Report of Cross-Systems Trends and Priorities

Coalition Supporting Young Adults

CSYA Louisville

Kya Kentucky *youth* Advocates

Introduction

Opportunity youth are ages 16-24 and are neither enrolled in school nor employed. This population has been previously referred to as "disconnected" but recently the term has shifted to "opportunity youth," for several reasons. For one, youth and young adults that were labeled as such were, in fact, quite connected to friends, family, their neighborhood, and even local community-based organizations that sought to help them overcome some of the challenges they faced. Instead, it was the institutions and systems that should have been giving them access to education and employment that were disconnected. As a result, many advocates began referring to this population as opportunity youth to acknowledge the opportunities that these young people still have and the opportunities that investing in their futures provides for our businesses and communities.

Young adulthood is a critical period of maturation for individuals to develop independence and personal growth. This window of opportunity lays the foundation for a successful transition into adulthood and the workforce. However, life circumstances may prevent youth from being able to navigate this transition and can be detrimental to their occupational trajectories. These life circumstances may include:

- homelessness or housing instability,
- involvement in the child welfare system,
- conflict with the law,
- suspensions from high school,
- physical or emotional special need or disability, including addiction,
- leaving school before graduating,
- early pregnancy or parenting,
- discrimination or harassment due to their race or gender, gender identity or orientation,
- low-income or persistent economic stress.

The Coalition Supporting Young Adults and Kentucky Youth Advocates received funding from Louisville Metro's Office of Youth Development to develop a comprehensive report, utilizing current and previous research as well as input from partners and youth, on the current landscape for young people in Louisville. The goal of this report is to identify priorities for policy and program changes around which community members can coalesce to make transformational change for young people.

Youth Disconnection

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, national disconnection rates were trending downward. In fact, the national disconnection rate decreased by 30 percent from 2010 (15%) to 2019 (11%). Despite marked progress, this means more than 4 million young people ages 16 to 24 were neither in school nor employed in 2019.[1]

It is likely, however, that the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting disruption of the economy has negated almost a decade's worth of progress in the national disconnection rate. A study published by the Pew Research Center found that between February and June 2020, the share of young adults who were neither enrolled in school nor employed had more than doubled, from 11 percent to 28 percent.[2] While researchers and advocates do not expect the rate to remain this high as the economy opens back up and jobs become available, they suspect that progress will be disrupted.

Based on 2019 data, Kentucky's disconnection rate of 13 percent is higher than the national average. This means that in 2019, Kentucky had over 70,000 young people ages 16-24 not in school nor employed.[3] Furthermore, due to structural and institutional racism that is embedded in our society, in Kentucky we see stark differences in disconnection rates by race and ethnicity, with 21.4 percent of Black youth, 14.9 percent of Latinx youth, and 13.4 percent of White youth as disconnected.[4]

Locally, 2019 data shows that Louisville has a disconnection rate of 13 percent (approximately 9,000 young people) for those ages 16-24 who were not attending school and not working. This rate is an improvement from 2010, when 18 percent of Louisville's young people were disconnected. In 2019, Louisville ranked 34th out of the 50 most populous cities plus D.C. based on its youth/young adult disconnection rate.

When broken down by age group, we see that in 2019:

Youth Disconnection Rates in 2019

11%

13%

13%

- 8 percent of teens ages 16 to 19 were not attending school and not working in Louisville. That is approximately 2,000 youth; an improvement from 10 percent (3,000 youth) in 2010.

