Equity Counts

Using Data to Increase Equity and Improve Metric Outcomes for Opportunity Youth

by Suzanne Towns

Executive Summary
September, 2019

Equity Counts (EC) was launched in the fall of 2018 with support from Ballmer Group and in partnership with 17 of the Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions (FCS) Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) **network communities**. The ultimate goal of Equity Counts is to build capacity for data collection, analysis and use at both the network and community level to drive and inform programmatic and policy decisions, increase quality of services, and ultimately accelerate improved and more equitable outcomes for opportunity youth.

Opportunity youth (OY) are, by definition, amongst the hardest-to-reach youth in our communities. Unlike youth who are connected to school systems, postsecondary institutions, or employers, opportunity youth - defined by OYF as "young people between the ages 16 to 24 who are neither enrolled in school nor participating in the labor force" – do not regularly interact with these systems. There is no system or single point of contact through which opportunity youth are engaged, and through which progress and outcomes are measured. Rather, opportunity youth, if connected at all, float among service providers, in and out of school, and between temporary jobs.

Efforts to track opportunity youth and provide services are fraught with logistical and technical challenges and are almost impossible to do consistently. To achieve these goals, data and measurement approaches need to focus on the success of individual OY in the context of the services and programs they are engaged in. To improve outcomes and deepen impact, however, we must be able to track youth reconnection consistently across communities and over time.

OYF has achieved significant impact over the last year in moving our network to a more rigorous and consistent approach to understanding opportunity youth. In partnership with Equal Measure (who has evaluated the **place-based work of FCS OYF** over the past three years), and six OYF communities

(**Austin Opportunity Youth Collaborative,** Austin, TX, **Boston Opportunity Youth Collaborative,** Boston, MA, **Thrive Chicago,** Chicago, IL, **Oakland-Alameda County Opportunity Youth Initiative,** Alameda County, CA, **Project U-Turn,** Philadelphia, PA, **Santa Clara County Opportunity Youth Partnership,** Santa Clara County, CA) which served as data collection pilot sites, we have developed a new set of OYF common measures and approach for calculating the number and types of OY in communities within our network.

The new methodology uses customized annual American Community Survey (ACS) data to focus more closely on specific geographic areas within our network of communities and to disaggregate data by key demographics, such as race, gender and other key variables. As a result, we are now able to calculate the following OYF common measures for our network communities:

Overall community disconnection rate
The rate of young people disconnected from work and school (i.e., opportunity youth).

High school disconnection rate
The rate of young people without a high school diploma/GED and not working who are disconnected from high school.

Postsecondary disconnection rate
The rate of young people with a high school diploma/GED, without a postsecondary credential who are disconnected from postsecondary education and not working.

Workforce disconnection rate
The rate of young people with a postsecondary credential, but not enrolled in postsecondary, who are disconnected from the workforce.

Each OYF common measure calculates the percentage of youth who are uniquely disconnected from a particular segment of the education-to-workforce continuum. This approach to identifying, segmenting and disaggregating the OY population based on annual ACS data is unique and we are excited to bring this new methodology and suite of resources to our network and to the field. We will use this methodology going forward to better understand the OY population trends and demographics across our network, and to inform resource development, learning and program improvement, national OY policy and advocacy efforts and increase community-wide OY outcomes.

During this first year, we also sought to learn more about how to "operationalize equity" in a data-related context. Explicit in our efforts are a commitment to collect and analyze data with a focus on conducting a deeper level of disaggregation within each OYF common measure to help communities identify and understand where there are disparities along racial, ethnic and gender lines, which subsets or sub-populations of the communities are disproportionally affected by negative outcomes, and how resources can be more efficiently targeted to address outcome gaps. This information can be used to help understand and inform place-based program improvement and systems changes that will drive improved outcomes for youth.

