

# OPPORTUNITY YOUTH NEEDS ASSESSMENT

December 1, 2017

Stacy M. Deck, PhD, MSSW  
Spalding University, School of Social Work

A project of the Coalition Supporting Young Adults in Louisville, Kentucky. Made possible by a grant from the Community Foundation of Louisville (YMCA Safe Place, fiscal agent).

# Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	3
Introduction.....	5
Methodology.....	5
Survey Methods .....	6
Focus Group Methods .....	6
Demographics .....	7
Characteristics of Survey Respondents and Focus Group Participants .....	8
Disconnected Conditions Reported by Survey Respondents and Focus Group Participants.....	10
Survey Results.....	10
Experiences and Circumstances Reported by Survey Respondents .....	11
Experiences in School .....	11
Ratings of Need For and Access To Resources .....	12
Summed Ratings of Need For and Access To Resources .....	13
Focus Group Results.....	13
Experience of Transition to Young Adulthood .....	13
Transition Challenges .....	15
Desired Connections.....	16
Obstacles.....	17
Independence and Success.....	18
Need for Community Resources .....	19
Other Comments.....	20
Discussion.....	21
Appendix A: The Survey.....	23
Appendix B: The Focus Group Interview Guide.....	30

## Executive Summary

In the Louisville MSA, approximately 10.9% of all 16- to 24-year-olds are “disconnected.” They are neither in school nor working due to academic challenges, language barriers, poverty, homelessness, foster care or juvenile justice involvement, early parenting, structural racism, mental health problems, or related issues. Not only is disconnection a problem for these young people and their families, it is costly for our community in terms of lost contributions and public expenses.

The Coalition Supporting Young Adults (CSYA) is a diverse group of education, social service, employment, housing, health, and safety organizations. CSYA has reframed “disconnection” as an opportunity for youth and the community to experience gains by connecting these young people to resources and support that allow them to lead satisfying, productive adult lives. By developing a better understanding of the unique needs and goals of Louisville’s vulnerable youth and young adults, CSYA identifies and advocates for community-wide policies and funding strategies to address these needs and to build the capacity of service providers, educators, and others to work more effectively and collaboratively for vulnerable youth and young adults. In 2017, CSYA received funding from the Community Foundation of Louisville to conduct an Opportunity Youth Needs Assessment. The results of this effort to identify the goals and challenges of Louisville’s vulnerable young people—as they described them—are presented in this report.

The study used a mixed methods approach to needs assessment by inviting vulnerable youth to complete a survey and/or participate in a focus group. Eligible participants: (1) were between ages 16 and 24; (2) were residents of Jefferson County; and (3) reported at least one of the following characteristics of “disconnected” youth (currently and/or in the prior two years): (a) simultaneously unemployed *and* not in school, (b) homeless; (c) in foster care; (d) involved in the juvenile justice system; (e) 6+ unexcused absences or tardies in one school year in high school, and/or (f) 2+ suspensions in one school year in high school.

Between August and October 2017, 117 eligible youth completed a survey, and 61 youth participated in one of nine focus groups conducted at various locations around the community. Survey respondents ranged from 16 to 24 years old with a median age of 20. Most were Black/African American (58%) or White/Caucasian (29%), female (58%) and straight/heterosexual (77%). About half had less than a high school education (47%), while 27% had a diploma or GED, and the rest had at least some post-secondary education. Over three quarters had been employed in the past year, but less than half were working at the time of the survey. Most (75%) had been in the Louisville Metro area for at least six months. A little over half had spent the prior night in their own home or the home of the person(s) who raised them. About one in eight (13%) were in residential care or a group home, 12% had stayed with other family or friends, and 21% were homeless.

Focus group participants ranged from 16 to 24 years old with a median age of 19. Most were Black/African American (63%) or White/Caucasian (32%), female (56%) and straight/heterosexual (67%). About 10% were Hispanic/Latino/Latina. Half had less than a high school education, while 23% had a diploma or GED, and the rest had at least some post-secondary education. As compared to survey respondents overall (many of whom also participated in a focus group), the focus groups tended to include slightly greater proportions of youth from marginalized identity groups in terms of race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and involvement with the foster care system.

Survey respondents reported high rates of challenging experiences and circumstances such as attending more than one high school (56%); being in foster care, kinship care or a residential facility (45%); being arrested (44%); and having low income (37%). While over two thirds said they had friends in school, less than half said they liked learning, were able to use what they learned in school, believed doing well in school is important, or perceived that they were respected by teachers. About one third acknowledged getting in trouble at school, and 14% felt unsafe at school.

Survey respondents were presented with a list of 20 resources and asked to rate each item in two ways. First, they rated their need for the resource on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 is no need at all and 4 is a critical need. Second, they rated how difficult it is to access the resource on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 is very hard and 4 is very easy. The top five *needs* were for help with transportation, housing, planning for the future, financial resources, and getting/keeping a job. The five most difficult resources for youth to *access* on their own were housing, transportation, college/training programs, financial resources, and food. Considering both need and access, the top five *priority* areas were housing, transportation, college/training programs, financial resources, and help with planning for the future.

Focus group participants described difficult experiences in their transition to young adulthood. Foster youth discussed the challenges of growing up in unstable, often abusive situations, and lacking control of their lives. Because of this, they struggled and sometimes acted out. In other focus groups, where participants were generally older, the youth and young adults spoke of being unable to focus in school, struggling to stay out of trouble at home and school, and being overwhelmed by the expectations of adulthood. These participants commonly mentioned resources they needed and had difficulty accessing. They reported barriers to housing and work, and challenges with managing bills and becoming financially independent. Many mentioned the absence of supportive relationships. Importantly, however, not all participants focused on obstacles in their transition to adulthood. Some spoke of going to college, studying at the library, working on goals, having confidence, and even “wanting two degrees.” One group focused on the importance of initiative.

Asked specifically about challenges, focus group participants said they lacked support, and had been let down by people in their lives. Some believed that relationships with professionals were challenging. Poignantly, some explained that losing supportive relationships they had once had caused them to struggle. Other themes included criminal justice system involvement, exposure to violence, and education-related challenges.

Focus group participants spoke of wanting a better support system and “someone who is in my corner for the long term.” They desired connections with family, helping professionals, networks of support, and their peers. Regarding places and opportunities for connection/help, participants especially wanted more and better connections with employment and employment-related supports. Some said they needed better connections to financial aid, means-tested benefits, and housing. What keeps them from making these connections is lacking knowledge about resources, not being told about options, being disconnected from family, and lacking transportation. Some described structural barriers in the education and employment systems as well as in society generally. This included feeling stereotyped, judged, abused, and exploited.

Focus group participants’ vision of independence and success involved being self-sufficient, employed and/or educated, able to meet basic needs, and interpersonally connected. Focus group participants who were involved with the foster care system said they needed money, effective services, education, help with motivation, and mentoring to move along the path to independence and success. Participants in other groups also mentioned a need for people to support them. They asked for adults to be more culturally competent, address community problems with crime, reach out to youth experiencing problems like cycling in and out of foster care or not attending school, and improve services by tailoring them to the needs of young persons. One participant emphasized the importance of “follow-up on issues when you ask what is needed.”

It is to this challenge that the Louisville Metro community must respond. Having listened to opportunity youth express their needs and challenges in their own words, the priorities are clear. A need for housing, transportation, college/training programs, financial resources, and help with planning for the future was expressed in both surveys and focus groups. However, narratives from the focus groups provide a more textured, nuanced understanding of the underlying need. These young people want to be self-sufficient, contributing members of society. They are asking us for support and mentorship in finding their way along this path to success.

## Introduction

In the Louisville MSA, approximately 10.9% of all 16- to 24-year-olds are “disconnected.” They are neither in school nor working due to academic challenges, language barriers, poverty, homelessness, foster care or juvenile justice involvement, early parenting, structural racism, mental health problems, or related issues. While many disconnected young persons (or “opportunity youth”) will intermittently enter the workforce or return to school, only 1% will earn a college degree by the time they are 28. The estimated cost to the community in lost tax payments and increased health care, public support, and crime expenses is \$13,900 for each year a young person is disconnected, and \$170,740 over a lifetime.

The Coalition Supporting Young Adults (CSYA) is diverse group of education, social service, employment, housing, health, and safety organizations. Using the Collective Impact model of system change, CSYA leads, participates in, and supports activities to better understand the unique needs and goals of Louisville’s vulnerable youth and young adults as they describe them. CSYA identifies and advocates for community-wide policies and funding strategies to address these needs and to build the capacity of service providers, educators, and others to work more effectively and collaboratively for vulnerable youth and young adults. To identify the most effective actions to achieve this mission, coalition members have studied approaches other communities have successfully applied to reengage and serve vulnerable young people, and explored a variety of strategies to fund new or expanded services. CSYA has also collected existing data from member organizations on a wide range of issues impacting the community’s vulnerable young people.