- 17 percent of young adults ages 20 to 24 were not attending school and not working in Louisville. That is approximately 7,000 young adults; an improvement from 24 percent (10,000 young adults) in 2010.[5]
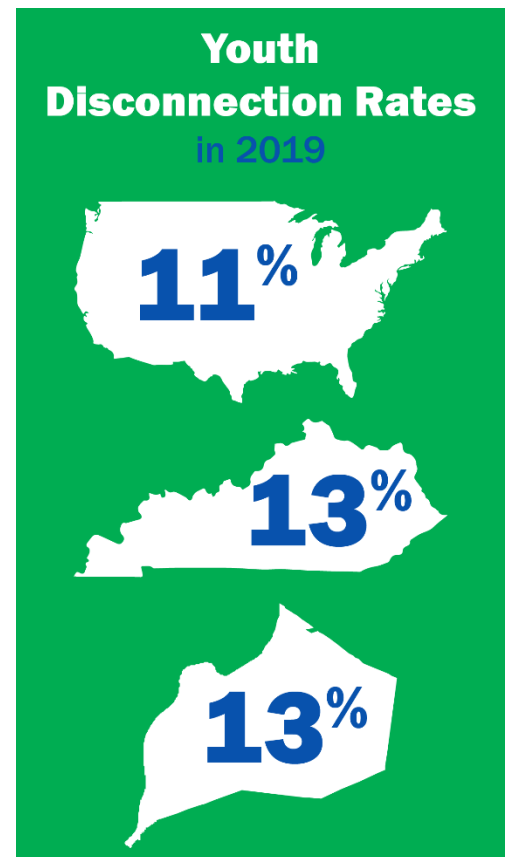
Disconnected Youth Are:

Almost
2x
As likely to live in poverty

3x
As likely to have
a disability

4x
As likely to be mothers
if a young woman

9x
As likely to have not
completed high school

20x
As likely to be living
in institutionalized
group quarters

Opportunity youth also face a number of challenges beyond a lack of connection to education and employment opportunities. According to Measure of America's 2018 data[6], when compared to their connected peers, disconnected young people in our country are:

- nearly twice as likely to live in poverty

- more than three times as likely to have a disability

- nine times as likely to have not completed high school

- more than twenty times as likely to be living in institutionalized group quarters

- disconnected young women are over four times as likely to be mothers as their connected peers

The consequences of youth disconnection are not solely felt by those experiencing disconnection and their families. Communities also shoulder the costs of disconnected young people in terms of lost earnings, lower tax revenues, and higher government spending associated with public supports, healthcare, and crime. According to a 2012 study, it is estimated that the immediate tax burden for every year a young person remains "disconnected" is $13,900, with a lifetime total of $258,240 per disconnected individual.[7]

With approximately 13,000 young people in our community who were deemed "disconnected," Louisville taxpayers shouldered over $180 million in costs in 2019 alone.

Methodology

To complete this work, Kentucky Youth Advocates employed the use of a mixture of literature reviews, quantitative/qualitative data, and community and stakeholder input to develop the policy and practice priorities identified in this report.

The initial phase included identifying existing data sets and engaging in an extensive literature review to gain a better understanding of the landscape of the needs and barriers facing opportunity youth throughout the United States and specifically in Louisville, Kentucky. Over 30 reports and publications from a variety of national and local sources were reviewed to determine themes and potential recommendations. Emerging themes included:

- **Preventative policies and practices are the priority.** Locally and nationally, we need to move upstream to identify the fractures within our society and specifically within our systems that set youth on the pathway to becoming disconnected. Programs and agencies exist to reconnect young adults to education and employment opportunities, but until we take steps to prevent youth from becoming system-involved or disconnected in the first place, we will only continue to put a band-aid on the issue.

- **Opportunity youth and young adults must be involved.** The most notable theme among recent literature regarding youth and young adults is the importance of ensuring that young people are engaged in every step of the process. Genuine engagement of youth and young adults is necessary to ensure the systems that serve them are operating in a way that best meet their needs. Oftentimes, young adults fall between the gaps of child-serving and adult-serving systems that fail to assist them in developmentally appropriate ways. Engaging them in the processes of creating, implementing, and evaluating services, programs, and systems will ensure that we are bridging these gaps and meeting their needs. We must also engage youth and young adults in the community decision-making process to ensure that we are creating workable solutions that best address the challenges facing this population.

- **The need for evidence-based practices.** There is an abundance of research and data that highlight the challenges and barriers faced by opportunity youth in our country, many of which include recommendations meant to move the needle in favor of this population. However, what is lacking is research on what works to help get youth and young adults onto an educational or career pathway of their choosing.