As the focus of Equity Counts is about using data to drive deeper impact and improve outcomes, Equity Counts partners and participating communities developed a new OYF Data Use Framework to help clarify specific types of data use and identify and track related outcomes:

- **Communicating the vision:** Data are used to articulate and build commitment towards a shared vision for connecting the community's youth to education and employment pathways and advancing equitable outcomes.

- **Case-making:** Data are used to communicate with funders, policymakers, the media, the general public and other stakeholders to articulate the need for support in advancing the OY agenda.

- **Continuous improvement:** Data are used to assess, improve, and target the collaborative's and partners' OY supports or services.

- **Understanding youth and their needs:** Data are used to understand "who" opportunity youth are to ensure effective engagement and support.

- **Partner accountability:** Data help the collaborative's partners "own" their contributions to the OY agenda.

- **Assessing partnership health:** Data are used to make sure the collaborative's infrastructure – including communication channels, decision-making processes, and work groups – are functioning properly, equitable, and inclusive.

Improved data usage is also dependent on the capacity and resources within network partner collaboratives. To better understand OYF communities' capacity for data collection, analysis and use and what resources would be needed for improvement, we conducted a data capacity analysis with all 17 participating Equity Counts sites. The data capacity assessment focused on three areas: data infrastructure, data-specific functions within the backbone or collaborative, and the current or potential opportunities for young people to help define what success and meaningful impact looks like.

Upon review of the data capacity assessment results, approximately 75% had a dedicated data person, and 50% have a data workgroup, shared data base and produce publicly available data. Sites felt

strong in their ability to use community level data to understand the needs of OY in their communities, communicate the vision or goal of their collaborative and make the case for funding or policy changes. Areas of growth included better collection of partner level or programmatic data, and progress assessment and program improvement at the individual partner and collaborative level. Sites also identified a desire for deeper capacity to convene partners and facilitate data-related working groups and to explore additional opportunities for youth participation and leadership. Based on these learnings, as well as our past approaches to data collection and use, and insights from our third-party evaluator, we identified key data related functions, select competencies and common needs and analyzed them by collaborative level of experience.

Additionally, this past spring each participating site created preliminary four-year plans to indicate how they foresee using OY data to drive deeper and more equitable improvements in their communities. This included identifying specific uses and outcomes, preliminary populations or OYF common measure areas of focus, how they would address equity and youth participation, and what resources would be needed to accomplish their goals. Upon review and analysis of the plans, all sites identified a need to develop or strengthen their data infrastructure to collect, analyze and use OY-specific partner, community and longitudinal data to better understand the needs of OY, as well as to increase coordination of efforts across partners and improve provision of services. In addition to serving OY who are already disconnected, most sites are seeking to learn more about when youth become "off-track" and likely to disconnect, and some of the key interventions and factors that help to prevent this from occurring. As they considered how to address opportunity gaps

and inequities, about one third of communities were focused on place-based and population specific strategies, specifically for black and latinx populations, and foster care and criminal justice involvement.

To support and learn from communities during this past year we provided one on one technical assistance to each of the 17 participating sites. We also established a community of practice to share learnings and resources across both Equity Counts sites and all of OYF. Initial focus areas were related to year one deliverables: OYF common measures and data use framework, data capacity assessment tool development and completion, clarifying potential youth roles and multi-year data plan development. We also met with several national level partners to share our work and determine how we might align efforts in the future.

The findings of the data capacity assessment, multi-year data plan development and learning activities informed our development of a flexible, equity-centered approach to building data capacity to improve outcomes which we will utilize going forward to support communities at the early, intermediate and advanced level of data use.

We are extremely proud of the work OYF communities and our partners have accomplished over the last year. Our partner communities have embraced the need for greater shared accountability and more rigorous, data-driven approaches to get to deeper impact and improved outcomes. As a result of our activities, we are well positioned to move quickly into scaled implementation and execution as we move forward. As a network, our communities are ready to enter the next phase of OYF work for and with the youth and young adults in our country who have too often been shut out of opportunity.

For digital copies of this executive summary, or to download the full report, please visit:
http://aspencommunitysolutions.org/resources/