



Youth Transition Funders Group

Investing in the Well-Being and Well-Becoming of America's Young People: Recommendations for Philanthropy, Policy, and Practice

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May 2021

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Older adolescence and emerging adulthood are pivotal periods of growth and development.

During this time frame, young people experience distinct developmental milestones that are critical for becoming healthy, connected, and productive adults.¹

This developmental phase is rich with possibility and promise as young people develop and understand their identities, begin to make their own decisions, pursue education and employment goals, explore and adopt a values system, and develop and deepen their relationships. Some young people become parents during this time, charged with the responsibilities of caring for their own children’s health and development.

During this time of growth and transition, young people can also experience increased vulnerability and risk. They may become disconnected from family, school, or work. They may lack access to physical and mental health care. They may engage in risky or unsafe behaviors or environments. They may experience homelessness or housing instability, the child welfare or justice systems, or—as is often the case—some combination.² Young people of color experience the compounding and pervasive impacts of racialized trauma and systemic racism.

During this period of possibility, exploration, vulnerability, and risk, adolescents and young adults experience significant brain development, as much as during early childhood. Research clearly shows the importance of this life stage, and how profoundly maltreatment and trauma can alter brain development, quality of life, and future success. The brain continues to develop into emerging adulthood—up to age 26 and, in some instances, beyond—providing a critical window of opportunity to support healing and build resilience, as well as to develop the skills, habits, and attitudes needed now and in the future.



Young people are growing up and transitioning into adulthood during especially challenging times.

Moreover, the same neurological changes that prepare adolescents to take risks also present opportunities for them to learn from mistakes, become more adaptable, and acquire strong executive functioning skills—including self-regulation and critical thinking—as well as core coping skills. This is especially important given that young people are growing up in a period of rapid change and volatility, which will follow them into adulthood.³

What happens during this significant developmental period—which spans more than a decade, typically lasting from the onset of puberty into the mid-20s—has long-lasting implications on a young person’s present well-being and future well-becoming. For those farthest from opportunity or most held back, navigating this developmental phase can be particularly challenging. Without healthy internal and external resources and supports, it can be hard to deal with anticipated life challenges—in a learning environment, living situation, or in the workplace—as well as unexpected and unprecedented challenges, such as a global health pandemic or spikes in racial violence.

Well-being or “wellness” is a human condition of thriving, characterized by health and fulfillment.

Wellness is not a static state of being, rather a continual developmental process. The process of **“well-becoming”** is about becoming prepared to experience that state in the future.⁴

To move toward wellness and well-becoming, young people need strong relationships, healthy family and family-like connections, and social networks to manage their health, to succeed in school, to locate a place to live, and to begin and advance in a career. They need ample and equitable opportunities to acquire new knowledge, develop and practice new skills, and safely struggle or fail. They need the supports to succeed personally, socially, and economically.

Without well-lit pathways to get back on track when bumps in the road arise, young people can and will get left behind. **Well-being and well-becoming have to do with the levels and quality of supports and opportunities young people experience, to what extent they are supported by nurturing families and communities, and the ways in which public systems, policies, and practices are crafted to support their positive growth and development.**

Young people are growing up and transitioning into adulthood during especially challenging times. The cost of inaction, inadequate investments, and the continued perpetuation of historic inequities is great.



The Impact of Structural Racism on Well-Being and Well-Becoming

The cumulative and compounding effects of an array of factors that systematically privilege white people and disadvantage people of color have permeated our country for centuries and continue unchecked. The violence and murders of so many people of color at the hands of law enforcement and violence by public agencies against countless others are manifestations of systemic racism. Structural racism is a root cause of many challenges facing young people of color across America, leading to preventable hardship, disparate life outcomes, and even reduced life expectancy. It establishes disadvantages for young people of color, and then exacerbates intersectional oppressions based on gender, sexual identity, immigration status, and ability.

Due to deeply embedded structural racism, youth-serving systems and settings often harm and fail young people of color, both deliberately and unintentionally. Young people of color are disproportionately represented in child welfare and youth justice systems, with rates increasing at pace with deepened involvement. Young people of color receive disparate treatment while in youth-serving systems, leading to higher placements in foster care and justice group settings, harsher disciplinary actions and criminalization at school, hyper-surveillance in the community, and more severe sentences within the youth and adult criminal justice systems. These disparities are most severe for Black young people.

Trauma from racial injustice and racial violence have pervasive and significant impacts on young people of color. America's anti-Blackness is a persistent and severe threat to young people's well-being. Well-being and well-becoming will only be achieved with an intentional commitment and effective action to achieve racial justice and the abolition of the policies and practices that perpetuate racism. These policies and practices fail to provide supports and opportunities for young people of color, and, at worst, they deeply jeopardize their well-being and lives.

Within this context, young people of color continue to experience accelerated damage to their well-being and overall life outcomes. African American, Native American, and Latinx youth face ongoing systemic barriers in housing, educational and employment opportunities, access to health and mental health care services, and access to wealth and financial supports. They also face over-surveillance by child welfare and law enforcement. As a result, young people of color can experience negative outcomes at rates higher than national averages. Also within this context, we have witnessed the strength, reliance, and determination of young people to organize, change, and dismantle the systems that harm them.

Raised in Recessions and Survivors of a Global Pandemic

Today's young people are experiencing economic instability and insecurity which have been deeply exacerbated and illuminated by the **COVID-19 pandemic**. Young adults, especially those already vulnerable, have been especially harmed and held back during this global health crisis and the resulting economic crisis. The global pandemic exacerbated racial and economic disparities within communities and health systems. Additionally, this is the second major economic crisis these young people have experienced in their lifetimes. Today's young people are experiencing higher poverty rates and unemployment rates than adults, nearly twice as high as the national average. Since the onset of COVID-19, young people of color have experienced unemployment rates above 50 percent.

In addition to unprecedented unemployment, young people have faced many other pandemic-related challenges, from virtual school environments, to displacement from college campuses and workforce programs, to the need to care for family members, to dealing with the realities of unsafe and unstable housing. Young parents faced all of this uncertainty and more for themselves and their children. Young people in custody experienced added fears for their physical and mental health due to confinement and isolation during the pandemic.



Leading with Well-Being: The Role of Philanthropic and Public Leaders

How philanthropy and public and private leaders craft policies and practices to support youth and young adults, particularly those hardest hit and most held back, can have **significant, lasting, and transformative impacts** for these young people and for creating a **productive and equitable society**.