CSYA determined that the next step would be to collect data from Louisville’s youth and young adults via a formal needs assessment. The Opportunity Youth Needs Assessment has documented the goals and challenges of Louisville’s vulnerable young people as they describe them. This information will be used to determine specific actions the Coalition, member organizations, and the community at large can take to close gaps in services and remove systemic barriers.

## Methodology

This study used a mixed methods approach to needs assessment by inviting vulnerable youth to complete a survey and/or participate in a focus group. Eligible participants:

- Were between ages 16 and 24,
- Were residents of Jefferson County, and
- Reported at least one of the following characteristics of “disconnected” youth (currently and/or in the prior two years):
  - Simultaneously unemployed *and* not in school
  - Homeless
  - In foster care
  - Involved in the juvenile justice system
  - 6+ unexcused absences or tardies in one school year in high school
  - 2+ suspensions in one school year in high school

A snowball sampling method was used to recruit a convenience sample of participants. CSYA member agencies provided information about the survey and focus groups to clients and contacts who were eligible to participate. Information was posted on CSYA member agencies' websites and social media sites. Employees of CSYA member agencies and project staff also directly invited potential participants by attending meetings and events where the target population was likely to be present.

## **Survey Methods**

Between August and October 2017, 117 eligible youth completed the survey. Most completed it in a community space (72%) or at school (11%). Before beginning to answer survey questions, potential participants were provided with an informed consent form. Minors were given an informed assent form only after a parent or guardian consented to their participation. Foster youth were informed of their protected status as wards of the state. In addition to reviewing and approving the protocol for this study and all associated forms, the Research Ethics Committee at Spalding University also approved a waiver of informed consent for unaccompanied homeless minors and minors in institutional settings where a parent/guardian is not ordinarily present. In such cases, informed assent was still obtained from the participant, and an advocate who was not associated with the study was present to protect the minor's rights, ensure that the youth understood the study procedures and implications of participating, and confirm that the youth voluntarily agreed to participate. To ensure privacy and protection, individuals who agreed to participate were only asked to check an "I agree" box since their signature on the consent/assent form would be the only means by which they could be identified.

Once informed consent (and assent, as appropriate) had been obtained, participants completed the needs assessment survey. Most participants used a computer or personal computing device to complete an encrypted online survey. All minors completed a paper version of the survey, and others could do so upon request. Typically, it took participants about 10 to 15 minutes to complete the consent process and survey. In appreciation for their time, youth who completed the survey were offered the opportunity to enter a drawing for a \$50 gift card. Any participant who wished to receive a follow-up call from YMCA Safe Place for referrals to resources could provide contact information on a separate form.

The survey instrument was created for this project by CSYA members in consultation with a research consultant who is a social work professor at Spalding University. A copy of the survey is provided in Appendix A. The survey began with a series of four questions to confirm that the youth met the eligibility criteria for participation. Next, participants used a 4-point Likert scale to rate 20 items. For each item (e.g., "finding a mentor or caring adult" or "getting a job"), participants responded to two questions: Need this resource? Hard to access this resource on your own? Most participants (i.e., those who were currently disconnected) described their current experiences. Those who were disconnected in the past were instructed to think about that time frame as they responded to the questions. Finally, participants provided information about their demographic characteristics and experiences in response to a series of 14 questions at the end of the survey.

The research consultant checked surveys for missing information. Survey responses were imported into SPSS Version 25 for analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data. T-tests were used to test for differences between groups.

## **Focus Group Methods**

Between September 12, 2017 and October 11, 2017, program staff facilitated nine focus groups with a total of 61 eligible youth. Programs/sites included Baxter Community Center, Bridges of Hope/Project Life, Family Scholar House, KentuckianaWorks Youth Career Center (2 groups), True Up (2 groups), Volunteers of America (VOA), and YMCA Safe Place.

To begin the focus group process, the facilitators explained the role of the Coalition Supporting Young Adults (CSYA), the purpose of the focus groups, and the eligibility criteria for participation. The facilitators then reviewed the consent/assent form. The voluntary nature of participation, as well as potential risks and benefits, were discussed. Benefits included receiving a \$10 gift card at the end of the discussion as an expression of appreciation for participants' time. After having an opportunity to ask questions, group members were invited to signify their willingness to participate by giving informed consent/assent (minors were only permitted to assent in the presence of a consenting parent/guardian or a community advocate). To ensure privacy and protection, individuals who agreed to participate were asked to check an "I agree" box since their signature on the consent/assent form would be the only means by which they could be identified. The focus group materials and protocol were reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee at Spalding University.

Data protection and confidentiality guidelines were explained, and focus group participants agreed to abide by a group norm that "what is said in this room will stay in this room." Each participant completed a demographic information form to verify their eligibility and provide a description of the group's demographic characteristics. Sixty- to ninety-minute focus group discussions were facilitated by one or two project staff using a semi-structured Focus Group Interview Guide, and another staff person took notes during the discussion. The interview guide was created by project staff with input from other CSYA members, and it included six main topics related to goals, needs and challenges. A copy of the Focus Group Interview Guide is provided in Appendix B. While the suggested questions for each topic were used verbatim in most groups, facilitators could adapt the wording to make questions more relatable for group participants. The facilitators could also pose follow-up questions to elicit clarification or additional details as needed. At the end of the focus group, participants were invited to respond to the CSYA Opportunity Youth Needs Assessment Survey. Those who wanted to discuss their needs and receive referrals for resources were invited to provide contact information for a follow-up phone call from YMCA Safe Place.

Participants' responses to focus group questions were typed into a password-protected Excel Word file that was projected onto a screen during the conversation so that participants could see and confirm what was recorded. The content of this qualitative data was analyzed by the research consult. Themes and patterns in responses were identified, and a draft of these results was reviewed by the focus group facilitators to confirm the accuracy of the analysis.

## Demographics

The demographic characteristics of the 117 survey respondents and 61 focus group participants are summarized in Table 1 (some, but not all, youths were included in both groups). Survey respondents ranged from 16 to 24 years old with a median age of 20 (mean=20.3 years, standard deviation=2.6). Most were Black/African American (58%) or White/Caucasian (29%), female (58%) and straight/heterosexual (77%). About half had less than a high school education (47%), while 27% had a diploma or GED, and the rest had at least some post-secondary education. Many had been employed in the past year (75 youth or about 77% of those who answered this question), but less than half were working at the time of the survey (42 youth or about 44% of those who provided their current employment status). Most (75%) had been in the Louisville Metro area for at least six months. A little over half (53%) had spent the prior night in their own home or the home of the person(s) who raised them. About one in eight (13%) were in residential care or a group home, 12% had stayed with other family or friends, and 21% were homeless.

Focus group participants responded to a more limited set of demographic questions, and these groups tended to include slightly greater proportions of youth from marginalized identity groups. They ranged from 16 to 24 years old with a median age of 19 (mean= 19.4 years, standard deviation=2.5). Most were Black/African American (63%) or White/Caucasian (32%), female (56%) and straight/heterosexual (67%). About 10%

were Hispanic/Latino/Latina. Half had less than a high school education, while 23% had a diploma or GED, and the rest had at least some post-secondary education.

Table 1.

