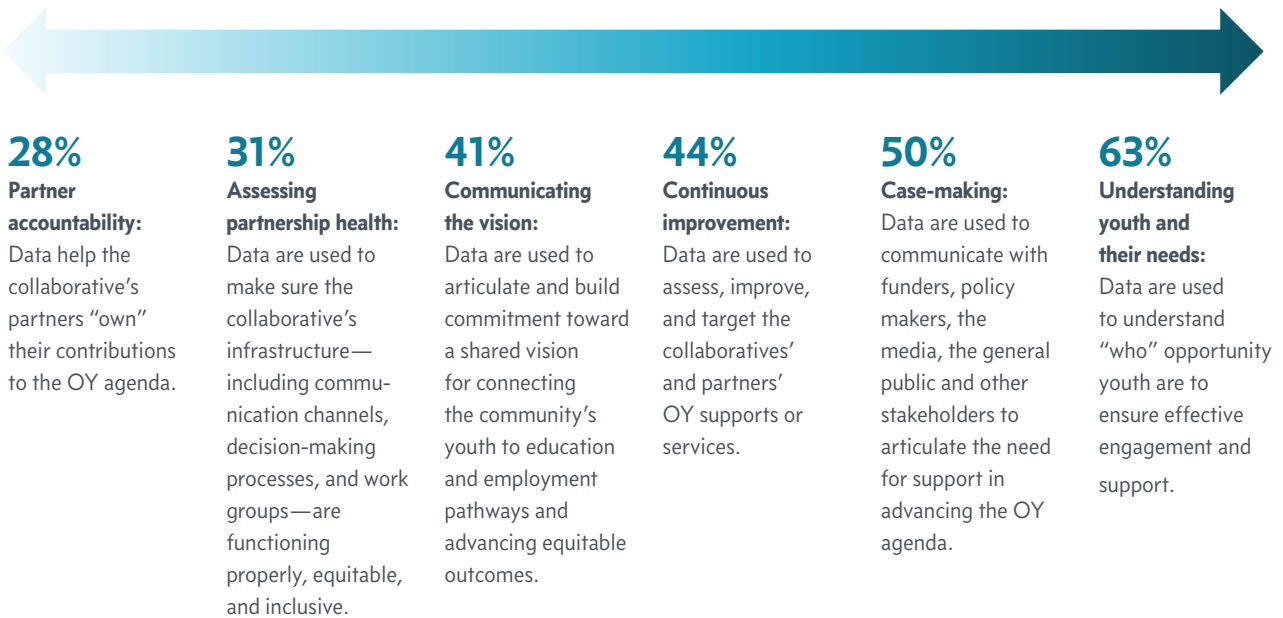
At the Hopi Opportunity Youth Initiative (HOYI), the collaborative leveraged the time available during the pandemic to think more strategically about its work. Their data associate convened partners to discuss data processing needs and provided tailored technical assistance. HOYI strengthened partners' data capacity and renewed MOU agreements that included specifics about data collection.

- » **Chicago:** The ThriveChicago collaborative changed the way it shares data with partners, shifting from monthly newsletters to implementing meetings where partners review data together and discuss its content and meaning.



Collaborative capacity to use data varied across the OYF Network, with collaboratives building on prior strengths of using data externally while making headway in 2020 on using data for internal purposes. Overall, the OYF Network remained strongest in using data to understand youth and their needs, as well as for strategic decision-making and case-making. The network also saw improvements in using data for internal accountability and assessing partnership health. Figure 8 summarizes the OYF Network’s relative strength across each aspect of the OYF Data Use Framework, a tool that looks at different ways collaboratives might use data to advance their core missions. This framework acknowledges that not all collaboratives will focus on using data for the same purposes. Some collaboratives are adept at using data for multiple purposes (28% of collaboratives use data for four or more purposes from the framework).

FIGURE 8
COLLABORATIVES USE DATA TO UNDERSTAND YOUTH NEEDS AND CASE-MAKE FOR THE OPPORTUNITY YOUTH AGENDA*



*Percent of collaboratives that reported strong evidence of each data use

Collaboratives most consistently use data to understand youth and their needs and for case-making with those outside the collaborative. More than half (63%) of collaboratives reported strong evidence of using data to understand young people in their communities, which was a critical early step to developing appropriate strategies for reconnection to school or work. Using data to “make the case” to external stakeholders such as funders and policy makers remained a strength in the OYF Network, with half of collaboratives doing this well, and 84% doing this at least somewhat well. For example, the City of San Antonio partnered with the University of Texas at San Antonio and the Up Partnership to publish a report on the scale of opportunity youth in the region and highlight their lived experiences. Sharing this report with the community has led to an increase in responses to calls for proposals to support opportunity youth.



Collaboratives are improving their ability to use data to track progress towards their goals. In 2020, more than half of collaboratives (53%) reported strong evidence of using agreed-upon measures to track annual progress and improvement. Consistent and standardized data across partners is helpful for assessing outcomes over time. Trends also indicate improvements on this indicator across the OYF Network, especially among returning sites where the percent of collaboratives reporting they do this well or very well increased from 46% to 59%, and the percent of collaboratives at least somewhat using consistent measures increased from 86% to 96%. Similarly, the percentage of collaboratives using data to assess partnership health and for partner accountability within the collaborative also increased from 2019 to 2020 by 14 and 6 percentage points, respectively. New sites were even more likely than returning sites to use data for these internal purposes, suggesting acknowledgement of the importance of the range of data uses.²⁴

Raising Awareness and Strategic Communication

Communications capacity is vital to helping collaboratives communicate their vision, bring attention to opportunity youth needs, and engage partners and stakeholders in efforts to change systems.

Overall, as in 2019, this was a weaker area of capacity across the OYF Network. None of the nine indicators of communications capacity had more than 41% of collaboratives report strong evidence of a capacity, and seven of those decreased from 2019 to 2020. The decrease in communications capacity in the network from 2019 to 2020 is partially due to new collaboratives joining the OYF Network, due to new collaboratives, with lower capacity in this area compared to returning collaboratives.