We cannot continue with business as usual. Narrow and uncoordinated approaches have historically not succeeded in significantly improving outcomes for the nation's most vulnerable young people.

To truly support the healthy development and successful futures of young people, system leaders, policymakers, and public and private funders need a **common framework to guide transformational initiatives and investments directed toward the well-being of young people**. We have seen growing interest from policymakers, funders, and practitioners to lead with well-being to better guide investments to support improved outcomes for young people, especially those most vulnerable. While many public and private funders agree that comprehensive and aligned approaches are useful and necessary, the challenge of how to develop a common set of definitions and approaches through the operationalization of a shared well-being and well-becoming framework remains a significant barrier to progress. **A comprehensive, science-based concept of “well-being” can serve as a powerful coagulating agent to support that alignment.**

What do we want youth-serving systems to look like, today and in the future?

Most recently, public and private leaders' national conversations have highlighted the need to move toward transforming our current approaches to serving young people and families toward a system that is centered on young people and their well-being, justice, equity, and healing. As we consider the history and evolution of child welfare, education, youth justice, health, and employment, **the question becomes—what do we want youth-serving systems to look like, today and in the future?** This journey of transformation necessarily requires prioritizing wellness based on principles and commitments that are holistic and life-course-oriented.

This document is intended to support those efforts, offering definitions, reframed language, and organizing concepts that can be used in any transformational effort. Note that this document is being published at a particularly momentous point in time and that evolutions and upgrades will continue.



Youth Transition Funders Group

About YTFG and This Framework

The Youth Transition Funder's Group (YTFG) is a national network of foundations whose mission is to help all youth make a successful transition to adulthood by age 25. This well-being investment framework was developed by our members in partnership with leading researchers, policy leaders, and young adults.⁵ Building upon work underway in the fields of child welfare, youth justice, education, employment, and health, YTFG sought to harness our network's collective experience and growing knowledge and understanding of youth who experience multiple public systems to create a **unifying framework for all youth-serving systems and settings** to work toward the well-being and well-becoming of our nation's most vulnerable young people.

The first version of this framework was published in 2015. Since then, YTFG members and partners have learned much about the continued importance of well-being and well-becoming as organizing concepts and can now offer critical updates to our original thinking and the needs of the field in order to fully operationalize this type of holistic approach. YTFG's mission focuses on supporting older youth and young adults, and this framework was developed specifically with these young people in mind. However, the definitions and constructs of well-being, and the associated policy and practice recommendations, are relevant across developmental stages. **YTFG encourages the use and modification of this framework to support the healthy growth and development of children and families across all ages and stages of life.**

This document begins by highlighting the critical relationship between racial justice and well-being. It then presents a narrative exploration of the role and responsibility of each youth-serving system to support the well-being and well-becoming of youth and young adults. Next, it presents the updated framework across five key domains, highlighting the roles and responsibilities of families, communities, private sector partners, and public systems. Finally, this document offers a set of concrete and actionable recommendations for youth-serving system leaders, policymakers, and public and private funders for improving policy and practice to support the well-being and well-becoming of young people throughout adolescence and into adulthood.

ytfg.org

Current Well-Being Outcomes for Older Youth and Young Adults

15% of young people do not graduate on time.

Among American Indian and African American high school students, more than one in four and one in five do not graduate on time.⁶ Overall, 15 percent of young people in the US do not graduate high school on time.

1 out of 9 young people are not in school or working.

1 out of every 9 young people in America (4.4 million young people) ages 16 to 24 are not in school or working. This number continues to rise as the pandemic continues.⁷

Youth unemployment hit a new high in 2020.

The youth unemployment rate is consistently double the national average. In 2020 it hit a high of 27 percent.⁸

Over 20,000 young people aged out of the foster care system in 2020.

Almost 100,000 young people between the ages of 14 and 20 are in foster care. Over 20,000 young people aged out of the foster care system in 2020, without a permanent legal connection to a caring adult.⁹

20% of youth who age out of foster care do not have a high school diploma by age 25.

Twenty percent of youth who age out of foster care do not have a high school diploma or a GED by age 25. Less than 8 percent graduate college.¹⁰

Over 43,000 young people under the age of 18 are in correctional or residential facilities.

These facilities are frequently dangerous, ineffective, and unnecessary.¹¹

Black youth and young adults in America are far more likely than their white peers to be arrested and detained for any crime. America detains and incarcerates young people at nearly five times the rates of other countries, even though juvenile violent crime arrest rates are only marginally higher in the United States than in other nations.¹²

Coming of Age in Crisis: Better Understanding the COVID Generation

When today's young adults started elementary school, the Great Recession was underway. Many families were affected, and as a result, a number of these young people got their start in school during a period of economic instability and crisis. Now, they are entering adulthood, the job market, and postsecondary education in the midst of a pandemic, economic crisis, increased racial violence, and political upheaval. Just as their transition into school was defined by economic crisis and disruption, so is their transition into adulthood.

The impacts are widespread and are already playing out. This generation of young people is the first in modern history to desire economic stability over mobility. There is a fear that prosperity is too hard to achieve and that the most one can hope for is a reliable job and a steady paycheck. Although entrepreneurial, this generation is less interested than others in pursuing their own ventures, like starting a new business.¹³ Financial ups and downs have defined many childhoods, especially for those who were already in vulnerable situations.¹⁴ Among older youth and young adults, this has led to millions of young people becoming disconnected from school and work. The consequences could be dire. Of young people we spoke with, all said they struggle to get by, feeling like life is hard, even if you do the right things to advance economically, including going to college and having a job. For them, the goal is a "good life," free of the risk of the "rug being pulled out" from under you.

This has also shown up in the mental health and emotional challenges many young people face. Depression and anxiety have skyrocketed, with many youth-serving systems and families ill-equipped to understand and address mental health challenges. Uncertainty, fear of the future, traumatic experiences, and situational stressors—such as the isolation and emotional turbulence of COVID-19—have brought new social, emotional, and mental health concerns. Anecdotally, young people involved in public systems, such as youth justice or child welfare, or who have experienced housing instability, seem to struggle the most.

All of this has been most pronounced for young people of color, especially those who are poor. Black and brown youth have been disproportionately harmed by the consequences of COVID-19, while simultaneously dealing with the life-threatening and life-shaping impacts of American racism. Sometimes called the "triple pandemic," centuries-old racism, today's economic crisis, and the global health crisis are all major threats to the overall well-being and well-becoming of young people of color, and subsequently the entire COVID generation.