- **Coordination and consistency between services is necessary.** Providing services to youth and young adults that are experiencing disconnection from school and work is not enough. Opportunity youth in our country face a number of challenges that require utilization of services from a number of programs and agencies. Because of this, coordination and consistency are needed between these various services.

- **The need to understand the impact of structural and institutional racism and discrimination.** National and local data depicts the stark contrast in disconnection rates between Black and Brown youth and young adults and their White and Asian counterparts. Advocates and professionals that work with youth and young adults have an obligation to understand the impact that structural and institutional racism and discrimination have on our young people of color and how this has contributed to their educational and employment outcomes.

Following the initial phase of information gathering, a robust list of community policy and practice priorities was generated by reviewing and building on the Coalition Supporting Young Adults' 2017 report "Opportunity Youth Needs Assessment Overview and Recommendations," along with input from partners, stakeholders, and young adults. This list of thirty priorities was included in a survey

intended to collect input from community members and young adults. The sixty-eight respondents were asked to rate each priority on feasibility and importance. After survey analysis, the list of thirty priorities was narrowed down to ten priorities.

Finally, a cross-sector convening was held to gain input from key stakeholders, CSYA network members, and young adults on the identified priorities (see Appendix list of organizations and agencies represented at the cross-sector convening). During this convening, participants had the opportunity to engage in dialogue around a collective vision for young people in our community and provide feedback that helped to sculpt the agenda outlined in this report.

Policy and Practice Priorities

The following list of policy and practice priorities were identified to provide a common agenda for the community to rally around in support of Louisville's young adult population. The first three priorities, related to housing, education, and understanding the role of trauma and racism, have been identified by the Coalition Supporting Young Adults and key partners as the most timely and feasible priorities that must be immediately addressed with available resources and funding.

1. Increase the number of emergency housing programs specifically for young adults (ages 18-26) and specific programming for young adults with specific needs (LGBTQ+ or parenting young adults).
In the homelessness services system, youth ages 18-24 that are experiencing homelessness or housing instability are assessed for potential housing services and programs available to youth. Youth that have completed an assessment are added to an active By-Name List of all youth who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. As of June 9, 2021 there were 107 youth in Louisville that were homeless or at risk, that have completed an assessment and are waiting on a referral.[8] Locally, the Salvation Army has 10 dedicated beds for young adults ages 18-24 that are separate from the general population. However, 10 beds are not enough. Ensuring that there are more safe and available spaces specifically for young adults to go to when experiencing a housing emergency is a vital first step in reconnecting our young people to educational and employment opportunities. Additionally, we must ensure that programs and shelters that provide specific services for LGBTQ+ and parenting young adults are available and funded.

2. Establish a community-wide network of academic support sites, or learning hubs, for high school and college age students enrolled in remote and e-learning schools, that provide additional wrap-around supports and services.
Jefferson County Public Schools recently announced the intention to merge Jefferson County High School, previously a more flexible educational option for students to attend classes while holding a job or attending to family responsibilities, and E-school to create a more robust option called the Pathfinder School of Innovation. We know that this may very well be a pathway that opportunity youth in our community can take advantage of. During the pandemic, we saw just how essential community learning hubs were in helping students and their families with schoolwork and other needs. The creation of hubs that are specifically for older youth and young

adults that also provide supports and services to address challenges they may be facing could improve the educational outcomes for this population.

3. Require training to equip opportunity youth-serving professionals to understand the role of trauma and racism and employ effective practices to help young people understand their experiences and develop strategies for healing and growth. As many of the youth in our community are preparing to transition from adolescence into adulthood, they are also dealing with the lasting impacts of adverse childhood experiences, trauma, and race-based trauma. Kentucky is among the top 14 states leading the nation in childhood adversity, with 22 percent of children having experienced two or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Youth exposed to trauma may have difficulty forming healthy and stable relationships and have also been shown to have unstable work histories as adults. Ensuring that professionals that work with this population understand the role that trauma and racism plays in their current circumstances and giving them the tools they need to support these individuals is critical to help foster growth and healing.