The pandemic contributed to a reduced focus on external relationships and communications, with collaboratives shifting attention inward. Building relationships with policy makers, and sharing data and research with them to support opportunity youth-related policy changes, remained somewhat present in the collaboratives (81% and 72%, respectively, did this at least somewhat). However, from 2019 to 2020, fewer collaboratives reported these activities were done well (strong evidence of relationships fell from 65% to 38%; strong evidence of sharing data/research fell from 57% to 41%). Across the OYF Network, public knowledge of the collaboratives' vision and development of public reports also showed declines.

Despite a relatively less visible communications approach in 2020, collaboratives continued to publicly discuss and advocate for their goals. Thirty percent of collaboratives reported doing these activities well or very well in 2019, rising to 41% of collaboratives in 2020. In addition, returning sites increased their use of local media to raise attention to opportunity youth issues: 36% reported strong evidence of garnering local media attention in 2020, compared to 27% in 2019; some evidence also increased from 46% of collaboratives in 2019 to 64% in 2020. Newark's collaborative developed the "Collaborative Spotlight Series," with stories about different members of the collaborative, to highlight programming as well as change the narrative about opportunity youth. These stories have been picked up by local media and have led to inquiries from local organizations wanting to join the collaborative.

While events of 2020 made it difficult to engage young people in communications efforts, opportunities remain to increase these opportunities. Across the OYF Network, incorporation of youth storytelling to communicate and elevate issues, as well as overall youth contributions to communications efforts with the public declined from 2019 to 2020. New sites, in particular, had lower levels of engagement with young people around communications efforts; returning collaboratives were statistically more likely to report strong evidence that youth contributed to the collaborative's communication efforts with the public, compared to new collaboratives.²⁵ An example of this type of engagement comes from a collaborative where a young person shared his story at the backbone's Board of Directors' meeting. The site lead noted the impact of this: "... seeing somebody talk about that as a real person, I think is incredibly important. So, data is great to show the impact of the dollars, but also matching it with that narrative story. And it definitely raised awareness for a lot of the people in that room."



Collaborative Resources

Raising resources for collaborative efforts, particularly backbone support and other infrastructure necessary to carry out the opportunity youth agenda, has historically been a challenge for OYF Network members. While resources remain relatively low compared to other collaborative capacities (Figure 9), **trends point to some positive changes in 2020.**

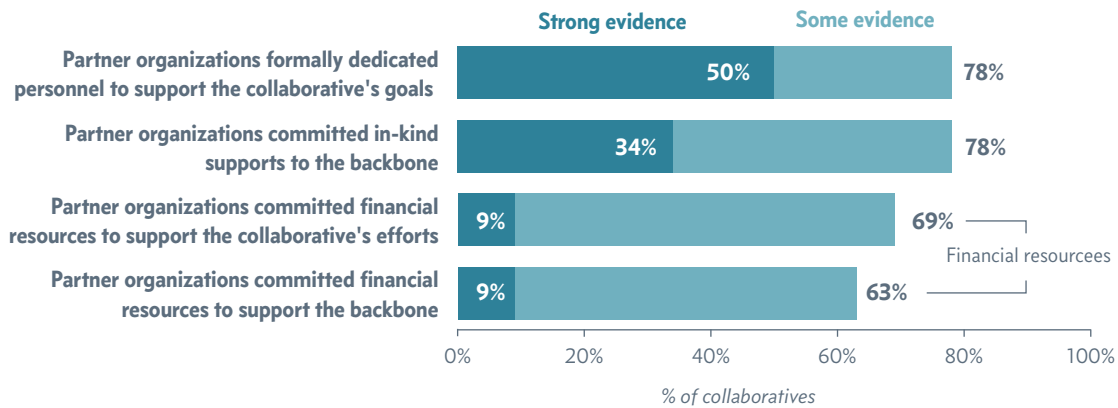
Partner support for backbone organizations increased from 2019 to 2020. Across the OYF Network, 39% of collaboratives (9 sites) reported partners committing financial resources to the backbone at least somewhat in 2019; this support increased to 63% of collaboratives (20 sites) in 2020. While no collaboratives reported strong evidence of financial support to backbones in 2019, three collaboratives reported support in 2020. This finding may be related to increased COVID-19-related resources, which many collaboratives reported using to address immediate needs of young people and their families such as housing, food, and technology-related needs (laptops, internet access).

While some progress was made in partners supporting OYF backbones, the pandemic also exacerbated existing fundraising challenges. Some collaboratives found it challenging, in light of the pandemic, to fundraise for traditional backbone functions like convening. One site lead offered, "Folks were very consumed with staying afloat, so we [backbone organization] did not ask for much support and not much was offered." Another site lead suggested that philanthropic organizations prioritized funding direct service activities during the pandemic. Backbone organizations had to make difficult choices with decreased funds; some succumbed to staff layoffs and furloughs.

In-kind support and personnel support remain more common than financial support to both collaboratives and backbone organizations. Consistent with prior evaluation findings, lean budgets in partner organizations make in-kind resources more feasible than financial contributions.

