



Forgotten and Left Behind:

Shifting Narratives and Exploring Policy Solutions for Vulnerable Youth and Young Adults

Reflection, Analysis and Next Steps from our 2017 Convening



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Introduction

Young people live in a moment of unprecedented challenge and unprecedented promise. This is the most educated generation in American history. Growth in communities of color also makes it the most diverse.

With over 75 million Americans between the ages of 18 and 34, millennials have surpassed baby boomers as America's largest generation.¹ Despite this extraordinary promise, young adults across racial, educational, and economic lines face one of the worst labor markets in over a generation, undercutting their long-term economic mobility. There are major gaps in educational attainment and economic mobility between young people of color and whites. Low-income young people of color are particularly vulnerable. Public resources have been systemically divested from pathways to opportunity for low-income communities. Moreover, millennials are coming of age in a period of mass incarceration; deadly interactions with law enforcement are becoming more visible; and resentment toward immigrants is being rapidly normalized.

Despite these challenges, young adults exhibit incredible resiliency in striving for achievement. They have developed multifaceted methods of resistance that are driving social, political, and economic change around the country. Organic, grassroots movements like United We Dream and the Movement for Black Lives are reshaping the conversation around immigration and justice reform. And the collective political agency of young people, especially young adults of color, was a significant factor in paving the way for the nation's first African American president.

However, far too often, mainstream discourse fails to recognize the contributions and challenges that shape young adults' lives. For example, journalists and researchers frequently start from an incomplete, often deeply distorted, picture of this generation that reinforces stereotypes and perpetuates negative images. The milieu of promise and threats facing young adults calls for new narratives to understand who young people are and how we can craft a broad policy agenda that uncaps their potential.

On May 11, 2017, CLASP partnered with the Ford Foundation to host "Forgotten and Left Behind: Shifting Narratives and Exploring Policy Solutions for Vulnerable Youth and Young Adults." The convening explored relevant data and research; interrogated myths and incomplete narratives about young people; and discussed policy implications and systemic solutions for advancing youth wellbeing and economic mobility. Among the three-dozen participants, the most important voices were those of young leaders. They drove the conversation and provided insights from their work and lived experiences. Other participants included prominent researchers, funders, advocates, federal and state decision makers, and program practitioners. Our objectives were to:

- Develop a shared understanding of who youth and young adults are, where they live, the opportunities to which they have access, and the challenges they are confronting.
- Identify mainstream and alternative narratives on "millennials," along with their implications for policies that impact young people's economic mobility, health, and wellbeing.
- Explore and identify strategies to more effectively center the needs of youth and young adults, particularly low-income young people and young people of color.

What We Learned: A Summary of Key Takeaways

The convening did not aim for consensus or a single point of view. Instead, it initiated a rich conversation drawing on many perspectives. CLASP took away five lessons on how policy stakeholders and advocates can better engage young leaders moving forward:

1. **Engage with young adult leaders through actions, not just words.** This means creating interactions that provide real engagement—including designing the conversation so that it is centered on young people. We can't force a small number of token young adults to fight for attention as part of an agenda that centers on other perspectives. This inclusive approach also requires modeling engagement and career paths for youth and young adults within the governance structure, compensation practices, and training and mentoring practices of nonprofits themselves. The group didn't reach consensus about how to take these steps. But the rich discussion about what they might look like was deeply affecting to young adult participants.

"We must understand how we got to the criminal justice system that we have. Germany redefined their criminal justice system in the wake of the Holocaust. How would we build a justice system today? Closing the 'loophole' in the 13th Amendment must happen."

— Young Adult Leader

2. **During the convening and follow up, young adult leaders expressed strong interest in at least four areas: civic engagement and political power, economic security and mobility, health and healing (including behavioral health and trauma), and justice reform.** These issues surfaced repeatedly in small-group and large-group discussions.
3. **Youth and young adults want policy partners to play a strong role in demystifying public systems, identifying levers that could lead to major change, and understanding how systems can impact young people and their communities.** Health care, higher education, workforce development financing, and criminal justice were highlighted in particular. These public systems can be complex and messy, often reflecting deeply damaging and racist experiences. Despite this sometimes negative history, young people see the need for organizations with expertise on reforming and reimagining systems. Participants urged us to move beyond tinkering around the edges. They recommended dramatic changes that reflect the values and priorities of the communities that systems impact. Participants recognized that, in order to make sweeping changes, we need practical strategies for large-scale reform that directly target systems' failure to respond to demographic change.

