

EVALUATION  
EXECUTIVE  
SUMMARY  
2023

# The Opportunity Youth Forum: Collaborating to Transform Local Systems and Amplify Youth Impact, 2019-2023

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**EQUAL**  
**MEASURE**

FINDING  
PROMISE  
FUELING  
CHANGE



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## The Opportunity Youth Forum: Collaborating to Transform Local Systems and Amplify Youth Impact, 2019-2023

For the past decade, Equal Measure has served as the learning and evaluation partner for the Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions (FCS) and its Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF). OYF is a network of more than 40 local collaboratives focused on the educational and economic success of youth and young adults (Figure 1). OYF's goal for the next ten years is to reduce youth disconnection by 50 percent in OYF communities, resulting in 500,000 fewer opportunity youth by 2033.<sup>1</sup>

### About the Opportunity Youth Forum

The Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions (FCS) launched the OYF in 2012, on the recommendations from President Obama's White House Council on Community Solutions. Since then, FCS has mobilized a national movement, convening and supporting a network of more than 40 communities dedicated to improving systems so all young people, including the nearly 1 million opportunity youth in OYF communities, can connect or re-connect to an education or career pathway.

FIGURE 1. MAP OF THE OYF NETWORK IN 2023



<sup>1</sup> Forum for Community Solutions, Opportunity Youth Forum, <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/opportunity-youth-forum/>.



## KEY FINDINGS IN THIS REPORT

- The **youth disconnection rate**, or the percentage of 16–24-year-olds not in school and not working, in OYF communities, has **nearly returned to pre-pandemic levels**, with an almost two percentage point drop between 2021 and 2022 (13.1% to 11.4%). Prior to the pandemic, rates dropped between 2017 and 2019 (11.9% to 11.1%).
- Preliminary data indicates that **collaboratives reporting greater evidence of systems change in 2019 in their local communities tended to have lower youth disconnection rates in 2022**.
- There continues to be a consistent relationship between **strong collaborative capacity and the ability to improve local systems** serving young people (see Figure 7 on page 9).
- **Public policy change is at its highest level in five years**; it increased by eight percentage points from 2022 to 2023.
- The **path to changing local systems remains nonlinear**, with all OY collaboratives experiencing both growth and declines over the past five years (see: [2023 Equal Measure report](#)).

## OYF Theory of Change: How OYF Works to Improve the Lives of Opportunity Youth

The OYF theory of change (Figure 2) hypothesizes that investing in the development, learning, and support of cross-sector collaboratives will enable communities to change systems to better serve young people, especially young people of color. Improving local systems – education, workforce, human services, justice, and others – will result in fewer opportunity youth by removing barriers and improving access and success on educational and career pathways.

This report describes progress across the OYF network and trends in the three main elements of the OYF theory of change: collaborative capacity, systems change, and youth outcomes, and the relationships between them using data from the annual OYF self-assessment<sup>2</sup> and the OYF Common Measures.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The self-assessment has been administered annually to each collaborative since 2019 and focuses on collaborative capacity in four areas (*leadership, planning, and convening power; data and learning; raising awareness and strategic communications; and resources for the collaborative*) and local systems change in seven areas (*programmatic change; organizational change; narrative change; public policy change; data use; funding changes; and pathway improvements*).

<sup>3</sup> The OYF Common Measures use American Community Survey (ACS) data to calculate youth disconnection rates and the number of opportunity youth in each OYF community and have been calculated in 2017, 2019, 2021, and 2022. See: Forum for Community Solutions, OYF Common Measures, <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/oym-common-measures/>