FIGURE 9

COLLABORATIVES WERE MORE LIKELY TO RECEIVE PERSONNEL AND IN-KIND SUPPORT THAN FINANCIAL RESOURCES IN 2020



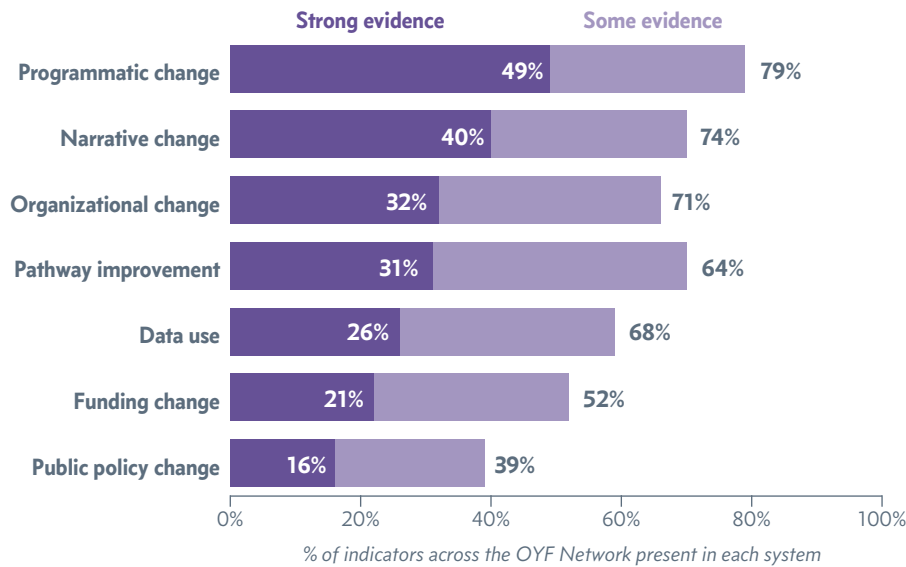


SYSTEMS CHANGE

Systems change “shifts the conditions that hold problems in place.” Systems change requires access to resources and funds, relationships, and staff capacity within collaboratives. It also may develop in response to national and local contexts. As compared to 2019, overall systems change scores remained stable in 2020. Programmatic changes were most common across communities. Collaborative partners modified programs in response to the pandemic and the urgent needs of young people. Narrative change was also a relative strength of the OYF Network, influenced by increased national dialogue on racial injustice. The largest gains in 2020 came in data use and the use of data to improve systems. These gains were driven by collaboratives’ use of data to drive decision-making, inform system-wide practices, improve programs, and advocate for policy changes.

Systems change “shifts the conditions that hold problems in place.”²⁶ While OYF collaboratives provide direct service activities designed to improve the daily lives of young people, they are simultaneously engaged in broader systems change activities that are designed to address the barriers opportunity youth face at the root of the issue—challenging the very systems that create and perpetuate these barriers. In this evaluation, we defined and assessed seven elements of system change that, when taken together, reflect the conditions necessary to produce equitable education and career outcomes for opportunity youth (Figure 10).

FIGURE 10
EVIDENCE OF SYSTEMS CHANGE THROUGHOUT THE OYF NETWORK





In 2020, the OYF Network rated 32% of the indicators associated with systems change as “strong evidence” and 66% of the indicators as “some evidence.” Examination of the relationships between collaborative characteristics and overall systems change in 2020 indicates that several collaborative characteristics are statistically related to systems change.

1. Larger collaboratives²⁷ and collaboratives that operate in urban areas²⁸ were more likely to engage in systems change compared to smaller and more rural collaboratives.
2. Collaboratives with older²⁹ backbones (older than eight years) and larger budgets³⁰ (over \$500,000 annually) reported greater engagement with systems change than collaboratives with newer backbones and fewer resources.

Despite the addition of nine collaboratives and unprecedented disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the systems-level indicators across the OYF Network remained stable between 2019 and 2020. The overall systems change ratings in 2020 stayed virtually identical to those of 2019, as strong evidence of indicators connected to systems change increased by less than one percentage point. Ratings for each of the seven areas of systems change remained fairly consistent as well. Across the seven areas, the OYF Network increased its engagement in three systems change categories: data use, funding change, and narrative change. The remaining four—programmatic change, organizational change, pathway improvements, and public policy change—decreased slightly from 2019. While the overall network scores for systems change remained relatively stable, 11 of the 22 returning sites reported increased evidence of systems change.

Understanding Different Types of Systems Change

Differences in prevalence among various systems change elements suggest that certain systems change elements may be more difficult to enact. Systems change activities require an intentional investment of resources—financial, human, and time—that may compete with other pressing choices an organization faces. In addition, systems change work is complex, requiring an ability to navigate across networks, sectors, relationships, power structures, and public policies to identify the root causes of social challenges and inequities. Some systems change elements across the OYF Network, including programmatic change and organizational change, affect systems through strategies that individual organizations have more control over and may require fewer resources or less time to implement. Other elements, like public policy change, affect systems through strategies that are “external” to individual organizations and sectors. These elements require established relationships, expertise, and dedicated staff, suggesting that collaboratives may benefit from multi-year support and planning in tackling these complex processes.

The differences in evidence among the areas of systems change may also be driven by the events of 2020. The differences suggest that certain systems change elements were prioritized amid the turmoil and uncertainty of the year. For example, collaboratives may have focused their efforts on program adaptations and partner support, as organizations shifted to virtual models. Other systems change elements, like changing public policies, may have been deemphasized as collaborative partners turned their attention to pandemic recovery efforts.



Programmatic Changes

The most foundational systems change effort involves altering the programs and activities that directly serve opportunity youth. These strategies include efforts by partners to develop, expand, and improve programs for young people and may require less time or capacity to implement than other systems change elements. Consistent with 2019 reporting, programmatic change was the most prominent systems change element across the OYF Network. The network reported strong evidence on nearly half (49%) of indicators associated with programmatic changes, while reporting at least some evidence on nearly 80% of these indicators. This represents a slight decrease from 2019, when the OYF Network reported strong evidence on 53% of indicators and some evidence on nearly 90% of indicators.

Despite limitations due to the pandemic, partner collaboration continued to be leveraged throughout the OYF Network to inform program changes. Seventy-seven percent of sites reported strong evidence of communication among different partner programs. Nearly all sites (84%) reported at least some evidence of partner organizations developing new programs based on conversations with other partners.