4. Establish and monitor policy that each young person has a housing plan at the time of exit from foster care or the juvenile justice system. Former foster youth and youth exiting the juvenile justice system have a much higher rate of experiencing homelessness in the years following their exit than their peers that were not system-involved. The National Youth in Transitions Database found, among Kentucky youth who turned 17 in foster care and completed the follow-up outcomes survey, 31 percent had experienced homelessness by age 21.[9] Additionally, a study that surveyed over 650 runaway and homeless youth ages 14 to 21 in 11 U.S. cities, found that over 10 percent of them reported their most recent episode of homelessness was due to being released from jail or prison.[10] It is important that youth transitioning out of the foster care and juvenile justice systems receive thoughtful and intentional transition planning and support. Moreover, these policies must be monitored annually by the Department for Community Based Services to ensure that youth exiting the foster care or juvenile justice systems are being provided with the housing coordination and planning they need.

5. Establish and enforce the rights of young people in foster care to include the opportunity to participate in extracurricular, cultural, and personal enrichment activities; to work and develop job skills; and to receive appropriate life skills training. When young people participate in extracurricular and social activities, it gives them the opportunity to gain skills to become independent, learn about making good decisions, and develop soft skills related to employment and independent living. Adolescent brain research confirms that such experiences are crucial as youth transition into emerging adulthood. These rights exist in the reasonable and prudent parent standards outlined in the federal Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 and are also outlined in the Kentucky Department of Community Based Services' Standards of Practice Manual.[11] However, we need to ensure that foster youth, specifically those in group care, are afforded these opportunities for normalcy without barriers that might include a lack of transportation, lack of staff, or inadequate funding. It may also be vital for us to look into ways

community-members can become involved in ensuring our youth in foster care have opportunities for normalcy.

6. Create educational pathways to earn a high school diploma for students who are over-age and under-credited, with an emphasis on programs that assist in providing reading and math instruction. At the end of school year 2020, over 1,600 high school students from Jefferson County Public Schools were under-credited.[12] Students that are at risk of not graduating face a number of barriers that prevent them from receiving a high school diploma. Creating additional, non-traditional pathways to a high school diploma can help address or even remove these barriers and provide more options for youth to improve educational outcomes.

7. Increase the capacity of employment programs to offer financial support for transportation, child care, work clothing, and other work-related expenses to opportunity youth. We know that providing youth and young adults with employment opportunities is not enough when there are a number of barriers that prevent them from entering the workforce in the first place, such as lack of child care, lack of transportation, and other expenses associated with working. We need to ensure the programs in our community that help our youth and young adults get and keep a job also have the capacity to help meet the variety of needs associated with employment.

8. Establish wrap-around services available to young adults reentering the community from incarceration, including housing assistance, life skills development, employment and/or education opportunities, and access to mentor programs. When youth and young adults exit residential placement within the juvenile justice system, they are faced with a number of challenges that may prevent them from successfully re-entering the community, such as housing instability, mental health issues, lack of skills for educational and employment opportunities, and lack of social support and connectedness. Research shows that successful re-entry programs that include case management services, mentor programs, and education and/or employment opportunities can reduce recidivism.[13] Ensuring that our youth and young adults exiting the juvenile justice system have the necessary supports and services available to them is vital to improving their odds of successful reentry.

9. Fund partnerships that connect opportunity youth-serving programs with community-based mental health providers to hire and train community peer support specialists who can provide social-emotional and mental health services to youth and young adults. Young adults, particularly young people of color, are often hesitant to utilize traditional forms of mental health supports.[14] Peer support specialists are trained to use lived experiences in a professional manner to help other people recover from emotional, social, behavioral, and/or substance use issues. Partnerships between youth- and young adult-serving programs and community-based mental health providers may help to reduce stigma and encourage utilization of those supports. Additionally, having access to these supports in spaces where youth and young adults already are could help to address barriers that youth and young adults face when attempting to access mental health supports.