FIGURE 2. OYF THEORY OF CHANGE FOR PLACE-BASED COLLABORATIVES

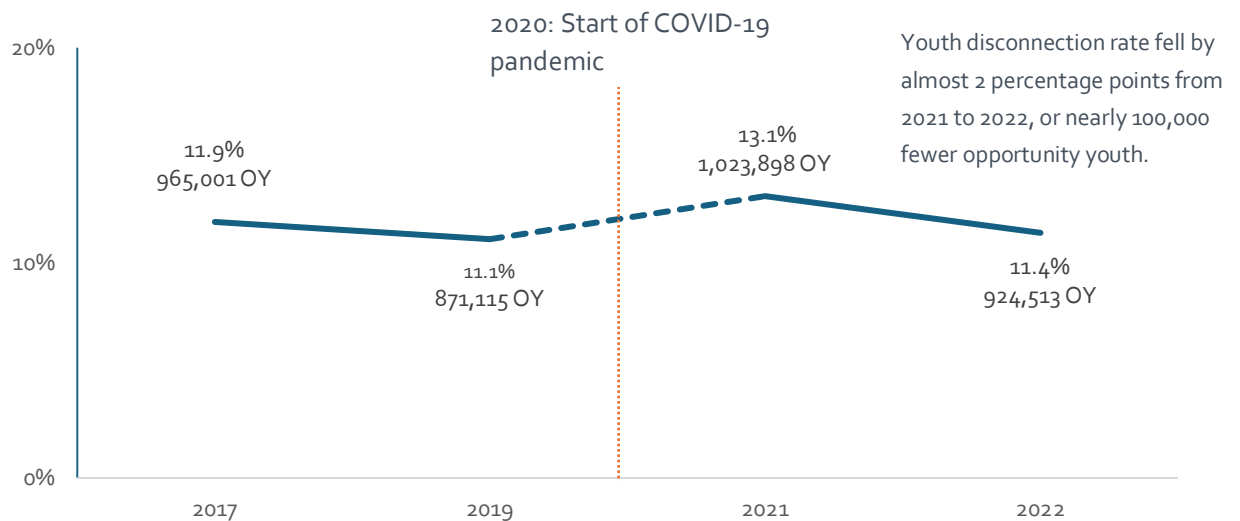


## YOUTH OUTCOMES

### Youth Outcomes in OYF Communities, 2017-2022

The Common Measures are intended to track and illuminate trends in youth disconnection over time and provide OYF communities with valuable community-level data to better understand opportunity youth in their communities. Across the OYF network, the youth disconnection rate<sup>4</sup> was 11.9 percent in 2017 and 11.1 percent in 2019; jumped to 13.1 percent in 2021 (due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic), and then dropped to 11.4 percent in 2022 (Figure 3). **The disconnection rate has nearly returned to pre-pandemic levels, falling almost two percentage points between 2021 and 2022 in OYF communities.**

FIGURE 3. YOUTH DISCONNECTION IN OYF COMMUNITIES ROSE DURING PANDEMIC BUT HAS RESUMED A DOWNWARD TRAJECTORY



Source: American Community Survey Data<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The percent of young people ages 16-24 who are not in school and are not working.

<sup>5</sup> Disconnection rates are based on the same set of 44 collaboratives in each year so that comparisons can be made over time. The Common Measures were not calculated in 2020 due to poor data quality of the ACS.



## Preliminary Findings: The Relationship Between Systems Change and Youth Outcomes

Based on the theory of change, we would expect OYF communities with *greater* success in changing local systems to better serve young people to have *lower* youth disconnection rates over the long term. We conducted exploratory analyses using data collected over five years to assess the relationship between systems change scores (based on self-assessment data of community change across seven areas, including narrative, policy, and funding) and community youth disconnection rates. One promising finding was a moderate correlation<sup>6</sup> between 2019 systems change scores (the earliest year we have) and 2022 youth disconnection rates (the latest year we have): **collaboratives with higher systems change scores in 2019 tended to have lower youth disconnection rates in 2022**. These findings should be considered preliminary; more data and a longer timeframe are needed.