“How do we in our position as policy advocates help to bear witness to the good work that is happening all over the country and lift up the voices of the youth and young adults across the country?”

– Convening Participant

4. **Data are very helpful for the conversation.** Several convening participants—particularly young leaders—advocated for more disaggregated information to help them make communities visible and identify and address their needs. Examples included Asian Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian communities; incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people; immigrant and undocumented communities; and LGBTQ young people.

“The availability of data raises questions about how to move systems and address challenges at scale.”

– Convening Participant



“Facts drive change.”

– Convening Participant

5. **Reaching across boundaries between communities to build alliances, and potentially bring in new stakeholders, is valuable but not easy.** Young leaders and “seasoned” researchers and advocates discussed ways to bring low-income young white men into the broader advocacy framework without diminishing the voices of young people of color, who have historically been left out. There was also discussion about expressing young leaders’ lived experiences in a way that’s accessible to people with very different perspectives, such as business leaders and policymakers in (as one participant said) “a blue city in a purple state in a very red region.” The discussion also covered intersectionality, the experiences of young people as they are shaped by multiple identities. These conversations demonstrate a critical need for more dialogue as well as intentional strategy building to determine action steps.

The Convening: A Report

This report provides brief context on the convening, followed by a summary of key data and research; the major themes that emerged over the course of the day, from the perspectives of both young adult leaders and other participants; and potential next steps for continuing the conversation. This convening was not exhaustive, but it meaningfully contributed to the ongoing dialogue about what's needed to secure a stronger, healthier, more just, and more equitable future for young people.

The convening was structured on three core beliefs:

- Reject deficit-based narratives that define young people by their challenges. Instead, adopt an asset-based framework that values young people.
- Explicitly center racial equity, because of the extent to which structural and institutional racism continue to shape outcomes for communities of color, including young leaders.
- Include a broad range of experts who bring value to the conversation, recognizing today's policy and political challenges. Incorporate organizers, policymakers, advocates, researchers, and others who could form the core of comprehensive strategies and partnerships.

The day's conversations reflected these principles, creating a space that privileged the voices of young leaders as equal experts. Other participants thoughtfully listened and imagined what an affirmative agenda for young people would look like. One participant remarked: "The conversation provided a broad perspective and was not limited to one viewpoint." Several young adults shared their appreciation that young adults and policy advocates were treated equally in the space. Another participant said: "Youth involvement must be authentic. Training and best practices are needed because it is easy to have a token young person."

The success of this experiment in the eyes of participants helped shape the first lesson that we identified above: the importance of clear actions that place young leaders at the center of any strategy to engage them in policy activism.