- » **Pueblo of Taos:** Initiated a new truancy task force that was maintained by staff from different programs. The cross-program task force monitored student engagement and connected with parents, school staff, and youth to understand and overcome engagement barriers.

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, may have affected partner collaboration opportunities, at least temporarily. Some collaboratives noted that partners needed to prioritize their own organizations when facing the challenges of the pandemic. One collaborative reflected that partner leaders “were unable to devote time to the collaborative as they had to focus on their own institutions.” Another offered that partner meetings had stopped, as partners dealt with “issues arising from COVID-19 and efforts were focused on triaging for community needs.”

Collaborative partners had to adapt their program design and pivot to new implementation strategies to meet the challenges created by the pandemic. In 2020, 71% of collaboratives redesigned programs to better serve opportunity youth and 58% launched new pilots, an increase of 19 and 6 percentage points, respectively, from 2019. Most collaboratives noted that partners shifted their youth engagement activities virtually; some encouraged youth participation by providing laptops and internet hotspots. For some collaboratives, the virtual environment created opportunities to engage youth in new ways. Partners in San Diego and San Antonio reflected that the virtual environment helped overcome a transportation barrier, increasing youth participation. However, several collaboratives noted that the virtual environment created challenges for young people who had previously relied on in-person connections. One collaborative reflected, “Youth engagement decreased as partners adjusted to a virtual environment, since so much relationship-building has to do with trust which is built face-to-face.”

Innovative Program Adaptations During COVID-19

- » Partners in San Francisco created paid experiences for young people, hiring youth as rent relief specialists, COVID-19 case managers, and intake specialists for their resource hubs.
- » San Diego’s Youth Will developed an Emergency Resource Ambassador program that empowered youth ambassadors to connect peers to housing and other essential COVID-19 relief services.
- » Philadelphia created a Virtual Internship Toolkit, designed to help employers support young people navigating employment opportunities in 2020.
- » The Pueblo of Jemez’s Department of Education trained opportunity youth and other tribal members as installation technicians in fiber optic conduits, creating employment opportunities and boosting high-speed internet for students and community members during the pandemic.



“Mental health issues [have] probably been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic.”

—OYF Site Lead

Collaborative partners also modified their programs, as the pandemic created new and worsened existing challenges for young people. Collaborative partners were aware of and alert to the changing needs of young people during the pandemic. Eighty-four percent reported some evidence of soliciting recommendations from youth to inform program and pathway design. In response to the pandemic’s impact on young people, partners prioritized young people’s basic needs, including hygiene, food security, and housing. Nearly a quarter of collaboratives (23%) reported making program-level improvements in mental health and one-fifth of collaboratives made program-level improvements in the housing sector. Collaboratives observed the increased trauma opportunity youth faced during the pandemic, further elevating the need for mental health supports. One tribal community member noted, “COVID has been very traumatic for the community, both in terms of losing elders and tribal members to the disease, but also being separated from religious practices and ceremonies.” Some collaboratives, including Newark, Hartford, and Detroit shared that organizations sought new programmatic partnerships to support the mental health concerns of young people.

Narrative Change

Many systems change efforts rely on shifting public mindsets and dispositions. After programmatic change, narrative change was the systems change element most prevalent throughout the OYF Network. Overall, the network showed strong evidence on 40% of indicators associated with narrative change (representing a slight increase of three percentage points from 2019). Compared to new sites, returning sites reported greater evidence of narrative change, suggesting that narrative change activities, resources, partnerships, and capacities may take time to develop.

Racial inequity and injustice were at the forefront of national attention throughout 2020, contributing to a changing narrative about equity and systems change across OYF communities. OYF collaboratives have long been champions for racial equity. However, an increased national focus on racial injustice created opportunities to shift public mindsets, dispositions, and negative stereotypes of opportunity youth. More than three-quarters (77%) of collaboratives reported some evidence of a perceived sense of urgency about opportunity youth among groups outside of the collaborative. Some collaboratives reflected that the increased community awareness of racial injustice spurred new and broader conversations about race. One collaborative observed that their partners may have previously shied away from directly naming race, but are now naming race and equity more explicitly. Another collaborative believed that the nation’s racial justice reckoning paved the way to center race in conversations with its steering committee.

Initial Steps to Community Narrative Change

“I think that our first priority was to educate people on what [opportunity youth] meant. Even the collaborative partners that came together, systems providers, funders, all of them needed a briefing on who we were talking about when we talk about Opportunity Youth.”

— OYF Site Lead

Some newer collaboratives reflected that simply defining and understanding opportunity youth within their community represented progress. Early strategies to begin changing narratives in communities include:

- » San Antonio funded a report that highlights the experiences of opportunity youth in the area that will be used to educate the community.
- » Houston used a report from Rice University to help bring attention to the number of opportunity youth in the area, and to galvanize community partners to work collaboratively to support opportunity youth.



Collaboratives continued to elevate the role of systemic barriers in obstructing opportunities for young people. Across the OYF Network, 74% of sites reported that partners discussed challenges of opportunity youth as systemic, rather than individual. Over 90% of collaboratives reported initial evidence of focusing on the assets of opportunity youth as opposed to the deficits.

- » **Boston:** Partners reflected that student-serving institutions—including the K-12 and postsecondary system—have been steadily looking inward at changes they can make rather than blaming or changing opportunity youth.
- » **South King County:** The collaborative noted framing challenges as system failures, shifting away from tracking cradle-to-college indicators that assess quality solely on students' performance.

Identifying the opportunities and barriers faced by specific subgroups within communities is critical to systems change work. Throughout the OYF Network, 71% of collaboratives regularly discussed the challenges that various racial, ethnic, gender, or age groups of youth experience. Among communities that were part of the OYF Network in 2019, strong evidence of stakeholder understanding of racial disparities, and the need to target strategies to subgroups, increased considerably, with 73% of communities reporting this compared to 50% in 2019.