The Science of Adolescence

Adolescence and emerging adulthood is a period of time when there is a heightened sensitivity to people and places. What happens to us and around us during this life stage has a long-term impact on overall life outcomes. It is also a time when the accrual of racism, prejudice, and bias flares among and between peers and communities, and shows up in the availability of advantages and opportunities.

This plays out in crucial differences in the quality and availability of health care, housing, education, and employment. As young people age, prejudicial action and exclusionary practice intensify and increase the likelihood of racial violence, police brutality, and victimization. All of this affects a young person's development, sense of safety and self, and ability to thrive.

These realities challenge identity development and threaten health, safety, and economic opportunities. What happens in adolescence strongly influences what is possible in adulthood. Present-day levels of well-being drive well-becoming.

Adolescence and emerging adulthood is when the brain is constantly wired and rewired by experience. The heightened sensitivity to people and places happens because the brain is as responsive to environment and experience as it was during early childhood. While adolescence may be a time of adversity, it can also be a period for healing, building resilience, and adaptability. Young people are impressionable and responsive to change in ways that can benefit them. This is a time when young people learn, relearn, and unlearn.

This means adolescence requires our deep investment and intervention. Today's young people have spent their whole lives living in disruption and rapid change. They are being shaped by centuries-old challenges and never-before-seen complexities. There are deep divisions and disparities that continue to separate across racial and class lines. This volatility and complexity will follow them into their futures. They need economic relief and economic mobility, social capital and caring relationships, and competencies and credentials.

Because of this, philanthropy and policy and practice strategies must reflect the realities young people face. Those experiences inform neurological wiring, basic functioning, and future possibilities. This understanding and subsequent informed action are essential for this generation's overall growth and development, identity, well-being, and well-becoming.



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The Relationship Between Racial Justice and Well-Being

Racial and ethnic equity is a foundational condition for young people's well-being and well-becoming.

The detrimental impact of racism across life domains is a public health crisis. The evidence of the impact of racism on health indicators and outcomes is undeniable. While impacts are largely attributed to the experience of people of color in relationship to their physical and mental health, there are similar connections to other well-being indicators and life domains. Disparate access to education, wealth, physical safety, and fairness and justice is traumatizing. For Black and brown young people, trauma is constant, compounded, and historic.

This injustice and trauma is recognized and felt by young people early on. The National Academy of Sciences, in **Reforming Juvenile Justice, A Developmental Approach**, suggests that adolescents have a well-formed sense of justice and fairness, and they react to injustice in ways that are developmentally appropriate but may exacerbate struggles.

The racial violence and uprisings in 2020 drew attention to long-standing inequities and highlighted the need to act with urgency to dismantle ineffective and often harmful systems and to eliminate structural racism in all institutions. The glaring health disparities of COVID-19, the deaths of African Americans at the hands of police, and the improper care and physical restraint of youth in group care institutions have further exposed historic, systemic inequities. Horrific and continued examples of law enforcement using deadly force on Black men (who are twice as likely to be killed by police as white men) not only heighten this injustice but are traumatic to watch in and of themselves.

Public agencies are often reactive and punitive, and they can initiate or exacerbate rather than heal trauma. Further, they operate by racist, classist, and pervasive systemic factors that have led to the inequitable distribution of resources and low-quality support services for children and families of color.^{15 16}

To achieve racial equity, we must be proactive and strengths-based in supporting young people, families, and communities. This requires a seismic culture shift, and the unlearning of existing practices and beliefs that are deeply rooted in the approaches of all systems that serve and support youth, families, and communities.

Well-being is inextricably linked to racial justice, and an intentional focus on that unlearning process to dismantle racist policies and practices is essential for realizing the well-being and well-becoming of young people of color. Once dismantled, we must embrace new learning to strategically replace and rebuild what has been eliminated.

In considering young people's well-being, we must value and validate the diverse life domains and contexts of young people, as well as adopt a life-course perspective that recognizes residual and long-term impacts resulting from current and historic systemic actions and inactions.

Youth-serving systems and settings that promote both well-being and racial justice must develop capacity in the following areas:

Policy

Systems clearly analyze existing and proposed policy with a racial equity lens; policies that create disparate impacts are identified, along with access and results; policymakers understand structural racism, implicit bias, and America's history of racial oppression, and can contemplate the unintended consequences.

Data Analysis/ Research

Data is used for decision-making, and research can be disaggregated by race and ethnicity. Data analysts and researchers use racial equity analysis tools in their respective work. Data analysts and researchers have a clear understanding of structural and institutional racism and implicit bias, and they understand how data has been used to perpetuate and inflame racial injustice.

Trauma-Responsive

An accurate understanding of trauma, including historical and generational trauma, is developed and incorporated into system reform and transformation efforts, policy development, professional development, and service delivery. Systems working with people of color have an intention toward healing from trauma, thus being more than trauma-informed and moving toward being trauma-responsive and healing-centered. Understanding trauma must also be a central component of prevention efforts (including maltreatment, violence, poverty, health/mental health efforts).

Justice

Racial justice is clearly defined and integrated into policy, service delivery, and systems transformation efforts. Access to a sensitive, fair, equitably-resourced justice system is possible, ensuring that young people can thrive in communities and engage with organizations that understand the implications of inequities and injustice and intentionally support practice and policy efforts designed to eliminate both.

Advocacy

System leaders, policymakers and service providers intentionally build their skills and experience in racial justice work. Level-setting efforts across system actors should be incorporated to ensure a basic understanding of structural racism and violence. An advocacy agenda focused on eliminating racial injustice and inequity should be considered across all human services systems.

History

Policymakers and systems leaders must have a keen understanding of the historical context through which their respective systems have evolved. It is not enough to start from the present because structural racism is both insidious and resilient. Leaders are prepared to unlearn and deconstruct harmful policies and practices that have evolved through our racialized history. Systems seek to avoid a blame or defensive polarity and lean into a frame of responsibility. Through an evolving understanding of history, leaders can look to expose and examine root causes of harmful practice and policy, and they can offer insights that will inoculate progress and momentum in achieving racial justice from inevitable backlash.

Lived Experience

Youth, family, and community expertise is necessary at all decision-making levels. Authentic engagement of those with lived experience should be built into visioning, strategy development, implementation, and evaluation efforts. Recognizing the strength, expertise, and power of families and community is not a threat; rather it is an asset, and level-setting power and engagement with professionals yield authentic engagement.