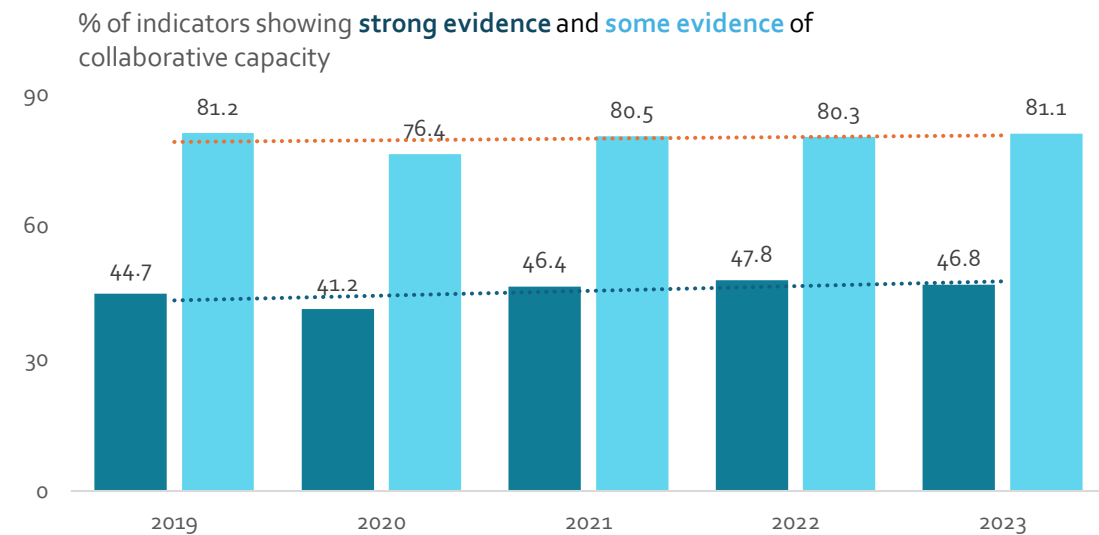
Community-level change in youth disconnection is the goal and OYF aims to achieve that goal through **high-capacity community collaboratives** that work across multiple sectors and with community leaders and residents to bring about **changes in local systems** that impact opportunity youth.

## COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY

### OYF Network Trends Over Time, 2019-2023

Collaborative capacity, which includes indicators of *leadership, planning, and convening power; data and learning; raising awareness and strategic communications; and resources for the collaborative* has remained steady across the OYF network over the past five years (Figure 4). *Leadership, planning, and convening power* is at its highest level in five years, indicating a **network strength of collaborative participation, structures, and processes – the foundation of high-functioning collaboratives**.

**FIGURE 4.** NETWORK CAPACITY SCORES BY YEAR, 2019-2023



Note: Some evidence responses include describes us somewhat, well, or very well; strong evidence responses include describes us well or very well.

<sup>6</sup>  $r = -0.45, p < .001$



## OYF Collaboratives Trends Over Time, 2019-2023

Looking at trends in the network is complicated by its changing composition – new collaboratives join and others leave the network each year or undergo significant changes and thus do not participate in the annual assessment. One way to look at changes in capacity and avoid the problems of looking at the network as a whole is to look at how individual collaboratives have changed over time.

Over the last year (2022 to 2023):

- **Two-thirds of collaboratives** (68% or 23 of 34 collaboratives) **improved their collaborative capacity from 2022 to 2023**. Looking at the four types of capacities, these improvements were driven by increases in *data and learning* capacity – 85 percent of collaboratives improved in this capacity from 2022 to 2023. Fifty-nine percent increased their *leadership* capacity from 2022 to 2023.

Over the last five years (2019 to 2023):

- **Over half of collaboratives** (with five years of assessment data) **improved their collaborative capacity from 2019 to 2023** (56% or nine out of 16 collaboratives).

Collaborative capacity in individual collaboratives may go up and down year to year due to several factors such as changes in collaborative or cross-sector partner leadership, other staff changes, and fluctuations in funding. These changes can affect building and maintaining cross-partner relationships, momentum on key initiatives or projects, and the ability to invest in capacities such as data infrastructure.