*Characteristics of survey respondents (N=117) and focus group participants (N=61)*

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Survey Respondents Count (Valid %)</b>	<b>Focus Group Participants Count (Valid %)</b>
<b>Age:</b>		
16	12 (11.5)	11 (18.0)
17	5 (4.8)	6 (9.8)
18	12 (11.5)	6 (9.8)
19	14 (13.5)	10 (16.4)
20	12 (11.5)	8 (13.1)
21	11 (10.6)	5 (8.2)
22	8 (7.7)	4 (6.6)
23	20 (19.2)	8 (13.1)
24	10 (9.6)	3 (4.9)
Missing	13	0
<b>Race:</b>		
Black/African American	58 (58.0)	38 (63.3)
White/Caucasian	29 (29.0)	19 (31.7)
Biracial or multiracial	7 (7.0)	0 (0.0)
American Indian or Alaska Native	1 (1.0)	1 (1.7)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1 (1.0)	1 (1.7)
Other	4 (4.0)	4 (6.7)
Missing	17	1
<b>Hispanic or Latino/a</b>		
Yes	5 (5.1)	6 (9.8)
No	94 (94.9)	55 (90.2)
Missing	18	0
<b>Gender identity:</b>		
Female	60 (58.3)	34 (55.7)
Male	42 (40.8)	27 (44.3)
Transgender	1 (1.0)	0 (0.0)
Missing	14	0
<b>Sexual orientation:</b>		
Straight/heterosexual	77 (77.0)	39 (67.2)
Bisexual	15 (15.0)	11 (19.0)
Gay	3 (3.0)	3 (5.2)
Lesbian	1 (1.0)	1 (1.7)
Queer	1 (1.0)	0 (0.0)
Other	3 (3.0)	4 (6.9)
Missing	17	3
<b>Highest education level:</b>		
Less than 8 <sup>th</sup> grade	1 (1.0)	1 (1.7)
8 <sup>th</sup> grade	1 (1.0)	0 (0.0)
9 <sup>th</sup> grade	2 (2.0)	0 (0.0)
10 <sup>th</sup> grade	22 (21.8)	17 (28.3)
11 <sup>th</sup> grade	21 (20.8)	12 (20.0)
High school or GED	27 (26.7)	14 (23.3)
Trade school	1 (1.0)	0 (0.0)

Some college	22 (21.8)	13 (21.7)
Associate's degree	1 (1.0)	0 (0.0)
Bachelor's degree	3 (3.0)	3 (5.0)
Missing	16	1
<hr/>		
Current employment status:		
Full-time (35+ hours/week)	16 (16.8)	
Part-time	20 (21.1)	
Day labor/temp/seasonal	6 (6.3)	
Not employed/not looking for work	42 (44.2)	
Not employed/volunteering	4 (4.2)	
Not employed/not looking	4 (4.2)	
Other	3 (3.2)	
Missing	22	
<hr/>		
Employment status, past year:		
Employed in last 6 months (n=101)	66 (65.3)	
Employed in last 12 months (n=98)	75 (76.5)	
<hr/>		
Lived outside Louisville Metro, past 6 months:		
Yes	23 (24.2)	
No	71 (74.7)	
Missing	22	
<hr/>		
Where spent previous night:		
Own home with or without a roommate	32 (34.0)	
Home of parents or people who raised me	18 (19.1)	
Residential/group home	12 (12.8)	
With other family or friends	11 (11.7)	
Shelter	11 (11.7)	
On the streets	6 (6.4)	
Car or abandoned house	3 (3.2)	
Other	1 (1.1)	
Missing	23	

Note: The total count for focus group participants' race exceeds 61 because some chose more than one race.

To qualify for the study, all survey respondents and focus group participants had experienced at least one of six “disconnected” conditions: unemployment while not in school, homelessness, foster care, juvenile justice system involvement, truancy (six or more unexcused absences or tardies in one school year in high school) and/or school suspensions (two or more in one school year in high school). Table 2 summarizes their self-reported “disconnected” conditions.

On average survey respondents were experiencing one of these conditions at the time of the survey (mean=1.1, standard deviation=0.9, median=1). Counts ranged from one to four, and about three in ten respondents said none of these conditions currently applied to them. Disconnection from work and school, and homelessness, were the most commonly reported current conditions (by about one third and one quarter of respondents respectively). During the two prior years, nearly six in ten respondents reported disconnection from work and school or homelessness. Homelessness, and disconnection from work and school, were the most commonly reported current conditions for focus group participants (28% and 23% of them respectively). During the two prior years, about four in ten focus group participants reported involvement in the foster care system.

It should be noted that the above statistics may underestimate the actual prevalence of “disconnected” conditions in the population of survey respondents. First, youth who reported a current condition occasionally did not report that same condition for the two-year period. Also, since the youth knew that one condition would qualify them for the study, they may have neglected to endorse other conditions that were

also true for them. This assessment is corroborated by the pattern of responses to the final survey question, which asked respondents, “Which of the following are true about you? (Choose any that apply.)” For example, when given a more detailed description of foster care at the end of the survey, 46 youth acknowledged this experience (45% of the 103 who answered the last question), as compared to only 26 youth who reported a current or prior foster care experience at the beginning of the survey (22% of all survey respondents). The proportion reporting an arrest record in the final question exceeded the proportion reporting juvenile justice system involvement (though these questions may not be directly comparable since arrests may have occurred after age 17). The proportion reporting current homelessness on the last question (27 or 26% of 103 who answered) was roughly congruent with proportion reporting it as a current condition at the beginning of the survey (30 or 26% of all respondents).

Table 2.

*“Disconnected” conditions reported by survey respondents (N=117) and focus group participants (N=61)*

Conditions	Survey Respondents Count (Valid %)	Focus Group Participants Count (Valid %)
Count of current conditions:		
None	35 (29.9)	
One	52 (44.4)	
Two	22 (18.8)	
Three	5 (4.3)	
Four	3 (2.6)	
Current conditions:		
Simultaneous unemployment/not in school	38 (32.5)	14 (23.0)
No current risks	35 (29.9)	0 (0.0)
Homelessness	30 (25.6)	17 (27.9)
Juvenile justice system involvement	17 (14.5)	12 (19.7)
Foster care	14 (12.0)	11 (18.0)
Truancy	13 (11.1)	8 (13.1)
School suspensions	11 (9.4)	9 (14.8)
Conditions experienced in prior two years:		
Simultaneous unemployment/not in school	65 (55.6)	14 (23.0)
Homelessness	63 (53.8)	11 (18.0)
Truancy	29 (24.8)	12 (19.7)
School suspensions	24 (20.5)	9 (14.8)
Foster care	21 (17.9)	26 (42.6)
Juvenile justice system involvement	21 (17.9)	9 (14.8)

## Survey Results

Survey respondents were presented with a list of potential experiences, and asked to check any that applied. Responses to this question are summarized in Table 3. It is noteworthy that a large proportion of respondents (i.e., greater than four in ten) reported school instability, foster/kinship/residential care, and being arrested. However, an almost equally large group reported using mainstream banking products, which is a positive finding. Over one third received public benefits and/or were parenting a child. Over one quarter had been a victim of crime, had been diagnosed with mental illness, or were experiencing homeless. Over 90% of youth who answered this question (or 90 out of 103) reported at least one of the following: low income, current homelessness, foster care, school instability, mental health diagnosis, disability, crime victimization, and/or arrest.

Table 3.  
*Experiences and circumstances reported by survey respondents (N=103)*

<b>Experiences/circumstances</b>	<b>Count (Valid %)</b>
I have attended more than one high school.	58 (56.3)
I have been in foster care or kinship care, or lived in a residential facility.	46 (44.7)
I have been arrested.	45 (43.7)
I have a checking and/or savings account in my name.	40 (38.8)
I have low income and/or receive benefits like welfare, food stamps, etc.	38 (36.9)
I have a child.	35 (34.0)
I have been a crime victim.	29 (28.2)
I have been diagnosed with a mental illness.	29 (28.2)
I am homeless.	27 (26.2)
I have a disability.	21 (20.4)
I live with my parents.	18 (17.5)
English is not my first language.	7 (6.8)
Missing	14

The youth were also asked about their experiences in school, and these responses are summarized in Table 4. Over two thirds (67%) said they had school friends. Nearly half (48-49%) said they liked learning, could use what they learned, and believed that school achievement was important. However, only 43% said their teachers respected them. About a third acknowledged getting in trouble at school (34%), and 14% felt unsafe at school.

Table 4.  
*Experiences in school (N=98)*

<b>Experiences</b>	<b>Count (Valid %)</b>
I have/had friends in school.	66 (67.3)
I like(d) learning.	48 (49.0)
I can/could use what I learn at school.	48 (49.0)
Doing well in school is/was important to me.	47 (48.0)
Teachers respected me.	42 (42.9)
I get/got in trouble at school.	33 (33.7)
I feel/felt unsafe at school.	14 (14.3)
Missing	19

Finally, the youth were presented with a list of 20 resources and asked to rate each item in two ways. First, they rated their need for the resource on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 is no need at all and 4 is a critical need. Second, they rated how difficult it is to access the resource on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 is very hard and 4 is very easy. Those who had *current* “disconnected” conditions (i.e., simultaneously not employed and not in school, homeless, etc.) were instructed to think about their *current* needs and access to resources. Those who had experienced these conditions *in the past* were instructed to think about their needs and access to resources *during that time*. Given that about 70% of respondents reported at least one current condition, the results for this set of items largely reflect *current* needs and access to resources. Table 5 summarizes respondents’ perceptions; items are ranked by average need. (Responses of “not applicable” were not included in counts or calculation of mean ratings.)