10. Involve local law enforcement in prevention and intervention activities and educate law enforcement on the specific concerns of the young adult population. With heightened public attention on the police-community relations in the wake of the tragic death of Breonna Taylor, local law enforcement may be more inclined than ever to create genuine partnerships with young adults in the community. A 2013 survey found that law enforcement academies nationwide devote just one percent of their training time—about six hours—to youth issues, and most of that is focused solely on juvenile law rather than best practices on how to communicate and intervene with youth and young adults.[15] A dedicated council of young adults can provide guidance and recommendations for local law enforcement on issues related to their age group. Additionally, training and education on best practices for law enforcement to communicate and intervene with young adults is essential.

Next Steps

While the priorities listed above seek to address challenges that Louisville's opportunity youth face across several sectors and systems, this list is only the starting point. Creating lasting and meaningful change to benefit this population and, ultimately to prevent disconnection, will likely take a long-term, collaborative effort from a wide range of likely and unlikely community allies.

It is important to note that through the leadership of the Coalition Supporting Young Adults and its key network partners, much of the work outlined above is already underway. Workgroups around the various sectors that have made previous progress in these efforts are gearing up to advocate for policy and practice change. Additionally, the recent unveiling of the Louisville Youth Network, a collaborative project led by Louisville Metro Office of Youth Development, will offer much-needed connection to and coordination of the variety of services and programs available to Louisville's young people.

The following actions should be considered when determining next steps for the work ahead:

- **Intentionally engage more youth and young adults.** Ensure that youth and young adults are genuinely engaging, informing, and leading much of the work to meet the needs of their community. Advocates must be willing to create opportunities to elevate youth and young adult voice and for young people to step into leadership roles that give them substantive decision-making power within the collective and throughout the broader community. The Coalition Supporting Young Adults commits to engaging at least 50 young people by December 2021 to offer insight and engage as true leaders of the work ahead.

- **Develop an action plan with identified champions.** Each priority listed above requires significant cross-sector collaboration and a detailed action plan to create movement.

However, it is also important to identify champions of each priority who will lead the charge in identifying action steps, determining cost, and seeking funding from the appropriate sources. Through its cross-sector work teams, the Coalition Supporting Young Adults commits to convening, engaging, and guiding at least 30 different community partners as champions to drive the policy and practice changes outlined above.

- **Generate community buy-in.** Engaging both potential supporters and opponents in meaningful dialogue to address the issue is one important step in garnering community-wide support. Utilizing data and research can highlight the issue and demonstrate the effectiveness of solutions to influence key decision-makers.

- **Measure results.** Aside from the typical indicators of youth and young adult disconnectedness, it is important to identify additional ways to measure progress, such as continuous feedback from the young people we seek to serve via focus groups, surveys, and other means of attaining qualitative data. It may also be helpful to measure the amount of private and public funds being allocated to solve issues facing youth and young adults as a way to gauge community buy-in. Through its strategic planning process, the Coalition Supporting Young Adults will work with key partners to identify outcome goals for youth and young adults in our community and how to effectively measure progress.

The Coalition Supporting Young Adults is a collective action initiative of more than 650 members representing over 60 community organizations, entities, or departments in Louisville, Kentucky who are committed to transforming the way vulnerable youth and young adults are supported. This is accomplished by bringing together existing complex systems to increase the supply of quality education and career pathways, to expand funding for and coordination between supportive services (housing, transportation, mental health services, and adult/peer supports), and to build the capacity of the community to confront racial inequity and other sources of marginalization.

Kentucky Youth Advocates is the independent voice for Kentucky's children. With a vision to make Kentucky the best place in America to be young, KYA works to ensure that decision-makers invest in policies and programs that meet the needs of youth and families by working with lawmakers and other elected officials to change and enact policies to benefit youth and families; conducting research and education that informs and recommends solutions to help youth succeed; mobilizing advocates to take action on behalf of youth and families; and leading various statewide initiatives that engage partners from across the state to address issues that impact youth and families in Kentucky.