Youth Well-Being and Well-Becoming Across Public Systems

Comprehensive attention to holistic and lifelong well-being for youth and young adults is everybody's responsibility. Systems serving children, youth, and families each have a particular focus, mission, and realm of responsibility, whether that is educating young people, supporting their physical or mental health, maintaining their safety, or ensuring community safety. But no one system has responsibility for the whole young person.

While systems do place a value on overall well-being, the specific value and role of each system as it relates to achieving well-being is often poorly defined. The fact that no one system specifically "owns," articulates, or identifies well-being as a critical and foundational value for the young people it serves demonstrates the challenge funders, community leaders, and advocates face when seeking to engage these systems around the vital need for investments in improved well-being outcomes.

All young people interface with multiple systems, including health care and schools. For vulnerable youth with trauma, abuse, neglect, and/or social-emotional challenges, the number of systems they interface with explodes exponentially. With the introduction of each new system, hurdles and barriers to well-being arise. When multiple systems are involved in a young person's life, at best, barriers to well-being are created as a result of a lack or a perceived lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities, or a lack of communication and coordination between various systems. Racist policies and practices embedded in these systems deeply harm and disadvantage young people of color. When a lack of clarity exists, accountability for well-being outcomes drops. Each system retreats to its siloed responsibilities and functions without a clear understanding of how or if its duties and roles relate to the overall well-being of the young person involved.

Every system that serves youth and young adults has a role and a responsibility to support comprehensive, holistic, and lifelong well-being. **Clearly articulating those roles and responsibilities benefits not only individual young people who are served, but also the ability of each system to be able to help young people achieve goals and experience well-being.**

Well-Being in the Education System

Education systems and programs are vital environments for young people to learn and connect; acquire new academic and social-emotional knowledge, skills, and attitudes; develop social relationships that benefit them now and later in life; and, ideally, to experience career pathways that prepare students for the future of work. Attention to well-being and well-becoming by educational leaders provides several significant benefits, including the following:

- Positive impact on academic, developmental, and future employment and economic outcomes.
- Improvement of school climate and student safety.
- Greater job satisfaction for educators and other staff.
- Reduced use of costly and restrictive services; and
- Increased family and youth satisfaction.¹⁷



Well-Being in Job Training and Employment

In this competitive, strained, and rapidly changing job market, young people may have difficulty preparing for and sustaining a career even if they have the educational credentials needed for success. Credentials signify completion of schooling but not always readiness for the job. On the front end of a young person's working life, potential workers may need to have more developed social and emotional skills and social connections to be able to get a job and keep it. They should expect to experience multiple types of work and to cycle through a number of different jobs and careers across long working lives. There is no one system responsible for the workforce-readiness of young people. Instead, some—but not all—districts and schools provide career pathways programming and work-based learning. Local workforce boards offering summer jobs programs and additional training programs for young people who meet eligibility criteria, typically those who are low-income and older than 16. Vocational rehabilitation is another source of job training, specifically for young people with disabilities.

Clearly articulating those roles and responsibilities benefits not only individual young people who are served, but also the ability of each system to be able to help young people achieve goals and experience well-being.

Well-Being in Child Welfare

In the child welfare system, well-being is closely tied to the achievement of critical system outcomes, including safety and permanency. For example, research has documented the critical interplay between placement stability and social and emotional well-being. Youth who experience fewer placement changes generally experience fewer school changes, less trauma and distress, and fewer mental health and behavioral health problems. They are also likely to achieve better academic outcomes and having a lasting positive relationship with an adult.¹⁸ Conversely, experiencing multiple placements has been associated with an increase in externalized behavior problems. There is a growing recognition that trauma-informed attention to social and emotional well-being provides a strong foundation for improved placement stability and leads to improvements in other youth outcomes.¹⁹

In child welfare, well-being is typically only measured by access to services. However, great opportunity exists for child welfare systems to actively promote and support a fuller concept of well-being and well-becoming beyond the construct of service provision. The Family First Act provides new opportunities and incentives to focus on well-being through prevention. Prioritizing the development of healthy relationships, ensuring the agency of older youth in decision-making, and creating affirming settings for identity formation are critical ways to promote well-being for older youth and young adults within policy and practice.



Well-Being in Youth Justice

Many policies and practices within the youth justice system are deeply harmful to young people's well-being, and young people of color experience disproportionate engagement and harm within those systems. In recent years, many reforms sought to lessen involvement with justice systems that harm young people's well-being. These reforms included limiting direct filing to adult systems, Raise the Age campaigns, and efforts to close youth prisons. These policy successes are also demonstrating ways to improve both youth and community safety outcomes.

While preventing and limiting the involvement of young people with the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems are critical strategies, it is time to disinvest, shrink and ultimately eliminate the youth justice system as we know it today by shifting from law enforcement and punishment to community support and healing, thus reducing the harm done to our young people and their communities and promoting and contributing to well-being outcomes.

Principles of Youth and Young Adult Well-Being

The well-being framework and the recommendations included in this report are founded on the following eight principles.

Value Young People

All young people are valuable. Leaders should believe, expect, and speak the best about the young people they serve. Young people should be valued decision-makers in their own well-being and well-becoming.

Pursue Equity and Anti-Racism

Young people of color and other young people who are systematically held back—including young people who experience homelessness, those who are pregnant or parenting, immigrant, and LGBTQ youth—deserve equitable opportunities, experiences, and well-being. Policies and practices must demonstrate intentional efforts to identify, address, and mitigate racial, cultural, gender, and other disparities among young people.

Insist on Youth Voice and Agency

What young people think and feel matters. Young people should be supported in expressing and realizing their dreams and goals, defining well-being for themselves, developing decision-making skills, and, in developmentally appropriate ways, exercising control over their journey to adulthood.

Be Developmentally Appropriate/Science Informed

All young people have a right to childhood and adolescence, which includes the ability to make and learn from mistakes. Young people should be treated as young people, not adults. Science related to youth and adolescent development should drive practice decisions and policy development.

Focus on the Whole Person

Well-being requires a focus on the whole young person (not a segment or part) and their relationship to communities where they live, work, and learn. A focus on well-being requires embracing a life-course perspective.

Center Family and Community

Policies and practices must center around, include, and respect family and community.

Ensure Fairness and Multiple Chances

All young people deserve opportunities to heal from trauma. Policies and practices should be fundamentally fair. Healing-centered, balanced, and restorative approaches to justice, which reduce or eliminate collateral consequences, should be the norm when systems respond to adolescent behaviors or needs. Use of harmful practices such as over-surveillance, incarceration, and prolonged probation should be reduced and ultimately eliminated.