Table 5  
*Ratings of need for and access to resources*

Help with...	Need Rating		Access Rating	
	# Responses	Mean (SD)	# Responses	Mean (SD)
1-Transportation needs like paying for public transportation, getting a driver's license, etc.	97	3.02 (1.22)	82	2.09 (1.11)
2-Finding and/or keeping stable, safe and affordable housing	97	3.01 (1.23)	75	1.95 (1.10)
3-Planning for your future	97	2.97 (1.16)	82	2.44 (1.08)
4-Financial needs like paying bills, budgeting or getting a bank account	93	2.83 (1.22)	73	2.29 (1.09)
5-Getting or keeping a job	96	2.77 (1.22)	88	2.72 (1.05)
6-Getting into college or a training program	93	2.75 (1.30)	69	2.19 (1.10)
7-Getting enough healthy food	95	2.65 (1.24)	74	2.31 (1.10)
8-Finding a mentor or caring adult	92	2.46 (1.24)	70	2.66 (1.18)
9-Getting things you need for work like clothes or tools	93	2.42 (1.23)	68	2.57 (1.04)
10-Graduating from high school/getting a GED	94	2.30 (1.34)	67	2.78 (1.15)
11-Mental health needs	90	2.22 (1.23)	61	2.51 (1.12)
12-Staying safe	97	2.08 (1.24)	73	2.79 (1.19)
13-Learning difficulties	88	2.01 (1.22)	58	2.90 (1.05)
14-Legal needs like a court case or your criminal record	84	1.90 (1.25)	42	2.74 (1.17)
15-Sexual health needs or birth control	90	1.86 (1.20)	51	3.16 (1.01)
16-Childcare for your child(ren)	81	1.83 (1.26)	39	2.62 (1.29)
17-Getting or keeping custody of your child(ren)	74	1.65 (1.15)	34	2.79 (1.23)
18-Drug or alcohol problems	93	1.63 (1.08)	49	3.00 (1.16)
19-Illness or an injury	90	1.62 (1.08)	54	3.13 (1.12)
20-Problems your children are having	74	1.53 (1.02)	29	3.07 (1.16)

Table 5 indicates that the top five *needs* were for help with transportation, housing, planning for the future, financial resources, and getting/keeping a job. (Also, relatively fewer respondents said that these needs did not apply to them.) The five most difficult resources for youth to *access* on their own (ranked by mean access ratings) were housing, transportation, college/training programs, financial resources, and food.

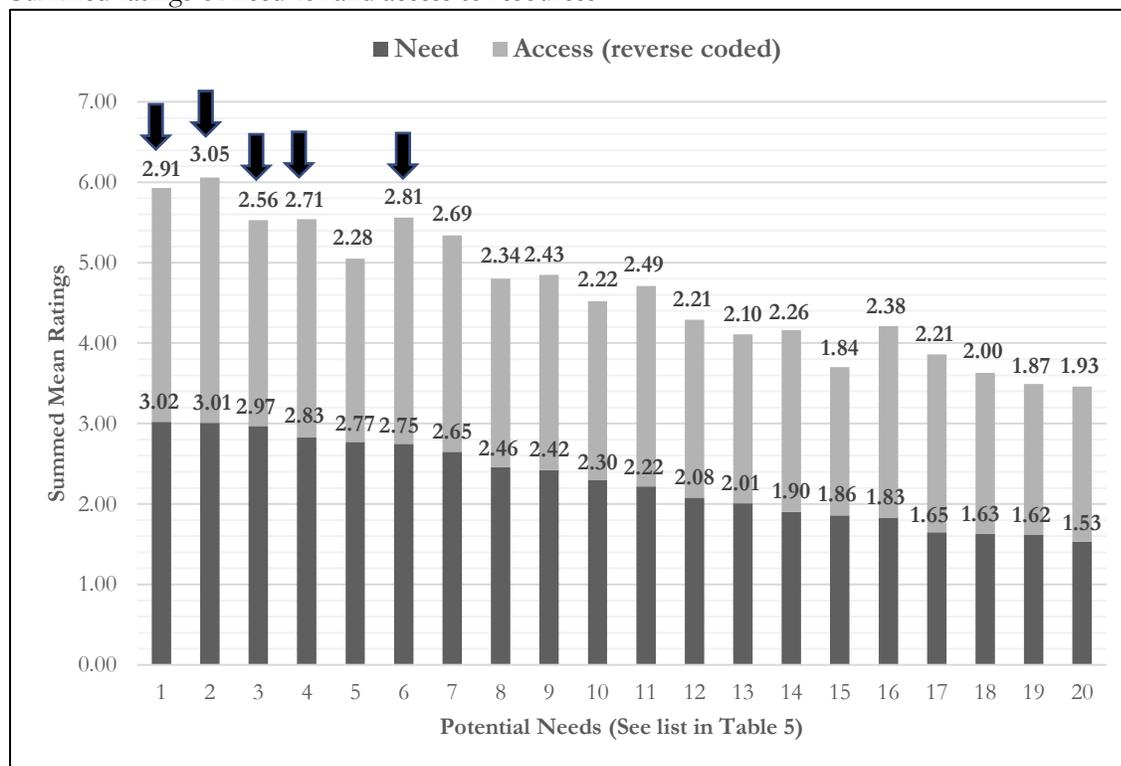
Independent samples t-tests were used to test for statistically significant differences in average ratings by race (white compared to racial/ethnic minority). White youth were significantly more likely to report a need for help with drug or alcohol problems (mean rating was 2.19 versus 1.39 for racial/ethnic minority youth;  $t(34.06)=-2.85, p<.01$ ), help with mental health needs (mean of 2.96 versus 1.97;  $t(83)=-3.66, p<.001$ ), and help with finding a mentor or caring adult (mean of 3.04 versus 2.22;  $t(58.77)=-3.10, p<.01$ ). On average, white respondents' ratings for access to help with getting into a college or training program were significantly higher, meaning they had easier access (mean of 2.65 versus 2.02;  $t(64)=-2.086, p<.05$ ).

To identify the highest *priority* areas, access ratings were first reverse coded (i.e., 4=1, 3=2, 2=3, 1=4), and then access means were recalculated. After reverse coding, *higher* ratings are interpreted as *less access*. This allows mean need and access ratings to be summed to identify the highest priority areas. Figure 1 presents stacked bars for each of the twenty numbered items in the table above. The tallest bars result from a combination of *greatest need* and *least access*, and suggest areas where the community should prioritize action.

The top five *priority* areas are housing, transportation, college/training programs, financial resources, and help with planning for the future.

Figure 1.

Summed ratings of need for and access to resources.



## Focus Group Results

Six sets of questions were used to elicit discussion of the following topics: (1) experiences during the transition from teens to young adulthood; (2) transition challenges; (3) desired connections to people, places or opportunities; (4) obstacles to making those connections; (5) perceptions of what it means to be independent and successful; and (6) resources needed from the community to achieve independence and success. At the end of the focus group, an open question was posed: What didn't we ask that you want us to know?

### Experience of Transition to Young Adulthood

*What has this period from your teens into young adulthood—ages 16 to 24—been like for you? Specifically, can you talk about your experiences at home, school and work?*

Seven of the nine groups responded to these questions. (The groups at Baxter Community Center and Bridges of Hope proceeded directly to the question about challenges.) Responses varied according to the location/type of group.

The groups comprised of minors involved in the foster care system described the challenges of growing up in unstable, often abusive situations. For example, one participant reported having to stay outdoors during the day, only going home to sleep, and being beaten while at home. Another said that adults did not always believe what was happening at home. Several mentioned transitioning from family to family, from one

geographic location to another, or from school to school. One person, who acknowledged having felt homicidal and suicidal, reported 50 different foster home placements. It is important to note, however, that some foster youth embraced change or said it did not bother them; one said that while “residential was cool for some, [it] sucks for others.”

Among these foster care-involved youth, lack of control was a common theme. One described being “moved to places outside your control,” and added that “when you get in trouble, they move you around.” Similarly, a different youth said that lacking control and “getting into trouble for little reason” were problems. Another explained, “Bouncing around to different placements means you have to change jobs and schools.” Loss of contact with one’s support system and “people who can help me like family” were also mentioned.

Because of such experiences, these young persons struggled and sometimes acted out in response. One said it “affected me at school... everything I learned was useless.” Another “used revenge to deal with the abuse,” and a third was “angry all the time [and] took problems out on teachers.” One made the point that when you are “trying to figure yourself out, [it] may look like you’re being difficult to others.”

In other focus groups, where participants were generally older, the youth and young adults spoke of being unable to focus in school, struggling to stay out of trouble at home and school, and being overwhelmed by the expectations of adulthood. They said things like “the real world starts at 15” and “playtime is over.” One explained, “You think you know it all, but you don’t. You want to be grown, but you aren’t. You want to have it all together, but you’re too young.”