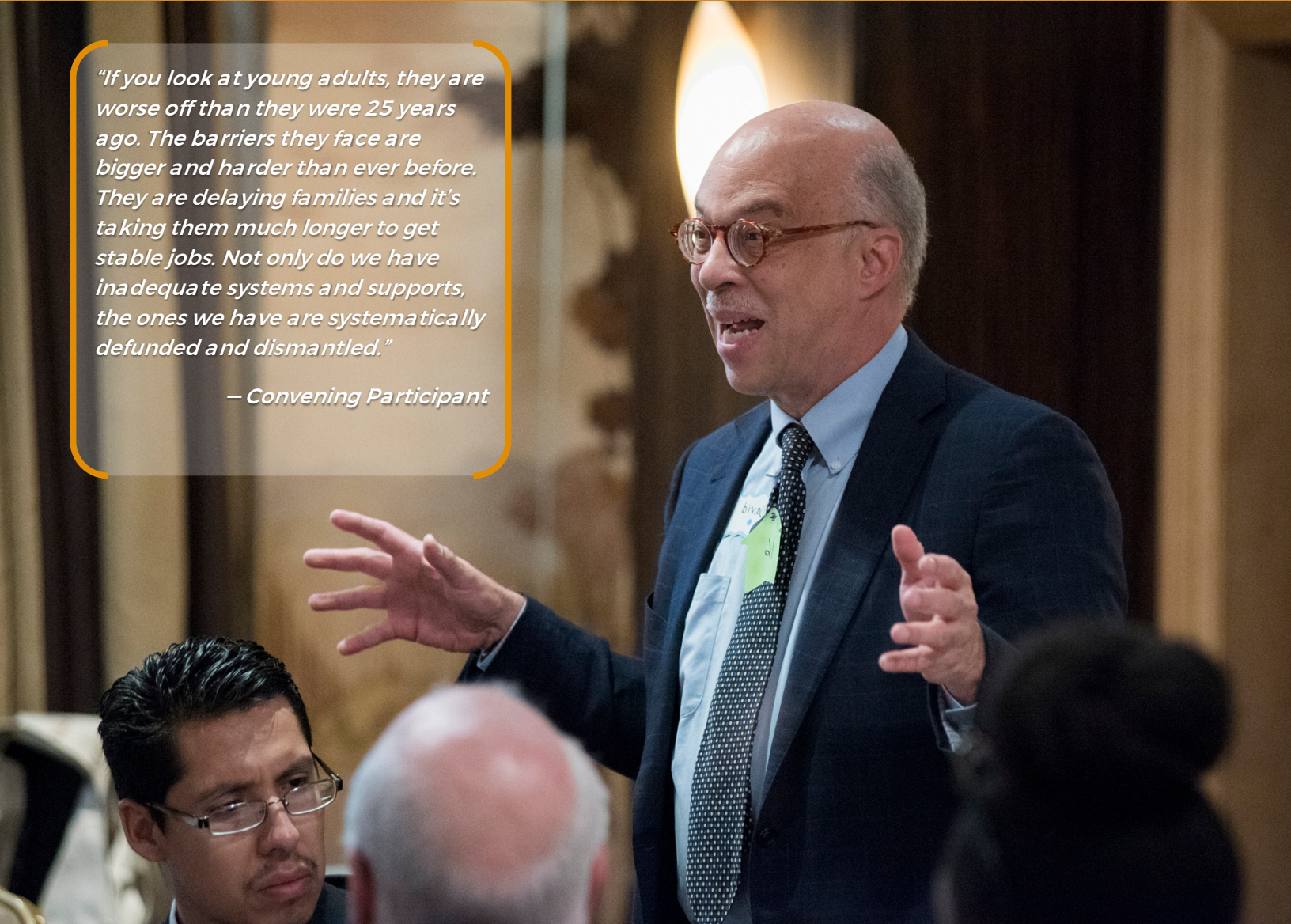
"We have to stop making policy with an oppressive and idealist lens. We have the data on who people are and what their stories are, but we are not modeling or changing our policy to be reflective of that."

— Young Adult Leader



"If you look at young adults, they are worse off than they were 25 years ago. The barriers they face are bigger and harder than ever before. They are delaying families and it's taking them much longer to get stable jobs. Not only do we have inadequate systems and supports, the ones we have are systematically defunded and dismantled."

— Convening Participant



The Research and Data: Who Are Millennials?

Millennials are people born between 1980 and 2000. ² They comprise roughly 23 percent of the U.S. population, making them the largest generational cohort in America. ^{3,4} Their impact on economic and political life is already evident. They comprise 30 percent of the voting-age population and 38 percent of the working-age population. ⁵ By the year 2025, it is estimated that they will make up 75 percent of the American workforce. ⁶

The convening primarily focused on a younger cohort of this population: those under 25. However, older millennials also participated. Our discussion leaders offered insights into demographic information; economic, education, and mobility challenges; attitudes about race and politics; and perceptions of mental health and justice supports.

Millennials have limitless potential but face persistent challenges to their economic security and wellbeing.

More than 16 percent of young adults ages 18 to 24 live in poverty (1 in 6). Among young parents ages 18 to 24, that number rises to approximately 1 in 4 (24.9%).⁷ Additionally, 4.9 million young adults ages 16 to 24 are working or in school. Known as “opportunity youth,” this population represents roughly 12 percent of this age cohort.

Discussant Harry Holzer, economist and professor at Georgetown University’s McCourt School of Public Policy, shared a presentation titled “Prospects for Young Americans: Education, Employment and Economic Mobility.” He identified challenges that contribute to poor labor market outcomes for low-income young adults (both people of color and white men and women):

- Low earnings are due to lack of postsecondary education that has labor market value; no early work experience in the teen and young adult years; changing labor demand and the shrinking of middle-wage occupations/sectors; and too few work supports, such as child care and transportation.
- Additional barriers for non-white workers, including labor market discrimination, social networks, geographic access, criminal records, and noncustodial parenthood (arrests).
- Recent growth in displaced worker populations; non-participation in labor force among prime-age men; dependence on Social Security Disability Income (SSDI)/Supplemental Security Income (SSI); residence in distressed communities/regions; and opioid usage/rising mortality.