Opportunities exist to more fully engage the general public in conversations about opportunity youth. Just 29% of collaboratives report that people in the public sphere, including employers and politicians, discuss the number of opportunity youth in the community. Only 23% of collaboratives report that civic leaders championed the work of the collaborative, while fewer than 20% of collaboratives have had local media share positive stories about opportunity youth. However, some collaboratives made headway in increasing awareness around their work with young people. Returning sites reported a sharp increase in newspaper, online platforms (e.g., social media), or television reports highlighting stories of structural barriers over individual challenges, from 14% in 2019 to 32% in 2020.

Organizational Changes

Organizational change references how organizational culture, values, and goals can affect services delivered to opportunity youth. In 2019, collaboratives reported strong evidence of organizational change on 37% of indicators and some evidence on 81% of indicators. These indicators decrease slightly in 2020 to 37% with strong evidence and 81% with some evidence.

The pandemic's impact on young people and collaborative partners influenced organizational priorities throughout the OYF Network.

For the majority of 2020, partners prioritized pandemic response and recovery efforts to support the needs of young people. Nearly all collaboratives (97%) reported at least some evidence of partner organizations having a culture attentive to the needs of opportunity youth. As a result, some collaboratives observed that systems change work was deemphasized so organizations could focus on more pressing and immediate pandemic response needs. As one collaborative observed, the pandemic shifted its focus to “connecting young people with resources on the ground that they would need [tomorrow], rather than looking at [a] more long-term vision.”

“Most of the decisions that we made this year were like, ‘We want to do this. How can we make it happen?’ And so it was really in the moment planning, and not really planning for the future.”

—OYF Site Lead



Adapting to the pressing challenges of the pandemic may have limited efforts to collaborate across organizations.

Just 13% of collaboratives focused on changing repetitive or redundant internal processes across organizations. Returning sites were particularly affected, reporting an 18-percentage-point decrease from 2019. Just one-quarter of collaboratives changed internal policies to advance collaborative goals—with returning sites reporting a nearly 14-percentage-point decrease. However, while cross-organizational collaboration may have been slowed by the pandemic, OYF sites showed emerging signs of progress. Eighty-one percent of collaboratives reported some evidence that partner organizations developed joint programs to better serve opportunity youth. Nearly one-third of collaboratives reported that local organizations could “hand-off” opportunity youth from one collaborative to another—a slight increase from 2019.

- » **Hartford:** The backbone, HOYC, and the local United Way created an online referral tool to connect young people to one of the collaborative’s partners and collect feedback from the partner to learn if other services may be needed.

“There was very little outreach or programming with youth just because of the restrictions we had in place. And so us, as [a collaborative] coming together and saying now what do we do? How do we still continue this work? We cannot afford to stop the momentum.”

—OYF Site Lead

As opportunities for collaboration and broader systems change work waned during the pandemic, some collaboratives sought opportunities to build partner capacity. More than three-quarters of collaboratives reported some evidence (with over 26% reporting strong evidence) that partner organizations changed their own policies and practices to advance collaborative goals. Fifty-eight percent reported some evidence (with nearly one-third reporting strong evidence) that partners increased their own organizational capacity to collect and analyze opportunity youth-related data.

- » **Hartford:** The Career Pathways Committee, which typically supports youth transitions between organizations, prioritized staff retention through wellness support of frontline workers.
- » **Del Norte:** The collaborative provided Youth Mental Health First Aid training to school district employees in lieu of providing direct service to youth.



Pathway Improvements

Pathway improvements refer to opportunities to create and integrate more high-quality pathways for opportunity youth into education and workforce among local systems. Collaboratives reported strong evidence on 31% of pathway improvement indicators, consistent with 2019 reporting. However, some evidence of pathway improvement decreased from 72% to 64%.

Opportunities to expand or replicate programs may have been limited for collaboratives across the OYF Network in 2020.

Strong evidence of systems-level scaling, which captures collaborative efforts to replicate or expand pilot or existing programs, decreased by close to 12 percentage points to 34% of indicators. Expansion efforts may have been temporarily slowed down, as approximately two-thirds of collaboratives reported initial evidence of replicating or expanding pilot programs (65%) and expanding established programs (68%)—a decrease from 2019 of 70% and 87% respectively. This result is not surprising, as program expansion efforts may have been delayed or abandoned in response to the pandemic. Organizations may have prioritized program stability or maintaining existing levels of service during the pandemic as funding and program opportunities were focused on recovery efforts. Returning sites appeared to weather the impact of the pandemic on systems-level scaling better than new sites. Returning sites reported an overall decrease of nine percentage points on systems-level scaling from 2019, but still rated themselves 16 percentage points greater than new sites.

“There were things that we were planning on doing as an organization, like collaborating with schools... we were actually in the process of receiving a contract with the [local school district] Of course, COVID hit and all of that shifted. Things like that happened where we all of a sudden have to restructure and say, ‘Oh, we can no longer actually do this class like we planned. What do we do now?’”

—OYF Site Lead

The OYF Network continues to leverage cross-sector and cross-organization partnerships to support opportunity youth.

The OYF Network made progress on systems alignment and integration—activities that describe cross-sector and cross-organization partnerships that pave the way for scaling opportunity youth pathways. Collaboratives rated 30% of indicators as having strong evidence—an increase of about five percentage points from 2019. In particular, returning sites reported relatively large growth in these activities, increasing their 2019 score by seven percentage points. Cross-sector communication and collaboration continue to emerge in the OYF Network. Eighty-seven percent of collaboratives reported some evidence that opportunity youth-related systems (e.g., juvenile justice, foster care, and the K-12 system) communicated with each other.

- » **Jasper:** The backbone organization worked closely with the Texas Workforce Commission to identify target occupations for in-demand jobs to align its training with the Commission’s research. As evidence of the site’s commitment to the partnership, the collaborative altered its established plan to bring a fire academy to the community as fire safety was not an in-demand occupation.
- » **San Augustine:** The collaborative similarly leveraged local partnerships, but to help young people earn certifications. The collaborative partnered with a local community college to offer health courses, including phlebotomy, EKG, medical assistant, and certified nursing assistant courses, helping students pass state board certifications even as they worked toward their high school diplomas.