It was common for participants to mention resources they needed and had difficulty accessing during the transition to adulthood (e.g., food stamps). One individual said that although “aging out of foster care was an easy process,” help with finding a job and housing had not been provided. Housing was also mentioned by several other participants, and elaborations included difficulties with homelessness, eviction, and long waits for subsidized housing. Barriers to work were also a theme. Participants named obstacles such as unavailability of retail, factory and other entry-level jobs; working in “so many places,” limits on how much one can work while receiving government benefits; having a criminal record; and using drugs/marijuana. One person noted that “mental illness is real.” Managing bills and being financially independent were also challenges for some. One said, “Credit scores matter.” Another noted, “If I would have learned about finances, that would have made things easier.”

The presence or absence of supportive relationships was another theme. One spoke of having parental support, but others mentioned growing up in state custody and not having a support system. Some said that romantic relationships can be barriers, and that “getting sidetracked is easy... you have girls, parties, whatever that sidetracks you.” Others described the challenges of parenting, co-parenting, and making sure children have what they need. One said, “Having a child makes you grow up [and I] feel a lot older than I am.” Another said that “being 20 years old, homeless and pregnant is never where I thought I would be.” Finally, one emphasized the importance of male role models.

Not all participants focused on obstacles in their transition to adulthood. Some spoke of going to college, studying at the library, working on goals, having confidence, and even “wanting two degrees.” One group focused on the importance of initiative. They said things like “only I can make something happen and work hard for myself,” “I feel like it’s all on me to get something done,” and “people can give you tools but it’s up to you.” One who felt “hopeful” warned that “fears and self-loathing will hold you back.”

At one site, an improvised follow-up question was posed by the facilitators: Who helped guide you through this time? Participants mentioned family members including a father, brother, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and “my kids.” One person received guidance from other youth in the community, and another individual mentioned the Baxter Community Center (the site for this focus group). Asked to name resources that can

help them, participants in this group listed job prep programs and mentoring, and one added, “I wish I would have actually used the resources that were available.”

## Transition Challenges

### *What types of challenges have you experienced?*

Several groups had already discussed challenges in response to the previous question set. For six of the nine groups, the question about challenges was separately and specifically posed. The most prevalent theme in these discussions related to the presence or absence of support. For example, one participant said that “kids are more independent now—they raise themselves,” and another described the challenge of “learning to be on your own... it’s all on YOU.”

Many described feeling let down by people in their lives who did not support them. This included “no support from family and friends, [and] haters.” Participants said it was hard to deal with people who treated them badly, judged them, and failed to understand “the complete story.” Some discussed challenges with negative influences and trusting others. For example, one said, “my stepfather got me into selling drugs” and that “losing contact with people” has been difficult. Another complained of “people on the streets, acquaintances, friends bumming from you.” One concluded, “Throughout years of battles with multiple vices and not having the right support, being in the streets was the only option I felt I could turn to.”

Some participants also believed that relationships with professionals were challenging. One said, “A lot of programs are a waste of time because once you jump through hoops you still don’t meet criteria.” Another stated that “aftercare has helped some [types of people], but others struggle with the criteria. After already being traumatized several times throughout life, it’s demoralizing when you are turned down at certain programs.” Finally, one asserted that in interacting with state workers, “opportunities were not there,” and a couple others said that programs they needed “were not around.”

On the other hand, some participants struggled with *having* important relationships and then *losing* them. One youth involved with the foster care system said a challenge was “growing close to people and having to leave... not wanting to discharge from certain places... [and] making excuses because you don’t want to leave. Leaving some places feels like leaving family.” Others mentioned being challenged by depression, sorrow, and loss. One said that “dealing with death and grief changes your outlook on life.” Another whose grandfather died while the youth was in residential care in another state said, “I haven’t been able to deal with it correctly.” One referenced self-harm as a way of “taking issues out on yourself” and another said that “emotional support is super important just for reassurance... [you] will feel a lot more whole as a person.”

An important—but less commonly mentioned—theme related to the criminal justice system. One participant said staying out of the justice system was challenging, and another described this system as “messed up.” The latter individual explained that “people who are not guilty are in jail while guilty people are free... I hate the police.” Another said, “They lock up people who are trying to take care of kids and work.” One group member said it is “easy to get guns,” and another who acknowledged being involved in gang activity described having “witnessed a lot of violence... a friend died in my arms.”

Several participants referred to education-related challenges including lacking help with making decisions about education, needing vocational training, and being in an education system that is “trying to teach people things they can’t understand without help... they need to understand different learning styles.” A couple of participants named themselves as challenges (i.e., “my own behaviors and choices” and “saying things that I wish I hadn’t said”). Finally, anomalous challenges mentioned by only one individual each included transportation and credit/financial training.

## Desired Connections

*What kinds of people, places or opportunities would you like to be more connected to? How do you think those people, places or opportunities could help you?*

Youth spoke of wanting a better support system and “someone who is in my corner for the long term.” A couple related these connections to their “mind frame” and “mental stability.” One participant said that “relationships are important because the people we are around determine how people look at me.”

Several mentioned their families, and one foster youth explained that “every person needs a family. I feel like foster care is forced and [it] feels like nobody’s there. [Family] fills the void of loneliness.” Another elaborated that “having family is important” because domestic violence had led to placement in the foster care system. A third foster youth wished for forgiveness from family, saying that “everyone deserves a second chance.”

Other youth described connections with professionals. Several mentioned mentors or “life coaches” in general terms, and one specifically wanted a connection with a supporter from Project Life or True Up. A participant involved in the foster care system named a youth pastor who “saw I could be a better person,” but said it has been difficult to stay connected with this individual. Another in the same group wished for people “in a leadership position... who are willing to say ‘How are things for you? I know it’s rough for you.’” This person emphasized the “need to have people who are stable.” Similarly, a participant at Bridges of Hope said it would be helpful to be “matched with an advocate like a big brother/little brother,” but elaborated that “if the ‘big’ is a young adult from foster care, they will need to learn or to get help with being a good, safe role model.”

Many mentioned needing a “network” of support and referenced reciprocal relationships with peers. One spoke of mentoring others and having a mentor. Another wanted a “peer network of young parents for support and mentoring.” A third participant wanted a connection with someone who is “loyal, positive, [and] has experienced the struggle themselves and made it out.” Poignantly, two participants responded to the question about who they wanted connection by with using the words “myself” and “nobody.”

Regarding places and opportunities for connection/help, one participant summed it up this way: “I wish I had the opportunity to be serious in school. High school doesn’t teach you about real life and get you ready for the real world. If I had gone to college tours [and] had mentors, that would have helped. A mentor I had in middle school was not helpful. I’m trying to find housing now. I need help to figure out how to manage money.”

Participants especially wanted more and better connections with employment and employment-related supports. Three mentioned jobs with higher wages, no background checks, and no bias. Six mentioned supports including career planning/coaching, interview skills training, liaisons to help with getting and keeping a job, employers that partner with foster care residents, more options like Youth Build (and “more spots” in the Youth Build program), and supportive managers/supervisors who help employees.

Three said they needed better connections to financial aid and means-tested benefits. One who recently aged out of foster care was frustrated due to believing (or being told) that “you have to be 21 to get food stamps.” Another participant said that “navigating systems like EBT<sup>1</sup> is difficult due to being on past cases.” Three asked for navigators to assist with finding an apartment, college, resources, etc., and one said programs that help with getting a GED are needed.

---

<sup>1</sup> EBT stands for Electronic Benefits Transfer. It is an electronic system that allows a recipient to authorize transfer of their government benefits from a federal account to a retailer account to pay for products received.

Housing was an issue for some. Two said homeless shelters (especially those suited for young people) are needed. One wanted to be connected to housing “with a better understanding of young mothers” (regarding guidelines). Anomalous needs mentioned by one person each were health and mental health care (free care needed), better and more accessible court-ordered rehab, agencies that provide clothes and school supplies, and pregnancy resources.

Finally, several youths discussed the importance of positive experiences with human service agencies. One recommended staying in foster care (“it’s beneficial”). Another talked about volunteering at an agency that helped during his/her freshman year, but noted that staff “change out pretty often so I have to get to know them again.” Some asked for improvements. One said, “If certain facilities didn’t spend so much time trying to see the wrong... with us and attempt[ed] to engage us more, it could [make] a difference.” Another named a program that needs to offer evening and weekend hours to better assist youth who have jobs. Finally, one youth said an agency in the Shawnee community “needs better programs and organizations (e.g., recreation centers) ...instead of chicken spots and liquor stores. It’s very frustrating because it feels like they don’t care.”