Prioritize Youth Workers and Volunteers

The people who serve youth and young adults are essential workers, and they need adequate resources, training, and ongoing support to do their work. Workforce well-being and organizational health are important considerations.

Framework for Youth and Young Adult Well-Being and Well-Becoming

Well-being is a human condition of thriving, characterized by health and fulfillment.

Well-being is not a state of being that one achieves and lives in for a lifetime. Defining for oneself, moving toward, and achieving well-being is a continual developmental process beginning at infancy and continuing throughout life. Indeed, well-being is the state of health and fulfillment, while the term **“well-becoming” is about being prepared to experience that state in the future.**²⁰

To move toward well-becoming, young people need opportunities, supports, and relationships to develop essential skill sets and resources to navigate life’s ups and downs in healthy ways that work, enabling them to deal with challenges, to see opportunity in the future, and to realize success.

This framework offers an ecological model for defining both the necessary elements for the experience of well-being and the process of well-becoming within five domains, and specifically geared toward older youth and young adults.²¹ Well-being cannot be achieved in the absence of full inclusion in a fair, just, and equitable society. Equity and inclusion are essential aspects of well-being, and principles of equity are infused into each domain, as well as being included as a distinct and critical domain.

The five well-being and well-becoming domains are as follows:



Physical Health and Safety

All young people should have the opportunity and supports—through family, community, and public systems—to maximize their physical health, strength, and functioning, be physically safe and free from violence, abuse, and neglect and have basic needs met.



Cognitive and Mental Health

All young people should have the opportunity and supports—through family, community, and public systems—to experience continuous cognitive health and intellectual growth and to optimize mental health, managing any mental health issues as they arise.



Social and Emotional Well-Being

All young people should have the opportunity and social supports—from family, community, and public systems—to cultivate a strong and resilient self-identity and supportive and nurturing relationships.



Economic Well-Being

All young people should have the opportunity and supports—through families, community, the private sector, and public systems—to obtain the learning and work opportunities needed to experience economic security and advancement and to accrue the financial and social capital needed to afford and access quality education, employment, and housing.



Racial and Ethnic Equity

All young people should have the opportunity—through family, community, and public systems—to be treated with fairness and respect, have equitable access to opportunity, and have their wellness not determined by race or ethnicity.

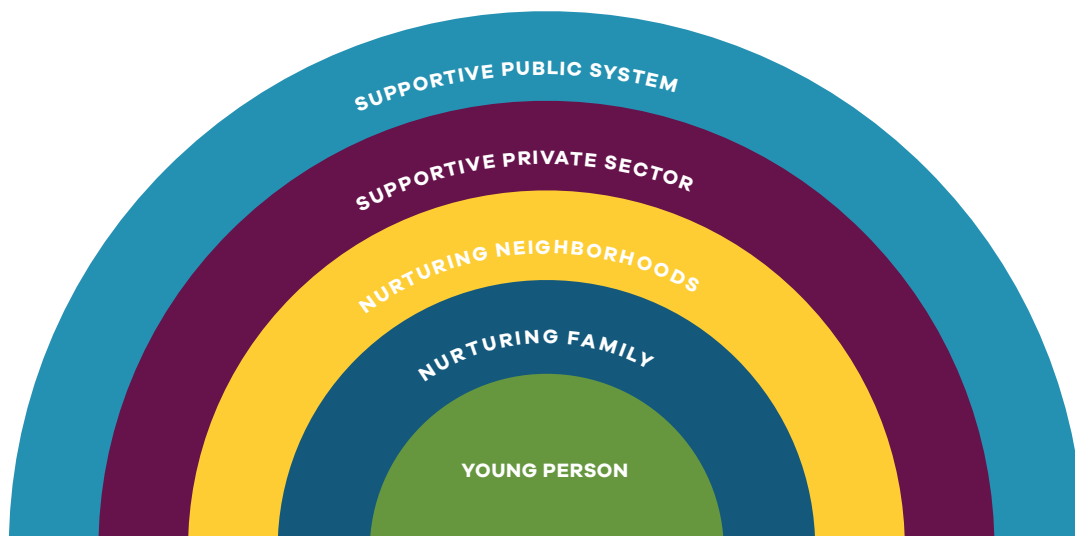
Environments that Enable and Encourage Well-Being

Young people are at the center of this framework. Young people must be central actors in defining and achieving well-being and must be given the knowledge, power and opportunities to exercise voice and choice. Young people have the desire and capacity to learn how to express their questions, concerns, ideas, and opinions when critical decisions about their life course and future are being made. Yet, young people cannot and should not stand alone in this growth process. All young people affect and are affected by their family, community, and public systems.

There is a dynamic and complex interrelatedness between individual young people, their life experiences, their family and cultural context, their community, and broader societal and political constructs. Attention to each domain by and on behalf of the youth, their families and caregivers, the public systems that serve them, and the community at large is necessary for young people to effectively make the transition into adulthood.

Given the critical roles of families, communities, government, and public systems, this well-being framework proposes conditions for how each can promote and support a young person’s well-being and well-becoming.

Settings to Support Well-Being



Experiencing a safe and nurturing family (or family-like relationships) throughout life is foundational for healthy growth and development. For some young people, separation from family has occurred as a result of placement in the child welfare, justice, or residential care system. When this is the case, the system has the added responsibility of ensuring that the parenting roles described in this framework are met, through their own action as well as their work in partnership with the young person's family. Families play a critical role across well-being domains—modeling healthy behavior, providing support and affirmation, creating conditions for growth and development, and helping to access new opportunities. Within the “family” setting, the framework includes a set of detailed roles that make for healthy growth and individual development. No family raises young people in isolation. To fully support the wellness of young people, all families need the positive support of and investment by communities and public systems.

Some older youth and young adults have children themselves. The framework includes the unique well-being conditions required for young parents to raise children and the unique and distinct supports and services they may need to fulfill their parenting role in healthy ways, while continuing to grow and develop themselves.

Neighborhoods play a critical role in supporting the well-being and well-becoming of youth and young adults. Those local organizations and individuals that operate and live nearby offer significant learning opportunities, healthy environments, and sources of positive role models and support. The faith community, local nonprofits, and service providers can play a powerful role in supporting well-being.

Private sector partners represent another important setting that can contribute to the healthy development of young people. The private sector includes employers, financial institutions, private hospitals and health care organizations, and others. These organizations can offer significant opportunities and resources to young people in how they live, learn, and work.