Data

Data plays an important role in systems change efforts, enabling collaboratives to identify system needs and gaps, communicate across partners and sectors, and monitor progress on collaborative initiatives. Strong evidence of the OYF Network using data to improve systems for opportunity youth grew by almost seven percentage points, from 19% to 26%, while some evidence of data use grew from 60% to 68%.

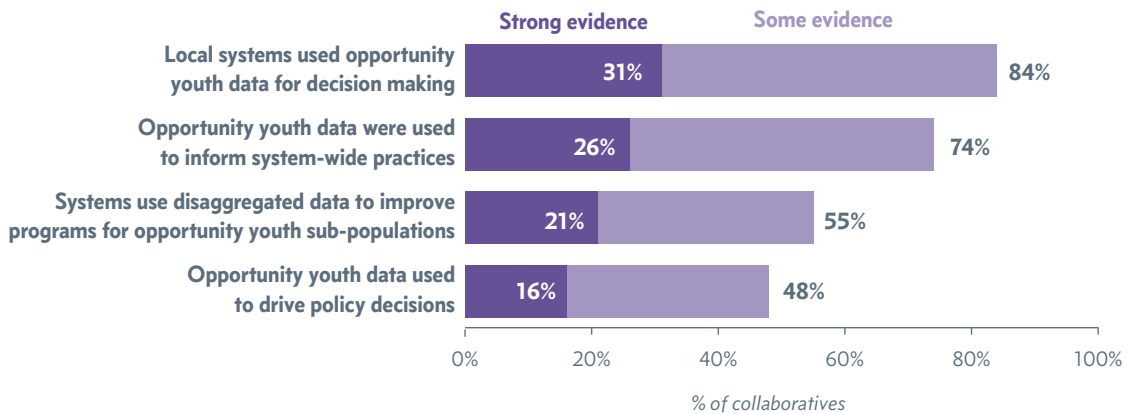
Among all elements of systems change, the OYF Network saw the greatest improvement in data use, including how partners use data to improve systems and outcomes for opportunity youth. This growth in the network’s data use was largely driven by improvements in how opportunity youth data are used by collaboratives, including driving decision-making and advocating for policy changes. The OYF Network’s strong evidence of data use increased by almost 13 percentage points to 27%.

“If we can help provide data, make it accessible, then community partners will come.”

—OYF Site Lead

Collaboratives described a variety of uses of data to improve systems and outcomes for opportunity youth (Figure 11).

FIGURE 11
REPORTED DATA USES BY COLLABORATIVES



- » **Austin:** The backbone organization convened a data working group in planning its Building Ecosystems for Youth Opportunity initiative. The working group used the OYF Common Measures data³¹ produced by Equal Measure to uncover an increase in post-secondary education disconnection and chose it as a priority for the initiative.



“We have all these terms out there that different nonprofits are very accustomed to using depending on what niche they’re in, but being able to bring that all together to get them to start speaking the same language about, okay, who are we talking about again, I think that that is important.”

— OYF Site Lead

Data shared among organizations is an emerging strength for the OYF Network; collaboratives can use these data to improve programs and outcomes for opportunity youth, and align vision and messaging across partners. Eighty-one percent of collaboratives reported some evidence that partners in the same system shared data with one another. Formalizing agreements on data partnerships among collaborative organizations remains an important strategy for facilitating shared data. In Newark, members signed data-sharing agreements to facilitate conversations assessing strengths and gaps in the youth workforce ecosystem. Most collaboratives (77%) reported some evidence that common opportunity youth definitions are used across system partners. Seventy-one percent reported some evidence that the same opportunity youth data indicators are tracked within systems. Aligning metrics and definitions may be especially important for new sites as partnerships begin to develop.

Collaboratives throughout the OYF Network leveraged data to advance pandemic recovery efforts. To support recovery efforts, collaboratives used data and data systems to:

- » **Monitor the impact of the pandemic on young people.** In Boston, Boston Public Schools used its Panorama database to monitor chronic absenteeism. The Denver collaborative used its Salesforce platform to communicate with young people during the pandemic.
- » **Facilitate resource distribution.** In South King County, partners created databases to access information about services to support in pandemic recovery. In Tucson, site leads reflected that the United Way became a centralized communication hub supporting emergency response efforts across the community.
- » **Document learnings for future program modification.** Collaboratives are also collecting data on virtual implementation to inform future programming. Philadelphia’s learning orientation is described well with their reflection, *“What does this last year of this more digital virtual world look like for our training programs for young people, moving forward in terms of what employers are going to be looking for?”*

Funding Changes

The shifting of resources is an important element of systems change efforts, yet it remains an emerging one for the OYF Network. Collaboratives reported strong evidence on 21% of funding indicators, a slight increase of three percentage points from 2019.

Collaboratives had limited success in raising new public dollars to support opportunity youth pathways. Just over 22% of sites reported that existing public funding increased, and 19% reported that new public funding emerged. Overall, the OYF Network leveraged fewer public dollars in 2020 than it did in 2019. However, partners in some collaboratives took advantage of the federal CARES Act, which supported pandemic recovery efforts.

- » **Boston:** CARES Act funding was leveraged by partners to support resources for families (such as Chromebooks, internet access, and meals).



The OYF Network had more success leveraging private dollars, which helped contribute to pandemic recovery.

Twenty-six percent of collaboratives found new private funding to support opportunity youth, with 61% of collaboratives showing early evidence of change. Several sites reported that private funders reached out to support pandemic recovery efforts and offer emergency funding.