## SYSTEMS CHANGE

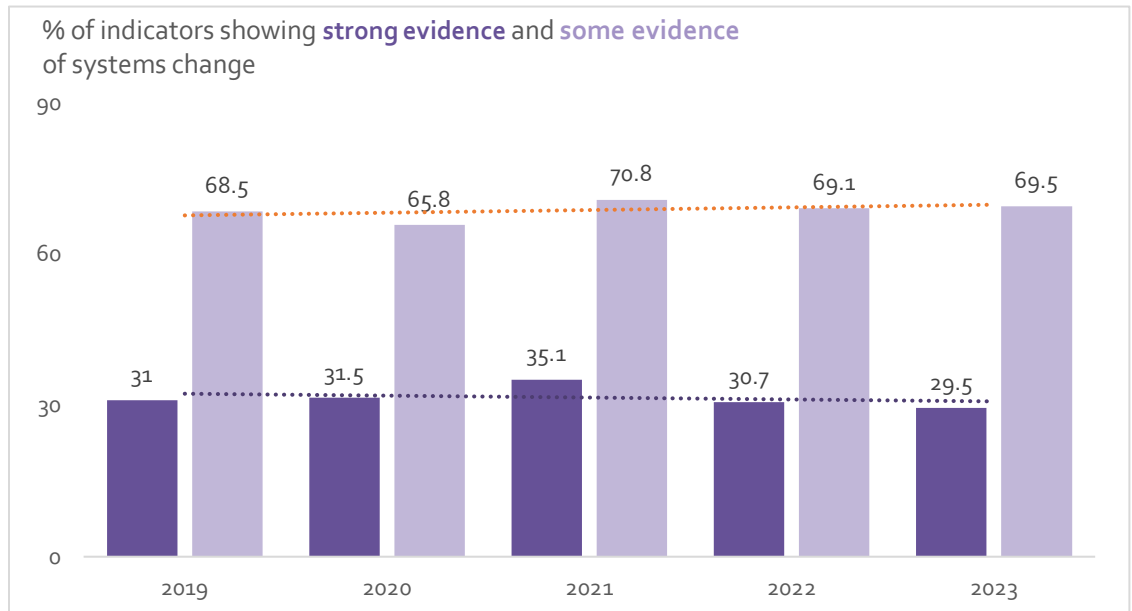
### OYF Network Trends Over Time, 2019-2023

Evidence of local systems changes is measured across seven areas: *programmatic change*, *organizational change*, *narrative change*, *public policy change*, *data use*, *funding change*, and *pathway improvement*.

Overall, network systems change scores were steady over the last five years (Figure 5). Systems change peaked in 2021 and has declined over the last couple of years. **Public policy change, however, is at its highest level in five years**; it increased by eight percentage points from 2022 to 2023.



**FIGURE 5. NETWORK SYSTEMS CHANGE SCORES BY YEAR, 2019-2023**



Note: Some evidence responses include describes us somewhat, well, or very well; strong evidence responses include describes us well or very well.

## OYF Collaboratives Trends Over Time, 2019-2023

In last year’s report, we found that the year-to-year systems change journeys were varied, with most communities experiencing some variation of “ups and downs” (growth and declines in systems change scores) over time. We continue to see these trends as we add an additional year of data (Figure 6).

**FIGURE 6. OYF COLLABORATIVES SYSTEMS CHANGE JOURNEYS, 2019-2023<sup>7</sup>**



**Zigzag.** Over half (53%, nine collaboratives) of collaboratives showed growth and decline over the time period (2019-2023). For some, this looked like a zigzag pattern with yearly alternating growth and declines; for others, it was ups and downs followed by two years of growth or decline (or vice versa).



**U-shape.** About a quarter of collaboratives (24%, four collaboratives) followed a “u-shape” pattern of declines followed by rebounds or periods of growth.



**Growth, then decline in 2023.** About a quarter of collaboratives (24%, four collaboratives) showed growth over four years and then a decline in 2023. At two collaboratives, this decline was large.

<sup>7</sup> Among collaboratives with 4-5 years of self-assessment data.



In looking at changes in individual collaboratives, the only **area of systems change where the majority of collaboratives improved from 2019 to 2023 was in *data use across systems*** (11 of 16 collaboratives or 69% improved). Similarly, *data use across systems* was the only area that most collaboratives (54%) improved over the last year (2022-2023). This coincides with an intentional multi-year effort by FCS to grow data capacity and use by OYF collaboratives.

The trend data continue to show the ups and downs of systems changes in local communities with sometimes dramatic year-to-year changes. As we shared in last year's evaluation report,<sup>8</sup> challenges to systems change work include: COVID and local natural disasters' impacts and recovery; leadership, staffing, and backbone transitions; unstable funding and resources; and the political context and climate. These factors can cause disruptions, the need to pause work, the loss of momentum, and the need to re-set priorities and strategies which can slow or reverse the progress of changing local systems. As we've noted before, progress, and especially in changing organizations, institutions, and policies, is not straightforward and linear, but a journey with many ups and downs.