## **Obstacles**

*What keeps you from being connected to the people, places and opportunities you just talked about? What would help to improve the connection?*

Only four groups responded specifically to this question (others had touched on obstacles in response to the previous question set). One group focused on lacking knowledge about resources and not being told about options. One participant elaborated: “I didn’t get to go to meetings about transitions, [and] I was told about resources outside of Louisville.” Another said that the “pre-independent program needs to teach about taxes, health insurance, parenting, and preparation for the next steps.”

A group of foster youth described disconnection from family. One said his/her mom “is unavailable to talk to.” Another said that “younger siblings keep me from going forward. My parents didn’t see what they were doing, [and] that is keeping me from going back home.” A third person is not allowed to contact certain people because “my behavior keeps me from contacting [them].”

At one agency, several participants described transportation barriers. One explained that “you have to look for a job close by, but that doesn’t always happen.” The other said that while public transportation is helpful, identification is required, the bus is sometimes late or dangerous (e.g., intoxicated passengers), and transferring can take a long time. This person noted that “it’s a two-hour trip from my house to school on the TARC bus.” Another person said, “Life is hard... coming and going.” One participant is isolated due to not having a job and having to babysit at home instead. Finally, one participant said, “Not having a stable place [causes] you to worry about being independent. [I am] always worrying about what it takes to get housing or a job.”

In another agency setting, participants described “side tracks,” like friends, the community, and Louisville itself (“there aren’t many options here”). One person said that in Louisville, “those schools don’t prepare you. The system makes you more dependent on it. It doesn’t really help you. The system messes with your mind.”

In one group, this question was posed slightly differently by the facilitators: What are the barriers to becoming independent and successful? Several participants described education-related barriers including the school system itself (“a never-ending cycle”), higher education (“it’s set up to pay a certain amount of money and prevent re-enrollment... I need choices”), and insufficient focus on trades, life skills and “adult skills.” One person added, “You need experience to get a job, but you can’t work if you’re in school.”

Some participants believed society is the source of barriers (“the way they look at 16- to 24-year olds,” stereotypes and being “judged by tattoos,” and “people abusing the system and taking advantage”). A couple people described insufficient resources and/or an inability to access, locate or navigate them. Finally, one person said that family is sometimes a barrier, and another said the only barrier is “myself.” Asked what has helped them to be successful, members of this group named Baxter Community Center (the site for this focus group), siblings, peers (“if we’re not at home, we are around people we hang with”), and “having a better relationship with Christ.” One person added, “I wish I had a father.”

## **Independence and Success**

*People in the age 16 to 24 age group usually say they want to be independent and successful, but the path to get there may be different for each individual. Typically, work and/or school are a part of the path. What does “independent and successful” mean for YOU? What is your ideal path?*

The most commonly mentioned path to independence and success involved self-sufficiency (mentioned 20 times and at least once in seven out of the nine groups). This cluster of responses included two sub-themes. There were 11 mentions of things related to financial stability including being rich, having a steady income (including a salary “in [the] mid-range to millions”), having money, paying bills, and “not living check to check.” There were ten mentions of being self-supporting, which included things like “not depending on nobody,” “being able to do on your own and no handouts,” “taking care of yourself,” “being independent in the ‘grown-up sort of way’ and not depending on income from anyone else,” “handing everything on your own,” “making your own decisions,” and “doing anything and everything for yourself.”

Employment was also an important theme (mentioned 17 times and at least once in seven out of nine groups). This included naming specific jobs (psychiatrist, nurse, lawyer, aerospace engineer), employers (Ford), and forms of self-employment (own a business, start an organization, move to California and open a dispensary). Others simply mentioned having a job or described qualities of that job (stable job, a career not just a job, working hard).

Another theme related to possessing things that meet one’s basic needs (mentioned 16 times and at least once in seven out of nine groups). Having a house and car were commonly referenced aspects of success and independence. Some referred to housing as “a place to live,” “a place to stay,” “my own place,” or “a place to lay my head.” One person mentioned wanting to “live in the suburbs” and another wanted to “own a place.” Also included in this category were having enough food and clean water, not having to “struggle against the street,” having things “on your own,” “just having your own everything,” and “living a comfortable lifestyle.”

There were 13 mentions (across five groups) of interpersonal connections (one person described it as “unity... coming together”). Several participants discussed the importance of healthy relationships, good connections with people, and needing others (“you can’t do it all on your own”). There were also several mentions of helping family (including “building mom a house” and “giving mom a place for peace of mind and getting married with a white fence”). One person spoke of “networking in your field” and another talked about “finding ways to talk with people about how you can have a positive influence... to have a different perspective on what you want to do for a career.” Giving back to the community was named as a form of success by a few participants, and some of them mentioned specific activities such as big brother/big sister mentorship, engagement with youth, meeting young people where they are, and shedding light on oppressive people and systems (“I want to see Louisville be great!”).

Education was important to many. Ten individuals (and four groups) said that this was an important element of independence and success. Four participants mentioned getting a GED, and eight spoke of going to

college. One person talked about recommitting to foster care to get help with paying for college. Another wants to “prove everybody wrong who said I could not go to college because of my disability.”

Some participants described personal conditions or traits such as happiness or other emotional states, becoming a better person, speaking up and speaking out, “not taking people’s BS,” and “making things work for you.” Less common markers of independence and success—each mentioned by two or three participants—included travelling/relocation, staying close to God/having faith, and being able to take care of children. Anomalous responses (mentioned only once each) included “not being watched 24/7” (but still having therapy and medications), not going to jail and staying off drugs, having access to dependable transportation, and having a good retirement.

A few commented on the *meaning* of the terms independence and/or success, saying that they are interrelated or that “everyone has their own definition.” A couple summed things up by saying that “success is achieving your goals.” One added that “to get there you need experience and preparation.”

At one site, an improvised follow-up question was posed by the facilitators: Why are we so focused on people who don’t want to help? Participants cited drugs and a lack of role models. They believed that people need second chances, that “hope is needed to prevent suicides and jail,” and that the community should build more shelters because this would prevent drop-outs, drugs and criminal activity.

## **Need for Community Resources**

***What resources do you need from the community as you move along the path to independence and success? Are these resources already available? Are they easy to access? Or do they need to be developed or improved? What—specifically—needs to be developed or improved?***

Several youths in the foster care system said that they need money to move along the path to independence and success (and one stated that “foster kids should not have to pay taxes”). Others mentioned needing services including free substance abuse rehabilitation (“it’s so expensive, it feels like enrolling in college”), a place to perform music and arts, and a taxi service (“one that is just for us... a residential Uber” and “foster residents cannot get a driver’s license”). They also mentioned education-related needs including “places to support me to go to college” and “help getting into college [because] I don’t know how to make a college resume.”

Some foster youth asked for help with motivation (including self-motivation, encouragement to get through school, and motivation to take advantage of resources). One foster youth asked for “a great mentor to introduce me to a number of services,” and another believed that “a trusted adult is the most common resource for information.” A third person elaborated: “You need awareness of resources available to you. Sometimes college resources are not known. Sometimes there is too much information. It is important to make information available in several different ways (website, face-to-face, email, posters).” Isolated responses included one foster youth who wanted the opportunity to relocate to a new community (“to start anew”), and another who said, “You just need your peoples!”

One focus group comprised of foster youth expressed negative perceptions of currently available resources (e.g., “foster families are shitty” and “foster homes are trash and foster workers suck”), and one individual wanted information on other foster care residences out-of-state. In the other group of foster care youth, participants said that “social workers are a good resource when you need it between [ages] 18 and 21” and “recommitting is the best resource for taking care of everyone.”

Across the other seven focus groups, participants described a variety of needs. Three individuals discussed needing people to support them (“programs that help people set goals and reach their dreams,” individuals who “continue to push us forward and have our back [like] teachers working one-on-one with me on aspects

I don't understand completely," and people who "communicate and keep in contact through good and bad times; building a strong network that has each other's backs, fronts, and sides"). Three participants named professionals/agencies they need more in the community (youth pastor, VOA, La Casita Center, YouthBuild). Two others talked about their need for family ("parents who care and hold us accountable" and "family needs to engage more").