In terms of racial diversity, millennials are the most diverse generation yet. Over 44 percent are non-white and 15 percent are immigrants.⁸ This diverse group has varying views and attitudes about politics and civic engagement. Discussant Jordie Davies of the University of Chicago highlighted divergent and aligned views about our current political climate among white and non-white young adults, presenting findings from the GenForward Survey of the Black Youth Project. The GenForward Survey, developed by Professor Cathy Cohen at the University of Chicago, is the first nationally representative survey of over 1,750 young adults ages 18 to 34. The survey shows the influence of race and ethnicity in Millennial attitudes about politics and the world around them.



For example, young people of color still think racism is a major problem.

Three Most important Problems Facing the Country

	African American Adults 18-30	Asian American Adults 18-30	Latina/o Adults 18-30	White Adults 18-30
Most cited problem	Racism (43%)	Healthcare and immigration (30% each)	Immigration (46%)	Healthcare (29%)
Second Most cited problem	Healthcare (25%)	Racism and education (26% each)	Racism (34%)	Environment and climate change (26%)
Third Most cited problem	Education (22%)	Income inequality (25%)	Education (25%)	Education (25%)
N=	516	277	504	505

February 2017 GenForward Survey

Similarly, the majority of non-white survey respondents do not believe Donald Trump is a legitimate president.

Is Donald Trump a Legitimate President?

Is Donald Trump a legitimate or illegitimate President?	African American Adults 18-30	Asian American Adults 18-30	Latina/o Adults 18-30	White Adults 18-30
Legitimate	25%	36%	28%	53%
Illegitimate	74%	60%	71%	47%

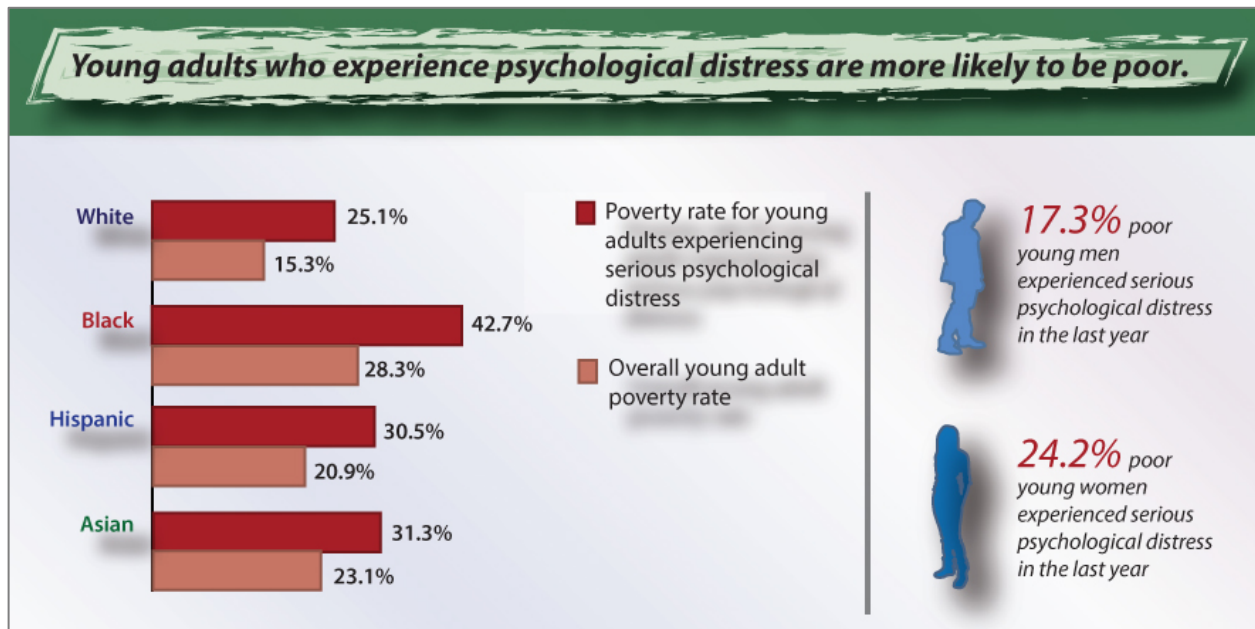
February 2017 GenForward Survey

While the majority of young adults across racial and ethnic lines believe we are on the “wrong track” as a country, many believe politics and government could be effective with some improvements.