## The Relationship Between Collaborative Capacity and Systems Change in 2023

The OYF theory of change posits that as collaboratives build their capacity to implement their opportunity youth agendas by strengthening collaborative *leadership, data, communications, and resources* that they will be better able to implement systems changes in their communities. In our analysis of the 2023 assessment data, we found that the relationship between collaborative capacity and systems change was consistent with prior years, where **collaboratives with greater capacity are statistically more likely to see greater evidence of systems changes necessary for opportunity youth to succeed** (Figure 7).

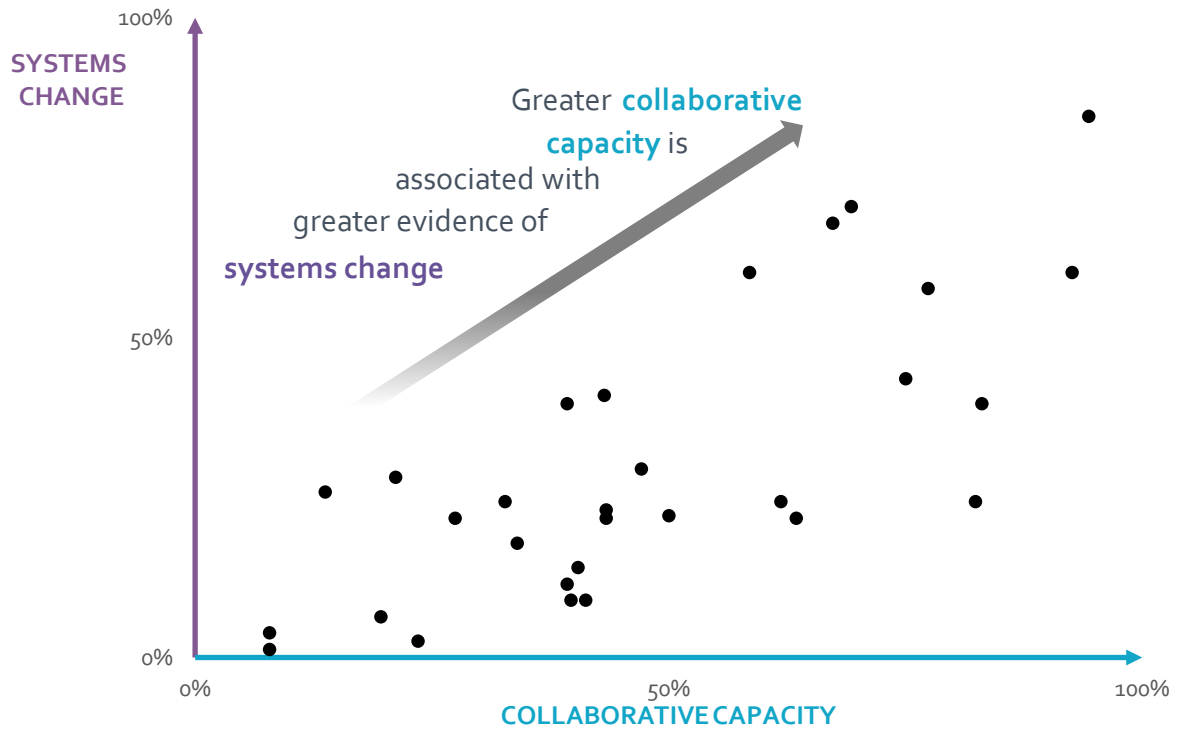
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<sup>8</sup> Equal Measure, Many Paths Forward: The Systems Change Journeys of OYF Collaboratives, <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/report/many-paths-forward-the-systems-change-journeys-of-oyf-collaboratives/>





**FIGURE 7. COLLABORATIVES WITH HIGHER CAPACITY SCORES HAD HIGHER SYSTEMS CHANGE SCORES (2023)**



Note: Each dot represents a collaborative. The capacity and systems change scores indicate the percentage of indicators of capacity or systems change that are strongly evident in the collaborative or community in 2023 (see Appendix for more details).