Several youths described a need for solutions to problems. Three focused on diversity-related issues. One of them said, "Stop building bridges. Instead use the money to improve schools and teach more about people of color. I was asked to read books independently instead of being taught things, and that didn't help me." Another said, "The school system needs to be infiltrated better to help students who are black or brown." A third wanted "to see the next generation change the way they think and talk about the isms." Crime was another concern. One participant asked the community to "help with the problem of too many gangs, [and] blacks fighting blacks." Another said adults should "find a way to keep people out of trouble (jail, court, shootings, drugs, too focused on material things) [by providing things] like activities at the library, Louisville Urban League, the YMCA, [and] community rec centers." Finally, a couple of participants were concerned about "kids going in and out of state's custody," and "kids not going to school."

Some youth wanted improvements in the way services are provided. One participant mentioned a need for "youth-based places [that are] better aligned, and that the youth are able to trust these programs and the people who work there." Another wanted "more effectively trained staff" and specifically identified a need for training on trauma-informed care. A third person asked for "opportunities to speak with other youth about doing what they need to do." Finally, one participant emphasized the importance of "follow-up on issues when you ask what is needed."

Other uniquely expressed needs included sex education, help with housing, and better publicity of available resources. The individual who needed help with housing explained that "I need help from my mom/family. Some programs do really help, and giving small gifts [incentives] helps people to get interested... People get comfortable in their situation. My mom is comfortable and not trying to do better. She uses public housing. I am in college and want to be a doctor." Finally, one participant said, "There are programs I didn't even know about, like Family Scholar House... They need to advertise more. You can go looking for what you need; it won't just come to you. You need to start asking questions about places. I need an elder to help." Asked what could be done to improve this situation, the youth suggested, "TV advertisements... everybody has email... just email them instead of commercials. Have more job fairs. Have a school fair."

## **Other Comments**

### ***What didn't we ask that you want us to know?***

Only four groups discussed responses to this question. Suggested topics included money management, ways youth can help with housing and budgeting, biological parents ("meeting them and navigating that system"), and sexual health education. Suggested questions included: What environment are you coming from? What is your living situation? If you could change anything, what would you change?

Members of one group wished they had been asked about resources they have that are "different from what others have." One explained, "I completed a program at UofL that allowed us... to go to a football game and some people had never been. Some had never been out of the setting they live in." Another said, "I'm from Lexington and they had three to four vocational high schools. I wasn't aware that it's not a common thing in Louisville." A third person stated, "I attended a private all-girls school, and they helped me to understand college and applying for aid. Many of my peers didn't have that. I have started to bring my knowledge into Baxter Community Center to teach others."

Several participants affirmed the focus group process they had just experienced, stating that the facilitators had “pretty much asked all the good stuff,” and had posed common questions that are usually asked (“those were the right questions”). One person said, “I have done focus groups before but this one has been really relieving.” Finally, one participant wanted the group to know that she wished she could have graduated before her granny passed away.

## Discussion

In summary, survey respondents reported high rates of challenging experiences and circumstances such as attending more than one high school (56%); being in foster care, kinship care or a residential facility (45%); being arrested (44%); and having low income (37%). While over two thirds said they had friends in school, less than half said they liked learning, were able to use what they learned in school, believed doing well in school is important, or perceived that they were respected by teachers. About one third acknowledged getting in trouble at school, and 14% felt unsafe at school. Their top five *needs* were for help with transportation, housing, planning for the future, financial resources, and getting/keeping a job. The five most difficult resources for youth to *access* on their own were housing, transportation, college/training programs, financial resources, and food. Considering both need and access, the top five *priority* areas were housing, transportation, college/training programs, financial resources, and help with planning for the future.

Focus group participants described difficult experiences with transitioning from their teens into young adulthood. Foster youth discussed the challenges of growing up in unstable, often abusive situations, and lacking control of their lives. Because of such experiences, they struggled and sometimes acted out. In other focus groups, the youth and young adults spoke of being unable to focus in school, struggling to stay out of trouble at home and school, and being overwhelmed by the expectations of adulthood. These participants commonly mentioned resources they needed and had difficulty accessing. They reported barriers to housing and work, and challenges with managing bills and becoming financially independent. Many mentioned the absence of supportive relationships. Importantly, however, not all participants focused on obstacles in their transition to adulthood. Some spoke of going to college, studying at the library, working on goals, having confidence, and even “wanting two degrees.” One group focused on the importance of initiative.

In terms of challenges, focus group participants said they lacked support, and had been let down by people in their lives. Some believed that relationships with professionals were challenging. Poignantly, some explained that losing supportive relationships they had once had caused them to struggle. Other themes included criminal justice system involvement, exposure to violence, and education-related challenges.

Focus group participants spoke of wanting a better support system and “someone who is in my corner for the long term.” They desired connections with family, helping professionals, networks of support, and their peers. Regarding places and opportunities for connection/help, participants especially wanted more and better connections with employment and employment-related supports. Some said they needed better connections to financial aid, means-tested benefits, and housing. What keeps them from making these connections is lacking knowledge about resources, not being told about options, being disconnected from family, and lacking transportation. Some described structural barriers in the education and employment systems as well as in society generally. This included feeling stereotyped, judged, abused, and exploited.

Focus group participants’ visions of independence and success involved being self-sufficient, employed and/or educated, able to meet basic needs, and having interpersonal connections. Focus group participants who were involved with the foster care system said they needed money, effective services, education, help with motivation, and mentoring to move along the path to independence and success. Participants in other groups also mentioned a need for people to support them. They asked for adults to be more culturally competent, address community problems with crime, reach out to youth experiencing problems like cycling

in and out of foster care or not attending school, and improve services by tailoring them to the needs of young persons. One participant emphasized the importance of “follow-up on issues when you ask what is needed.”

It is to this challenge that the Louisville Metro community must respond. Having listened to opportunity youth express their needs and challenges in their own words, the priorities are clear. A need for housing, transportation, college/training programs, financial resources, and help with planning for the future was expressed in both surveys and focus groups. However, narratives from the focus groups provide a more textured, nuanced understanding of the underlying need. These young people want to be self-sufficient, contributing members of society. They are asking us for support and mentorship in finding their way along this path to success.

## About the Coalition Supporting Young Adults

Recent estimates indicate **15,200 of Louisville’s youth and young adults (age 16 to 24) are not in school and not working** (Measure of America, 2017). Many of these young people face multiple and complex challenges: early parenting, limited economic resources, disabilities, homelessness or housing instability, or foster care system involvement. Their challenges have overshadowed their opportunities to learn, to become financially independent, and to fully participate in our community.

No single organization, public agency, or philanthropist can address the needs of our community’s disconnected youth and young adults. Solutions are possible only through coordinated, collaborative efforts.

The Coalition Supporting Young Adults is a **collective impact initiative** created to address the challenges of Louisville’s disconnected young people. Together, we are committed to developing:

- a common agenda that focuses on the needs of Louisville’s disconnected and vulnerable youth and young adults;
- shared measurement systems that give us common goals and specific actions;
- mutually reinforcing activities that build new partnerships and implement innovative strategies;
- continuous communication that creates a strong network;
- backbone support organizations that promote growth, accountability, and consistency.

Louisville’s Coalition Supporting Young Adults uses the Collective Impact Model developed by the consulting firm, FSG. For more information on the Coalition Supporting Young Adults, go to [www.connectlouisvilleyouth.org](http://www.connectlouisvilleyouth.org).

# Appendix A: The Survey

## Opportunity Youth Needs Survey

### Eligibility screening:

1. Are you between the ages of 16 – 24 years old?
    - Yes → Proceed to Question 2
    - No → You are not eligible to participate in this survey. Thank you for your interest.
  
  2. Do you currently live in Jefferson County, KY?
    - Yes → Proceed to Question 3
    - No → You are not eligible to participate in this survey. Thank you for your interest.
  