In his presentation, Dr. Francisco Villaruel, HDFS associate chair for education and senior fellow and professor at Michigan State University, encouraged participants to consider how our society is supporting young people to deal with issues of race and how our programs, research, and advocacy are changing traditional approaches to

working with youth. Further, he called on us to examine how youth are being oppressed and victimized by institutions and environments, including education and law enforcement/criminal justice systems that contribute to stress and trauma.

Dr. Nia West-Bey, CLASP’s senior policy analyst on youth issues, shared data that support Villaruel’s thinking. In her analysis of findings from focus groups and data from the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, she found that young adults who experience psychological distress are more likely to be poor. She also noted that young people get through their challenges without formal behavioral supports. In her research, young people had a vision of mental health that was affirmative and focused on strengths, not problems. They discussed independence and aspiration.



Mental Health Defined CLASP
 Go-Throughs to Get Through: Low-Income Young Adults and Mental Health #GoThroughs2GetThrough

How do young adults define mental health?

Mental health is defined by strengths, not problems. Young adults shared an affirmative vision of wellness that includes positive attributes, behaviors, and values.

"Things gonna get better. You feel me?"
 -Rural Focus Group Participant

Urban and Rural

Urban

Rural



Young Leaders' Voices: New Challenges, New Opportunities

During the second half of the convening, leading voices from a broad set of policy and grassroots organizations around the country engaged in a “fishbowl” discussion about the challenges young people face and their beliefs about what it will take to meet those challenges. Following the conversation, participants discussed their reactions in small and large discussion groups.

The discussion explored these questions:

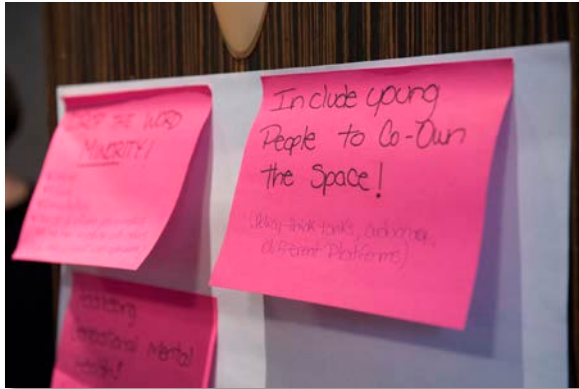
- How do you reclaim the narratives of young people in your work? And more broadly what is our story? Who's included, who's excluded, and how do those narratives shape policy, advocacy, and investments in communities?
- What do you see as the most effective ways to dismantle oppressive systems to achieve meaningful social change?
- How are you and/or your respective organizations thinking about sustainability, especially given the personal, professional, and financial demands of the new political climate? What resources and investments are needed in your work and in your community?



Young Leaders' Voices: Policy Themes

Throughout the fishbowl and follow-up conversations, key policy themes emerged: civic engagement and political power, economic security and mobility, healing, justice, and equity.

Civic Engagement and Political Power



“Don’t exclude youth from civic spaces.”

– Young Adult Leader

Nearly every conversation touched on building political power for young people, including restoring voting rights for returning citizens; getting young leaders on the ballot; and learning from the example of undocumented youth, who built a movement that led to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Data from GenForward supported the perspectives in the room. In the December 2016 survey, a majority of young adults expressed a belief that “politics and government can still work with some improvements.”⁹ In the February 2017 survey, a majority of young people across racial categories reported engaging in at least one political activity during President Trump’s first 50 days.¹⁰

Economic Security and Mobility

Discussants pushed us to think more expansively about youth economic security. Instead of working to get low-income youth into low-wage jobs, we should think about issues of job quality, career pathways, social mobility, and community investment. Parts of the conversation addressed the role of postsecondary credentials and higher education systems in supporting youth economic security. Additionally, many young leaders suggested we look inward to understand the nonprofit sector as an industry. They wanted us to ask ourselves if our hiring and promotion practices are designed to be accessible and equitable.

“When organizations talk about policy, they need to think about internal policies and diversity. Who are in leadership positions? How much are they paying their young people in their staff?”

– Young Adult Leader



Health and Healing

"We need to do more research and evaluate the mental health of youth affected by community and gun violence, which can cause PTSD."