Appendix and Sources

Following is a list of organizations and agencies represented at the Cross-Systems Convening for Louisville's Opportunity Youth on June 16, 2021:

- Boys and Girls Haven
- Cabinet for Health and Family Services
- Coalition for the Homeless
- Coalition Supporting Young Adults
- Department for Community Based Services
- Emerging Workforce
- Jefferson County Public Schools
- KentuckianaWorks
- Kentucky Youth Advocates
- Louisville Metro Council, District 21 Staff
- Louisville Metro Government, Criminal Justice Commission
- Louisville Metro Government, Office of Youth Development
- McNary Group
- True Up
- Young adults
- Youth Build

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[1] Annie E. Casey Foundation (2020). *Youth not attending school and not working by age group*. Kids Count Data Center. Available at https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/9292-youth-not-attending-school-and-not-working-by-age-group?loc=1&loct=3%23detailed/1/any/false/1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133/4121,4122,4123/18399,18400#detailed/1/any/false/1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133/4121,4122,4123/18399,18400.

[2] Fry, R. and Barossa, A. (2020). *Amid coronavirus outbreak, nearly three-in-ten young people are neither working nor in school.* Pew Research Center. Available at https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/29/amid-coronavirus-outbreak-nearly-three-in-ten-young-people-are-neither-working-nor-in-school/.

[3] Annie E. Casey Foundation (2020). *Youth not attending school and not working by age group*. Kids Count Data Center. Available at https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/9292-youth-not-attending-school-and-not-working-by-age-group?loc=1&loct=3%23detailed/2/19/false/1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133/4121,4122,4123/18399,18400#detailed/2/19/false/1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133/4121,4122,4123/18399,18400.

[4] Measure of America (2020). *Youth Disconnection in America.* Available at http://www.measureofamerica.org/DYinteractive/.

[5] Annie E. Casey Foundation (2020). *Youth not attending school and not working by age group*. Kids Count Data Center. Available at https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/9292-youth-not-attending-school-and-not-working-by-age-group?loc=1&loct=3%23detailed/2/19/false/1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133/4121,4122,4123/18399,18400#detailed/3/71/false/1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133/4121,4122,4123/18399,18400.

[6] Measure of America (2020). *A Decade Undone: Youth Disconnection in the Age of Coronavirus*. Available at https://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/ADecadeUndone.pdf.

[7] Belfield, C., Levin, H., and Rosen, R. (2012). *The economic value of opportunity youth*. Corporation for National and Community Service. Available at https://www.americaspromise.org/sites/default/files/d8/legacy/bodyfiles/Econ_Value_Youth_Jan_11_2012.pdf.

[8] Data provided by the Coalition for the Homeless on June 22, 2021.

[9] Annie E. Casey Foundation (2020). *Youth transitioning out of foster care: Experienced homelessness in the past two years.* Kids Count Data Center. Available at https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/10857-youth-transitioning-out-of-foster-care-experienced-homelessness-in-the-past-two-years?loc=19&loct=2%23detailed/2/19/false/1698,1697,6259,6260,6261,6262/21107,21108#detailed/2/19/false/1698,1697/6259,6260,6261,6262/21107,21108.

[10] Administration for Children and Families, Street Outreach Program (2016). *Data collection study final report.* Available at https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fysb/data_collection_study_final_report_street_outreach_program.pdf.

[11] Department for Community Based Services. *Standards of Practice Online Manual*. Available at https://manuals.sp.chfs.ky.gov/Pages/index.aspx.

[12] Data provided by Jefferson County Public Schools for school year 2019-20 via an open records request.

[13] Nellis, A. and Wayman R. (2009). *Back on track: Supporting youth reentry from out-of-home placement to the community*. Youth Reentry Task Force of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Coalition. Available at https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/back-on-track-supporting-youth-reentry-from-out-of-home-placement-to-the-community/.

[14] Kentucky Youth Advocates (2021*). Louisville Youth Behavioral Health Landscape Assessment*. Available at https://kyyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Behavioral-Health-Landscape-Report.pdf.

[15] Strategies for Youth (2021). *Forging partnerships with law enforcement: A guide to juvenile justice detention reform*. Available at https://strategiesforyouth.org/sitefiles/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Forging-Partnerships-Report-Apr2021.pdf.