The final circle in this ecosystem are **government and public systems**. This setting broadly includes federal, state, county, and local offices as well as the public agencies that interact with and serve young people and their families. **Government and public systems have enormous power, reach, and resources. They can harm well-being, or they can promote and protect it. Given that power, the recommendations included in this document largely focus on these public system and governmental leaders.**

In order to promote well-being and well-becoming and to dismantle the structural racism that exists within youth-serving systems, conditions for reimagining the positive role that systems can play must be put into practice. System and governmental leaders must commit to actively promoting and supporting well-being, notably including engaging in respectful partnerships and sharing power with young people, families, and communities

Table 1 provides a detailed cross-walk of well-being domains by environments, describing the full range of intrinsic skills and capacities of individual young people, as well as opportunities and supports offered by families, communities, private sector partners and government and public systems to promote young people's well-being.

A Framework for Well-Being

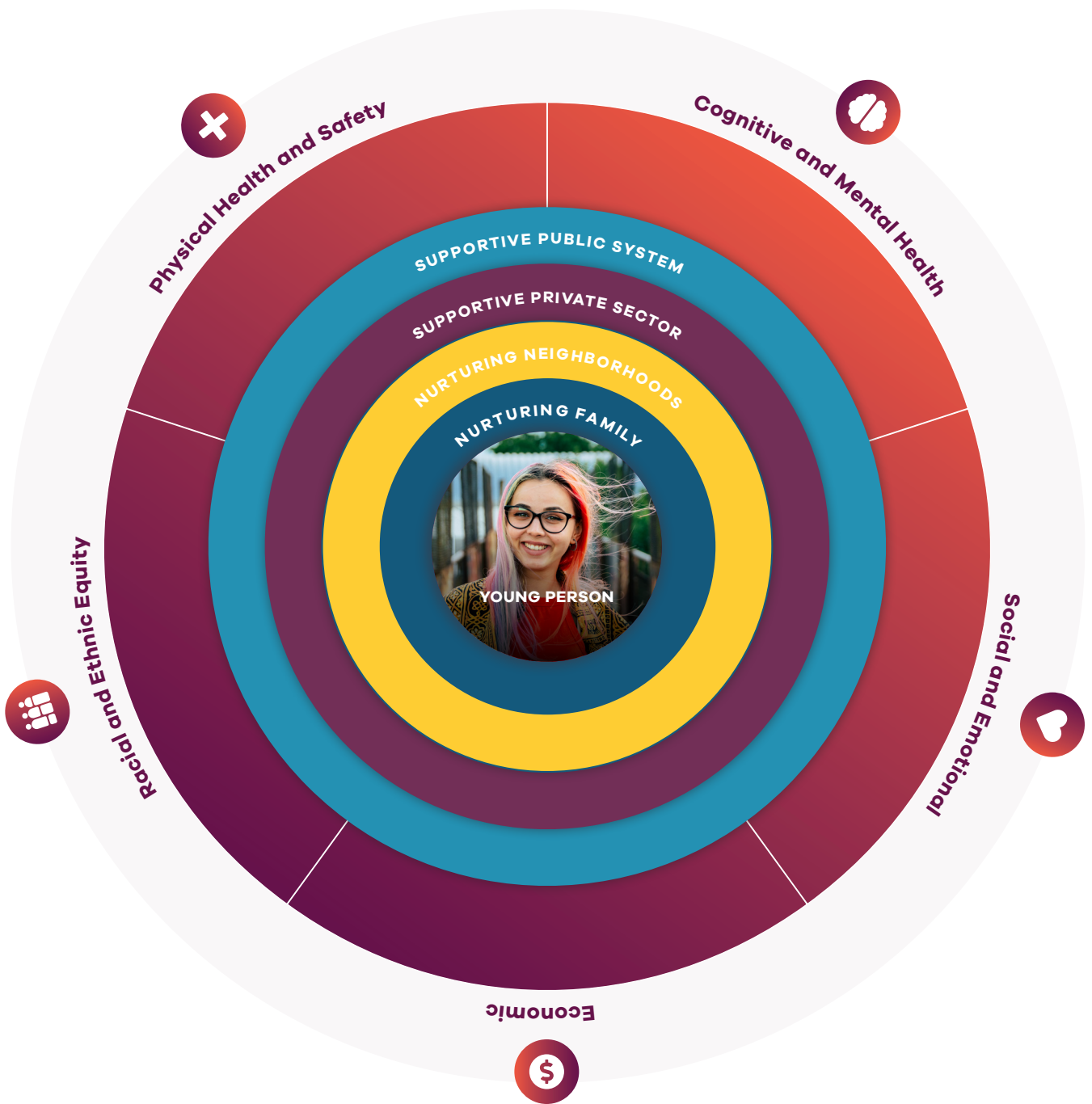


Table 1: Framework for Young People’s Well-Being and Well-Becoming: Drill Down of Conditions, by Domain and Setting

Youth

All young people should experience the conditions, opportunities, and supports to:

				
Physical Health and Safety	Cognitive and Mental	Social and Emotional	Economic	Racial and Ethnic Equity
<p>Maximize physical health, strength, and functioning, be physically safe and free from violence, abuse and neglect and have basic needs met.</p>	<p>Experience continuous cognitive and mental health as well as intellectual growth, with the ability to address any mental health issues as they arise.</p>	<p>Cultivate a strong and resilient self-identity and supportive and nurturing relationships</p>	<p>Obtain the learning and work opportunities needed to experience security and advancement; accrue financial and social capital to afford quality education, employment, housing, and transportation</p>	<p>Be treated with fairness and respect, have equitable access to opportunity; wellness is not determined by race or ethnicity</p>
<p>Have affordable, nutritious food</p> <p>Experience safe and secure housing</p>	<p>Build and strengthen executive functioning skills</p> <p>Engage in continuous learning</p>	<p>Develop and maintain a strong sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem</p>	<p>Have access to quality education</p>	<p>Be owners, planners, and decision-makers in the systems that govern their lives</p>
<p>Have access to and use accurate information to make health-related decisions and meet health needs, including those often not covered: reproductive, dental and vision</p>	<p>Manage cognitive load and stress</p> <p>Practice mental and cognitive self-care, including technology use boundaries</p>	<p>Develop and have agency over decisions and life events</p> <p>Develop positive racial, gender, sexual, and cultural identities</p>	<p>Experience learning and work opportunities that match interests, needs, abilities, and goals</p>	<p>Develop healthy racial and ethnic identities</p>
<p>Have choice and access to consistent health providers that respect and represent culture and identity</p>	<p>Address mental health challenges in healthy and productive ways, including responses to trauma and stress</p>	<p>Persist through struggles and maintain hope</p> <p>Positively experience living in, connecting with, and belonging to family (including chosen family)</p>	<p>Acquire credentials, skills training, and connections that lead to a career and provide pathways to economic and education advancement</p>	<p>Develop protective mechanisms designed to counter exposure to direct and vicarious racism (personal, institutional, structural, implicit and explicit)</p>
<p>Engage in healthy behaviors that support physical health and safety</p>	<p>Have a choice of providers that respect and represent culture and identity and where confidentiality is honored</p>	<p>Build and use effective coping, self-management, and self-regulation habits and skills</p>	<p>Achieve educational success to their fullest potential, no matter abilities or limitations</p>	<p>Use protective supports that promote healing from exposure to overt racism, racial microaggressions, racial assault, racial insult, and racial invalidation</p>
<p>Live a full life, even with a physical or developmental challenge, able to access needed supports for any disability or diagnosis</p>	<p>Receive high quality and affordable mental health care and information</p>	<p>Practice social and emotional self-care</p>	<p>Succeed in paid work experiences that provide a springboard into a career and living wages</p>	<p>Develop fluency of expression when working to heal from racial trauma</p>
<p>Make informed choices related to risky behavior</p>	<p>Exercise full agency and participation to benefit from therapeutic and treatment decisions</p>	<p>Develop spiritually, engaging in chosen religious or spirituality practices</p>	<p>Save and spend money in ways that meet needs and ensure economic security</p>	<p>Experience organizations and systems that reinforce and affirm a sense of fairness, inclusion, and justice</p>
<p>Have protective and healing supports to minimize and manage the impact of violence, trauma and racism</p>	<p>Be able to cope when feeling unsafe, unwell, or under/un-represented</p>	<p>Engage in physically and emotionally healthy relationships</p>	<p>Fully participate in experiences that build necessary social and financial capital and financial literacy and capability</p>	<p>Develop a level of understanding of the terms and definitions that support active engagement in discussions around race and racism</p>
<p>Make informed and healthy choices related to risky behavior</p>	<p>Make informed and healthy choices related to risky behavior</p>	<p>Cultivate healthy and supportive social networks that provide strong social stability and help achieve goals</p>	<p>Experience stable and affordable housing with all of the necessities and amenities needed to support health and well-being</p>	<p>Feel safe and free from racial, ethnic and gender-based bias and discrimination in health care, learning, therapeutic, social and work settings</p>
<p>Have opportunities to engage in restorative practices that repair harm</p>	<p>Have opportunities to engage in restorative practices that repair harm</p>	<p>Develop leadership skills and connect with peers to engage in and influence civic life</p>	<p>Have access to reliable and affordable transportation</p>	<p>Develop a level of understanding of the terms and definitions that support active engagement in discussions around race and racism</p>
		<p>Have ability to make mistakes that don't define their future</p> <p>Have access to racially diverse mentors and role models</p>	<p>Have access to racially diverse mentors and role models</p>	

Young people should experience the conditions, opportunities, and supports to be healthy and supportive parents and to support the well-being of their child(ren). They should:



Physical Health and Safety

Be able to access and use accurate information to make health-related decisions and meet health needs of their children

Have choice and access to consistent health providers for their children that respect and represent culture and identity



Cognitive and Mental

Have access to tools and support to manage the unique challenges of parenting

Be able to cope as a parent when feeling unsafe, unwell, or under/un-represented



Social and Emotional

Have agency over decisions and life events regarding their children

Have trusting relationships with peers that can provide a safe space for honesty and support for parenting challenges

Cultivate healthy and supportive social networks of parents that provide strong social stability and help achieve goals



Economic

Have child care support

Experience work environments that support parents, especially the unique demands placed on single parents.



Racial and Ethnic Equity

Experience respect for their parenting role

Be free from punitive supervision and over-surveillance as a parent

Have support for developing healthy racial and ethnic identities of their children

Families

All young people should have lifetime connections to family that support and nurture their healthy growth and development. Families, supported by positive investments and partnerships by communities and systems, should:



Physical Health and Safety

Connect the young person to a spectrum of healthy activities that reflect interests and capabilities

Connect the young person to preventative and as-needed physical health care supports and services

Offer and connect to environments that promote health (including access to nutrition and exercise)

Participate in and inform policy discussions and resources related to safety at home and in the community



Cognitive and Mental

Provide or connect to activities that spark the young person's interests, needs, curiosity, and creativity

Model and encourage lifelong learning, executive functioning skills, and stress management

Connect to appropriate mental health support and services as needed

Provide environments, to the best they are able, that promote cognitive and mental wellness

Exercise healthy boundaries that protect and strengthen the young person's cognitive and mental health

Share honestly and healthfully about mental health concerns and the benefits of therapy and treatment

Encourage and enable healthy identity development and formation



Social and Emotional

Offer and encourage long-term or lifelong relationships with caring adults and peers

Extend and nurture a network of extended family and family-like relationships that a young person feels a sense of belonging to and that builds their social network and capital

Create healthy conditions that affirm gender, sexual, and cultural identities and the formation of identities that may be different than their own

Actively support spiritual development; support and affirm engagement in chosen religious and spiritual practices

Provide opportunities for positive social connections



Economic

Expose and equip for different types of work, and a range of job and career choices

Connect to different types of learning environments that best meet the young person's preferences and needs

Actively engage with the young person's education, youth development, and workforce development settings

Provide ongoing social and financial stability and support

Model and teach healthy ways to spend and save money, including during times of scarcity or crisis

Model and teach ways to cope with and bounce back from economic, education, and employment hardships

Encourage and enable the pursuit of goals, interests, and dreams

Ensure healthy housing and living arrangements



Racial and Ethnic Equity

Racially "socialize" the young person

Support healthy identity formation

Provide strong connections to healthy familial and group relationships

Access resources that help the young person build a healthy sense of "self" and resist potential racialized experiences

Access resources and supports that enhance family well-being and well-becoming

Introduce and encourage culturally relevant role models and accurate history that exemplify depictions of success, character, and integrity

Offer positive messaging that contributes to healthy identities and protects from societies' negative, overt and subliminal, racialized messaging

Across All Domains

- Maintain a "whole child, whole life" perspective on parenting and family support.
- Support healthy identity formation and agency
- Provide stability and security
- Participate in respectful and authentic decision-making with the young person