—Young Adult Leader

Themes around healing unfolded along two fronts. First, participants expressed a need to design systems that better connect young people to culturally relevant forms of physical and mental health care. Discussants shared how trauma and exposure to violence manifest themselves across various communities and the ways in which this affects other dimensions of youth wellbeing, including employment and justice involvement. One of the small groups said defending the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid expansion are currently key priorities. Second, participants shared the need for community-level healing, particularly for historical and intergenerational trauma. We confronted questions such as: **What are the cumulative effects of families exposed to racialized violence or identity-based toxic stress?**

"We must also recognize the need for generational mental health and address the stigmas around young people getting access to the supports and care they need."

—Young Adult Leader

Justice

Criminal and juvenile justice reform was a much-discussed topic throughout the convening. Earlier conversations focused on the disparate impact of the justice system on communities of color, individuals with disabilities, and immigrant communities. The rampant disparities and violence endemic to the criminal and juvenile justice systems led several participants to ask what it would look like to entirely redesign those systems, particularly with an eye toward atoning for how those systems have historically operated. What does it take to realize youth justice? In the small group conversations, participants expressed a need to work more intentionally with leaders in those systems to create change from the inside out. Discussants also identified the need for critical discussion around reentry and in particular about a reentry framework that includes comprehensive education and employment services, wrap-around supports, and ballot access.

“To combat the system of punishment, we need radical inclusion and partnering with the people being affected by the policies discussed.”

– Young Adult Leader



Young Leaders' Voices: "Challenging the How"



"Spaces with no young people talking about young people are not effective. Nothing for us, without us!" – Young Adult Leader

Young leaders pointed out clear challenges in policy and advocacy spaces. They noted the lack of youth voices in conversations that shape policies affecting youth and young adults. Specific challenges include:

- Cultural barriers (clothing, food, and conversation signal whether someone is welcome and whether a space is designed for them);
- Lack of room for advancement;
- Lack of generational change;
- Lack of mentorship, with a particular need for older adult leaders to mentor young leaders; and
- Tokenism of youth, which leaves youth feeling excluded and their experiences invalidated.

Young leaders also had a clear understanding of what it would take to combat challenges. Participants suggested many new approaches:

- Require advocacy organizations to consult with the impacted community when making recommendations for policy/programmatic changes;
- Focus on preventive, not just reactionary, approaches to policy and organizational challenges;
- Build spaces for diverse young leaders to come together under a common cause;
- Encourage organizations leading movements to model the values for which they advocate;
- Include young people in the executive leadership of advocacy organizations;
- Place more value on young people's labor, including paying interns;
- Have trainings on best practices for youth engagement;
- Promote community education and create a pipeline of engagement;

- Encourage multisector collaboration in shaping policy; and
- Create spaces and opportunities to engage youth in co-owning and co-creating solutions to issues that affect the youth and young adult community.

Integrated approaches can overcome the persistent challenges that youth and young adults face in policy and advocacy spaces. The question is: how should youth advocates incorporate these approaches within their organizations?

Framing to Action: Insights from Young Leaders, Researchers, Policymakers, and Advocates

- *What do we mean when we talk about youth policy?*
- *Are there common outcomes or elements that jurisdictions, researchers, funders, or evaluators should use when designing, implementing, and evaluating youth policy?*
- *Are there core components of policies that can bridge the gaps between state and federal agencies and institutions?*

After hearing the research evidence, data, and young people's lived experiences, many participants noted a shift in their thinking about the millennial "narrative" framework. The convening was too short to build consensus around any single action or theme or resolve underlying areas of tension and differing views. However, it did produce rich conversations that, even without agreement, carry a broad set of implications for policymakers and advocates invested in young people's wellbeing. It is also important to note the unique connection shared among the young adult leaders and seasoned advocates. This affirmed youth perspectives and their value as experts.

Insights from the convening were not issue specific. Rather, they reflect the ongoing process of moving from narrative reframing to social change while grappling with inherent tensions. In addition to the above-mentioned takeaways, following are key points that emerged from the conversation.

Role of Largescale Systems and Policy Change: Initially, young leaders challenged the understanding of systems-based approaches to supporting youth. In their personal experiences, these systems had marginalized them or otherwise caused harm. Some young leaders perceived solutions, such as community-based programs, as separate from large systems. In the larger group, some participants challenged this perception. They suggested large-scale decisions about funding and structure make success possible or impossible for local programs.