- » **Philadelphia:** A local funder in Philadelphia helped create the Opportunity Youth Relief Fund. Through this donation, the Philadelphia Youth Network distributed relief dollars directly to young people to cover any needs that may have been affected by the pandemic.
- » **Greenville:** Funders such as Google, Microsoft, and the Markle Foundation approached the collaborative for the first time to increase capacity to deliver trainings and career coaching in the rural region.

Funder collaboration remained a challenge for the OYF Network. Just under 23% of collaboratives reported that private and public funders worked together to fund local systems. Fewer than 13% of collaboratives noted that two or more systems applied jointly for new funding. However, 35% of collaboratives reported strong evidence that funders prioritized work aligned with the collaborative's goals—an increase from 13% of collaboratives in 2019. This encouraging development suggests that the OYF Network is making progress in helping the funding community become more strategic with its support.

Public Policy Change

Public policy change was the least leveraged systems change element of the OYF Network in 2020 (collaboratives reported strong evidence on just 16% of indicators) and declined from 2019. Indicators with strong evidence of public policy change decreased by three percentage points, while indicators with some evidence dipped 12 percentage points—one of the largest declines of any systems change element throughout the network.

Few collaboratives reported strong evidence of local policies changing to address the needs of opportunity youth in 2020. One collaborative observed that its state government session was focused on pandemic response. Just four collaboratives reported implementation of new public policies addressing opportunity youth, while only two collaboratives confirmed that new policies addressing opportunity youth were passed by local councils. Despite this, sites noted important public policy wins.

- » **Boston:** The Massachusetts legislature passed a police reform bill that included removing the mandate for Massachusetts schools to have a school police officer.
- » **Denver:** The Colorado General Assembly amended the Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative to increase funding flexibility.
- » **San Antonio:** The City Council passed the COVID-19 Community Recovery and Resiliency Plan to support pandemic recovery, including offering programs that benefit opportunity youth.



While changing public policies to remove barriers opportunity youth face is an important element of systems change, advocating for policy change is a critical first step. Close to one-fifth of collaboratives proposed new state changes that would benefit opportunity youth, and 16% of collaboratives supported the passage of state policies that would benefit opportunity youth. Several collaboratives offered examples of advocacy to support policy efforts.

- » **Santa Clara:** The collaborative advocated for its workforce development board to launch a youth forum to bring community stakeholders together to discuss youth workforce needs and strategies.
- » **Oakland:** The Oakland-Alameda Alliance for Boys and Men of Color advocated for the creation of a new Office of Youth and Community Restoration.
- » **Newark:** The backbone staff in Newark testified at the state legislature on bills that would require disaggregation of school discipline data by race and gender, and would create a taskforce to examine racial disparities in school discipline.
- » **Phoenix:** Site leads reflected that the pandemic brought further attention to existing inequities, including young people not having access to technology and other basic needs. This facilitated partners' desire to become more politically active as they looked to the backbone for support.

The OYF Network made strides in including young people in their policy and advocacy efforts. While 35% of collaboratives reported strong evidence of youth influencing policy decisions, close to 60% reported some evidence, indicating this strategy is becoming more prominent.

- » **Maine:** Young people were engaged in the workgroup of the Portland School Board to design an equity policy for the district.
- » **Newark:** A young person involved in one of the collaborative's programs penned an op-ed about the need for restorative justice and funding local community organizations rather than incarcerating young people, calling for the state legislature to pass the Restorative and Transformative Justice for Youths and Communities Pilot Program.
- » **Twin Cities:** Youthprise collaborated with a local youth-serving organization to support a lawsuit for an expansion of unemployment insurance to young people, removing an incentive to drop out of school. Youth led the advocacy effort, coordinating meetings and working with the backbone's lobbyist.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE OYF NETWORK

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 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. offer 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.

- » **Elevate collaboratives as key partners in advancing equity in communities.** The racial reckoning of 2020 brought racial inequities across the education and career spectrum into the national conversation. While FCS has been focused on advancing equity since its inception, many collaboratives were sought out for the first time as partners in addressing these disparities. Consider how communication about the OYF—work within communities and across the network—can more closely connect collaboratives' roles in advancing racial equity to the dialogue that has emerged, including the Biden administration's efforts to advance racial equity. Share stories of how collaboratives are dismantling inequitable systems and working toward equitable impact as part of the OYF's communications strategy.
- » **Emphasize the importance of backbone organizations as critical community partners.** The funding community prioritized direct service and youth-facing engagement during 2020 to support pandemic response. But during the pandemic, partners continued to rely on backbones' abilities to convene organizations, share resources, and facilitate communication among system actors. These functions provided partners stability and assurance as the pandemic fueled uncertainty but were deprioritized by funders. Promoting the infrastructure required to support collective impact work could help backbones continue to provide these necessary services that enhance partners' efforts.
- » **Position the OYF as uniquely suited to help meet future workforce needs.** The pandemic and subsequent recession of 2020 raised questions about workforce stability and talent needs. Given the OYF's equity-driven focus on connecting and supporting opportunity youth through family-sustaining careers, consider how FCS's movement-building efforts can help funders and prospective partners see the network-wide focus on career pathways—including its work on alternative summer youth employment programs—as a sound strategy for addressing tenuous employment situations exposed in 2020.



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 learned from this crisis can inform and inspire program design and partner engagement—among other collaborative functions—throughout the network, and point to opportunities to increase collaborative support and technical assistance in important areas.