  3. Which of the following currently apply to you? (check all that apply)?
    - Simultaneously unemployed *and* not in school
    - Homeless
    - In foster care
    - Involved in the juvenile justice system
    - Having 6+ unexcused absences or tardies in one school year in high school
    - Being suspended 2+ times in one school year in high school
    - None of the above
  
  4. Which of the following have you experienced in the past two years (check all that apply)?
    - Simultaneously unemployed *and* not in school
    - Homeless
    - In foster care
    - Involved in the juvenile justice system
    - Having 6+ unexcused absences or tardies in one school year
    - Being suspended 2+ times in one school year
    - None of the above → [If also “none of the above” in Q3] You are not eligible to participate in this survey. Thank you for your interest.
- } → Proceed to survey

### Survey questions:

*This part of the survey includes a list of 20 resources. Some young people need these resources, and others do not. For each area, please let us know about your needs by answering two questions: (a) How much do you need this resource? (b) How hard is it to access this resource on your own? We'll use the answers you and others like you give us to prioritize services and resources offered in our community.*

- *If you currently meet eligibility criteria (i.e., simultaneously unemployed and not in school, homeless, in foster care, involved in the juvenile justice system, having 6+ unexcused absences or tardies in one school year, being suspended 2+ times in one school year), please think about your current needs.*
- *If you do not currently meet eligibility criteria, but did meet them at some time in the past two years, please think about your needs during that time.*

**1. Help with getting or keeping a job.**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**2. Help with graduating from high school or getting a GED.**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**3. Help with drug or alcohol problems.**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**4. Help with transportation needs like paying for public transportation, getting a driver's license, etc.**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**5. Help with staying safe.**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**6. Help with an illness or injury.**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**7. Help with learning difficulties.**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**8. Help with finding and/or keeping stable, safe and affordable housing.**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**9. Help with childcare for your child(ren).**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**10. Help with getting or keeping custody of your child(ren).**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**11. Help with problems your child(ren) is having.**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**12. Help with getting things you need for work like clothes or tools.**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**13. Help with getting enough healthy food.**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**14. Help with getting into college or a training program.**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**15. Help with mental health needs.**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**16. Help with sexual health needs or birth control.**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**17. Help with legal needs like a court case or your criminal record.**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**18. Help with financial needs like paying bills, budgeting or getting a bank account.**

**Need this resource?**

No need at all	Not an important need	An important need	A critical need
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

Very hard	Somewhat hard	Somewhat easy	Very easy	Resource not needed
<input type="radio"/>				

**19. Help with planning for your future.**

**Need this resource?**

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| No need at all        | Not an important need | An important need     | A critical need       |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Very hard             | Somewhat hard         | Somewhat easy         | Very easy             | Resource not needed   |
| <input type="radio"/> |

**20. Help with finding a mentor or caring adult.**

**Need this resource?**

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| No need at all        | Not an important need | An important need     | A critical need       |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

**Hard to access this resource on your own?**

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Very hard             | Somewhat hard         | Somewhat easy         | Very easy             | Resource not needed   |
| <input type="radio"/> |

*The last part of the survey asks some questions about you. This information will help us to better understand the needs of different groups of young people.*

**21. How old are you?**

- |   |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 16                   | <input type="checkbox"/> 21 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 17                   | <input type="checkbox"/> 22 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 18                   | <input type="checkbox"/> 23 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 19                   | <input type="checkbox"/> 24 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 20                   |                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer |                             |

**22. How do you describe yourself?**

- |   |                                       |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Female               | <input type="checkbox"/> Transgender  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Male                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer |                                       |

**23. Which of these describe you (choose any that apply)?**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Black/African American | <input type="checkbox"/> American Indian or Alaska Native          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> White/Caucasian        | <input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asian                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer   |  |

**24. Are you Hispanic or Latino/a?**

- |                              |                             |   |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|

**25. How do you describe yourself?**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lesbian              | <input type="checkbox"/> Queer                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gay                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Straight/heterosexual |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bisexual             | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer |  |

26. Where did you stay last night?

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> In my own home (with or without a roommate)   | <input type="checkbox"/> With other family or friends |
| <input type="checkbox"/> At my parents' (or people who raised me) home | <input type="checkbox"/> In a shelter                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer                          | <input type="checkbox"/> On the streets               |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____                 |

27. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Less than 8 <sup>th</sup> grade | <input type="checkbox"/> High school or GED |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 8 <sup>th</sup> grade           | <input type="checkbox"/> Some college       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 9 <sup>th</sup> grade           | <input type="checkbox"/> Associates degree  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 10 <sup>th</sup> grade          | <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor's degree  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 11 <sup>th</sup> grade          | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer            |   |

28. Which of these statements describe your experience in school (choose any that apply)?

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I have/had friends in school     | <input type="checkbox"/> Teachers respect(ed) me                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I like(d) learning               | <input type="checkbox"/> Doing well in school is important to me |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I feel unsafe at school          | <input type="checkbox"/> I get/got in trouble at school          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I can use what I learn at school |  |

29. Are you currently employed?

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Employed full-time (35+ hrs/wk)   | <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed, on disability |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Employed part-time                | <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed, volunteering  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Employed, day labor/temp/seasonal | <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed, not looking   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed, looking for work      | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer              |  |

30. Have you been employed in the last six months?

- Yes → Skip to Question 32       No       Prefer not to answer

31. Have you been employed in the last twelve months?

- Yes       No       Prefer not to answer

32. Have you lived outside of the Louisville Metro area in the past six months?

- Yes       No       Prefer not to answer

33. Where are you completing this survey?

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Home                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Community space |
| <input type="checkbox"/> School               | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Work                 |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer |  |

34. Which of the following are true about you (check all that apply)?

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I have a child                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> I have been in foster care, kinship care or lived in a residential facility |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I am homeless                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> English is <u>not</u> my first language                                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I have been arrested                              | <input type="checkbox"/> I have attended more than one high school                                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I have a checking &/or savings account in my name | <input type="checkbox"/> I have a disability   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I live with my parents                            | <input type="checkbox"/> I have been diagnosed with a mental illness                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I have been a crime victim                        | <input type="checkbox"/> I have low income and/or receive benefits like welfare, food stamps, etc.   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> None of these apply to me                         |  |

*Thank you for completing this survey!*

*If you or someone you know needs immediate help or information, you can call the Crisis and Information Line at (502) 589-4313 or (800) 221-0446. This resource is available 24/7. If you would like someone from YMCA Safe Place to call you about resources, you can give us your contact information by filling out the contact request slip. That way, there will be no way anyone can connect your name or contact information with the answers you provided on this survey.*

*To thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey, we are doing a drawing for a \$50 gift card. If you would like to enter the gift card drawing, you can give us your contact information by filling out the gift card drawing ticket. That way, there will be no way anyone can connect your name or contact information with the answers you provided on this survey.*

# Appendix B: The Focus Group Interview Guide

The Coalition Supporting Young Adults (CSYA) is a collaboration of community organizations and individuals who are committed to transforming the way Louisville provides care for vulnerable youths and young adults. We accomplish this by listening to young people and connecting them with programs and other opportunities.

To do a better job of meeting your needs, it's important for the community to understand how to help you succeed. We would like to hear more from you about your needs and your access to resources in the community to meet your needs. We also want to know what we can do to increase opportunities by connecting you and others like you to what you need. That's the purpose for this conversation. Any questions?

To be eligible to participate in this focus group, you must be between the ages of 16 and 24, currently live in Jefferson County, and have experienced at least one of the following conditions within the past two years:

1. simultaneously being unemployed and not in school
2. being homeless,
3. being in foster care,
4. being involved in the juvenile justice system,
5. having 6+ unexcused absences or tardies in one school year during high school
6. being suspended 2+ times in one school year during high school

[Complete consent/assent process and eligibility questions on Focus Group Questionnaire. Collect Consent/Assent Forms, making sure that each participant turns one in, and seal them in an envelope. Now, parents, guardians and advocates can leave the room.]

We ask you to agree that what is said in this room will stay in this room. Do you promise that you will not repeat what other group members say during this focus group to people outside the group? [Ask for a commitment from each participant.] The people doing this project have also agreed that no one will use your name and tell others what you as an individual said. During this meeting, we'll be taking notes about what you say in a password-protected document, but we won't write down your name. Instead, each of you will be identified by a letter of the alphabet. Any questions?

Let's get started. First, we'd like to know a little more about you. Please take a couple of minutes to complete the rest of the Focus Group Questionnaire. We will give each person a letter of the alphabet to write on the form. You do not have to write your name on the form, and you can skip any question about you that you do not want to answer.

[Allow time to complete demographic questions. Collect questionnaires and seal them in a second envelope.]

The rest of our conversation will focus on six main topics. We'll spend about 10 minutes on each topic. Remember that you do not have to answer any questions you don't want to answer or provide any information you don't want to give. You can say "pass" if you choose to. What you share is your choice, and we hope to hear from everyone.

First, what has this period from your teens into young adulthood—ages 16 to 24—been like for you? Specifically, can you talk about your experiences at home, school and work?

What types of challenges have you experienced?

What kinds of people, places or opportunities would you like to be more connected to? How do you think those people, places or opportunities could help you?

What keeps you from being connected to the people, places and opportunities you just talked about? What would help to improve the connection?

People in the age 16 to 24 age group usually say they want to be independent and successful, but the path to get there may be different for each individual. Typically, work and/or school are a part of the path. What does “independent and successful” mean for YOU? What is your ideal path?

What resources do you need from the community as you move along the path to independence and success? Are these resources already available? Are they easy to access? Or do they need to be developed or improved? What—specifically—needs to be developed or improved?

Last question... What didn't we ask you that you would like us to know?