“How do we move through and across grassroots action, research, and policy change?”

– Convening Participant

Addressing Language and Understanding Demographic Change: Participants noted that systems have trouble keeping up with and responding to demographic changes, posing unique challenges to our most diverse generation to date. Many youth-serving systems were designed with a different type of participant in mind. Their failure to adapt diminishes their ability to support low-income youth, especially young people of color.

“We have to stop making policy with an oppressive and idealist lens. We have the data on who people are and what their stories are, but we are not modeling or changing our policy to be reflective of that.”

– Young Adult Leader

“We focus on the school-to-prison pipeline, but the other focus should also be on the school-to-deportation pipeline. Criminalization of folks of color has changed in this administration. What does this means for young folks who might not be citizens in this country?”

– Young Adult Leader

Building New Stakeholders and Audiences: Over the course of the day, we heard the need to move beyond speaking only with allies and traditional partners. Instead, we need to build relationships with new and/or unconventional partners. However, opinions varied about the best way to accomplish that, including striking a balance between adding new stakeholders and grounding work in the most affected communities. Participants also debated how much we can compromise to achieve a goal without “selling out.”

For example, one small group discussed creating space for left, right, and moderate people to express themselves openly while focusing the conversation on values, not issues. This approach has been effective in advancing criminal justice reform in conservative states.

Informing Research: Intentional Inclusion of Young People: Several participants called for more community-centered, participatory research practices, arguing that the questions asked in qualitative and quantitative data collection efforts should be intentionally inclusive and in service of communities, particularly the most vulnerable.

“The conversation clearly reveals that we need to infiltrate these elite spaces and include young people as co-researchers and thought-leaders and towards co-ownership of decision-making spaces.”

— Convening Participant



Conclusion

What emerged from our convening was a very strong interest in continuing to provide spaces that accommodate tensions, raise questions, and build a foundation for more detailed discussions around strategies, tactics, and policy.

Following is a synthesis of suggested next steps:

- **Create spaces that foster the co-creation of solutions. Focus on:**
 - Educating young people about how federal, state and local policies affect them.
 - Building opportunities to bring youth voice and representation into national policy fights through young adult networks and/or interdisciplinary coalitions/alliances focused on specific policy issues.
 - Investing in transformative, not transactional, leadership. Stress the importance of sustained relationships between policy advocates and young leaders.
- **Channel frustration into action.**
 - Acknowledge the changed political context
 - Understand how to embrace people who want to do meaningful work.
- **Address narratives around fear; be intentional about combatting and understanding implicit bias, openly discussing whiteness, and institutional racism.**
 - Develop language that does not pit one group of youth against another.
 - Abolish use of the word “minority” to describe people of color.
 - Develop capacity to talk to rural and disenfranchised white communities, including white young men.
- **Apply a layered, long-game approach to creating equitable systems from precinct-level organizing to federal policy change.**
 - Leverage policies and opportunities that currently exist.
 - Address local and state policies that don’t require legislation and challenge how institutions interpret and implement policy.
 - Demand accountability at all levels of government, recognizing there is room to evaluate agency-level decision making and drive change.
- **Create opportunities to innovate.**
 - While alliances with older advocates and organizers are needed, movement by and for youth is essential.
 - Best practices and training are needed to make youth engagement more authentic.
- **Redefine civic participation.**
 - Deliberately include and understand the role of family and community.
 - Build tables that intentionally shift power and develop mutual interest around analyzing systems that enable inequity.
 - Be intentional about including young people of color in civic spaces.
 - Invest in voter participation and uphold democratic principles. This includes focusing on undocumented immigrants and disenfranchised returning citizens.

We live in a moment when systems are ripe for change. Despite serious threats to low-income young adults and young adults of color, participants expressed clear commitment to equal justice, economic mobility, and healing for (and with) youth and young adults and their families. It is equally clear that we must do our work differently to effectively create change.

“We cannot allow stereotypes to limit anyone's opportunities to excel.”

– Convening Participant



There were points of tension and criticism among advocates, researchers, policymakers, and organizers who were in the room, particularly around the need to provide space for authentic partnership with and leadership development for young people. However, they shared a willingness to listen and learn from each other's voices.

“Those who are closest to the problem are often closest to the solution.”

– Young Adult Leader

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Endnotes

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