- » **Support collaboratives in prioritizing youth mental health needs.** The pandemic brought to light and exacerbated mental health challenges for many young people. These issues reinforced the “whole person” approach that many collaboratives have implemented. As the network’s efforts continue to embrace Healing Centered Organizing, consider how collaboratives can incorporate mental health supports into their work, such as engaging mental health providers as key players in systems change efforts and supporting opportunity youth through transitions into and through education and career pathways.
- » **Equip collaboratives for flexibility and community responsiveness.** The events of 2020 demanded an unprecedented level of adaptability for collaboratives. Each needed to pivot and reprioritize efforts to meet ever-changing demands across their communities, whether meeting youth basic needs, providing virtual internships, or crowdsourcing youth input. As collaboratives reimaged their work and purpose in the most difficult of circumstances, several piloted new ways of serving youth and system partners. Among other innovations, collaboratives found new ways to incorporate youth voice, create employment opportunities, and facilitate virtual programs. As the network moves forward, consider how to help collaboratives build the adaptive capacities to maintain this level of resiliency. Strategies may include encouraging local funders to support general operating support, building a community response strategy, and considering new ways to listen for and respond to community needs in real-time.

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., urbanization, 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 honors the unique nature of collaboratives’ work and provides a consistent vision for essential capacities and systems change can help collaboratives chart a clear path that enhances their work while unifying efforts nationally.

- » **Establish a more directive framework.** Consider establishing an OYF Framework—with key markers, stages, and milestones—that creates a common and more nuanced understanding of collaborative development and systems change. This model may build from the OYF’s five levers of change, core values, and evaluation findings to outline key stages of capacity building and systems change efforts that collaboratives can use as building blocks for their own efforts and signposts toward incremental progress. Such a framework, grounded in community context and acknowledgement of localized strengths, can encourage implementation of best practices while helping the FCS diagnose needs and tailor support, learning, and technical assistance to emerging and mature sites.
- » **Continue to leverage affinity groups for shared learning.** Over the past several years, OYF collaboratives have used affinity groups to create communities of practice and shared learning. Groups like the rural and tribal cohorts, California Opportunity Youth Network, and Data 4 Impact help communities to engage around common points of interest and meet the unique needs of community contexts. Such groups will remain important for creating shared learning and can help like communities navigate the complexity of systems change with one another’s support.



NOTES

- ¹ <https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/opportunity-youth-forum/>.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Lewis, Kristen. A Decade Undone: 2021 Update. New York: Measure of America, Social Science Research Council, 2021, <https://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/ADecadeUndone2021Update.pdf>.
- ⁴ Data from analysis of 2019 ACS data in development of 2019 Common Measures.
- ⁵ Calculations based on 35 OYF geographies using 2019 ACS data.
- ⁶ Lewis, A Decade Undone: 2021 Update, <https://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/ADecadeUndone2021Update.pdf>.
- ⁷ “Workforce disconnection” includes only young people who have a postsecondary degree. For more information about the OYF Common Measures, see: <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/report/equity-counts-using-data-to-increase-equity-and-improve-metric-outcomes-for-opportunity-youth/>; <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/report/equity-counts-tracking-opportunity-youth-outcomes/>; and <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/report/equity-counts-development-of-common-measures/>.
- ⁸ Number of youth and opportunity youth served is based on what was reported by 27 and 23 collaboratives in the 2020 self-assessment, respectively. Many noted these numbers were likely undercounts.
- ⁹ Outcomes for youth participants were only reported by a portion of the collaboratives; among those reporting outcomes, data were not often collected on all of the listed outcomes. This is likely a large undercount of outcomes among youth served by the collaboratives.
- ¹⁰ As noted in the Introduction, only 30 of 33 communities completed the 2020 self-assessment reflected in this report. However, 33 collaboratives completed this assessment—one community (NYC) reported separate outcomes for four different opportunity youth-focused collaboratives.
- ¹¹ 12,000 FTEs was from a city Department of Human Services.
- ¹² Kania, John, Kramer, Mark, and Senge, Peter (FSG), The Waters of Systems Change, May 2018.
- ¹³ Correlation coefficient = 0.71, $p < .05$.
- ¹⁴ <https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/OYF-2019-Annual-Report-Forging-a-National-Network-FINAL.pdf>
- ¹⁵ Equity: 64% vs. 43%; youth-led change: 45% vs. 26%. T-test $p < .05$.
- ¹⁶ T-test, $p < .05$.
- ¹⁷ <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/report/scan-of-the-field-of-healing-centered-organizing-lessons-learned/>.
- ¹⁸ Jimenez, Eli, Tokunaga, Jessica, and Jessica Wolin, J. (November 2019). Scan of the Field of Healing Centered Organizing: Lessons Learned. Department of Health Education, San Francisco State University. Prepared for the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. <https://aspencommunitysolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Healing-Centered-Paper.pdf>
- ¹⁹ ANOVA, $p < .05$ (strong evidence: large collaboratives: 51% capacity indicators vs. small/mid-sized collaboratives: 35% and new collaboratives: 30%).
- ²⁰ T-test, $p < .10$ (strong evidence: \$500,000+ opportunity youth budget: 50% capacity indicators vs. less than \$500,000 opportunity youth budget: 35%).
- ²¹ Collaboratives with two years of assessment data.
- ²² Increases in capacity: **Austin, Chicago**, Denver, Hartford, **Los Angeles, Philadelphia, San Augustine**, San Francisco, San Jose/Santa Clara County, and **Seattle/South King County** (bolded=10% points or more increase in percent of indicators strongly present).
- ²³ Decreases in capacity: Atlanta, Boston, Del Norte, Greenville, Hopi, Southern Maine, New York City BON, Newark, Phoenix, and San Diego. No change: Detroit.
- ²⁴ Differences were not statistically significant.
- ²⁵ T-test, $p < .10$ (strong evidence: new sites: 0%; returning sites: 27.3%).
- ²⁶ Kania, Kramer, and Senge, Water of Systems Change: https://www.fsg.org/publications/water_of_systems_change.
- ²⁷ ANOVA, $P < .01$.
- ²⁸ ANOVA, $P < .1$.
- ²⁹ ANOVA, $P < .05$.
- ³⁰ T-Test, $P < .01$.
- ³¹ More information about the Common Measures can be found here: <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/using-data-to-advance-equity/>.

EQUAL
MEASURE

FINDING
PROMISE
FUELING
CHANGE