Neighborhoods

Young people are supported by neighborhoods that nurture and provide opportunities for healthy growth and development, including creating opportunities for inclusion, connection, and belonging. Neighborhoods should:



Physical Health and Safety

Cultivate environments that include a spectrum of healthy activities and supports

Provide environments that promote health (including access to nutrition and exercise) and that are as free from violence and toxic social or environmental conditions as possible

Offer physical accommodations to ensure mobility and access for young people with physical limitations and challenges



Cognitive and Mental

Provide a range of informal and formal learning and positive youth development environments

Respect and comply with public health measures

Offer resources and supportive environments for young people who experience suicidal thoughts or other mental health crises

Offer supportive environments for young people with physical or developmental challenges and limitations

Ensure the environment is one that promotes mental health and is as free as possible from toxic social and environmental conditions

Support opportunities to engage in restorative practices that repair harm



Social and Emotional

Cultivate healthy environments that are identify affirming

Provide opportunity for positive social connections and social capital building

Ensure environments promote positive community-building, social and emotional wellness, and are free from toxic social conditions

Support and value healthy parenting and caretaking

Create environments that are socially and culturally responsive, as well as healing-centered

Provide opportunities and supports for a young person's spiritual development

Provide opportunities to develop leadership skills and to engage in and influence civic life



Economic

Offer free or affordable extracurricular and enrichment activities, which nurture youth development and build social and economic capital

Offer or advocate for communitywide internet and affordable or free digital devices for all young people and their families

Provide access or connections to cash assistance and basic needs support that enable young people to continue learning and working

Ensure that all schools and youth employment sites are accessible and safe and free from racial, ethnic, linguistic, and gender-based bias and discrimination



Racial and Ethnic Equity

Cultivate environments designed for healthy identity formation

Provide culturally relevant role models and accurate history that exemplify depictions of success, character, and integrity

Provide positive, healthy messaging that contributes to healthy identities and protects from societies' negative, overt and subliminal, racialized messaging

Cultivate environments that support healing from exposure to overt racism, racial microaggressions, racial assault, racial insult, and racial invalidation.

Private Sector Partners

Young people are supported by private sector partners that nurture and provide opportunities for healthy growth and development, including opportunities for inclusion, connection and belonging. These partners should:



Physical Health and Safety

Cultivate and support healthy, safe, and inclusive environments that include a spectrum of healthy activities

Provide access to a range of health care services

Provide environments that promote health (including access to nutrition and exercise) and that are as free from violence and toxic social or environmental conditions as possible



Cognitive and Mental

Maintain a diverse and affordable network of mental health services and supports

Offer resources and supportive environments for young people who experience mental health crises

Ensure that all young people are able to learn and work in local settings that are safe and free from racial, ethnic, linguistic, and gender-based bias and discrimination



Social and Emotional

Cultivate healthy, safe, and inclusive environments that are identify affirming

Provide ample opportunity for positive social connections and social capital building

Create environments that promote positive community-building, social and emotional wellness, and are free from toxic social and environmental conditions



Economic

Offer quality paid work and work-based learning options

Offer quality earn and learn experiences with career advancement potential

Offer or advocate for community-wide internet and affordable or free digital devices

Provide access or connections to cash assistance and basic needs support that enable young people to continue learning and working including access to affordable housing, transportation and childcare



Racial and Ethnic Equity

Cultivate environments designed for healthy identity formation

Provide culturally relevant role models

Provide positive, healthy messaging that contributes to healthy identities and protects from societies' negative, overt and subliminal, racialized messaging

Cultivate environments that support healing from exposure to overt racism, racial microaggressions, racial assault, racial insult, and racial invalidation.

Across All Domains

- Ensure all environments are accessible and safe and free from racial, ethnic, linguistic, and gender-based bias and discrimination

Young people and families are valued, respected, and supported by government and systems that contribute to and promote their well-being. These systems should:



Physical Health and Safety

Invest in, partner, and share power with community leaders to create environments that promote health (including access to food, adequate nutrition, and exercise)

Invest in, partner with, and share power with communities to cultivate environments that include a spectrum of healthy activities, services, and basic needs supports

Invest in protective and healing supports that reduce violence, trauma, and toxic stress

Ensure all young people have health insurance and access to their medical records

Invest in and employ family-centered, culturally responsive, and healing-centered practices for responding to child safety concerns, including allegations of abuse and neglect

Employ community-centered and culturally responsive practices for responding to safety concerns, as well as a major disruption or disaster

Ensure all policies and practices are trauma-responsive, healing-centered, and address racial and ethnic bias and discrimination



Cognitive and Mental

Invest in, partner with, and share power with community to create services and supports that nurture the cognitive growth, health, and development of young people

Provide accessible and affordable youth-centered mental health supports

Ensure young people can receive the level of care and attention they need to deal with cognitive, developmental, and mental health concerns

Promote mental health first aid

Promote and richly reinforce diverse forms of positive social behavior and cognitive fitness

Provide and support learning and job training environments that are equitable, inclusive, engaging, and youth-centered

Train staff in and employ a “whole child” and “whole life” approach to service delivery, education, and programming

Ensure staff are trained in adolescent brain development

Provide opportunities to engage in restorative practices that repair harm



Social and Emotional

Support, value, and invest in healthy parenting, kinship and social networks, friendships, and family connections

Honor, support, and invest in family and parental/caretaker engagement

Actively promote healthy relationships and offer ample social capital-building opportunities

Ensure policies allow young people the ability to make mistakes that don't define their future

Prioritize social and emotional learning, health, and wellness in policy and practice

Invest in and support skill-building in relationship and emotions management

Ensure trauma-responsive and healing-centered policy and practice

Ensure policies and practices affirm and support young people's racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, and sexual identities

Ensure policies and practices affirm and support young people's chosen religious or spiritual practice



Economic

Provide necessary supports and opportunities for young people to learn and work anytime and anywhere

Ensure that career pathways programming, job training, and CTE options align to high-growth and high-value fields (including nonprofit), and future earnings that are self- and family-sustaining

Update credit and graduation requirements to reflect what young people need to know and be able to do in postsecondary learning and work

End the criminalization of young people in school and at work, investing in the redesign of school safety and the rapid expansion of mental health and restorative supports

Prioritize education and workplace equity and justice

Create well-lit pathways back into education and employment and training

Offer varied and high-quality education, career pathways, and job training opportunities

Ensure that all young people have access to safe and stable transportation and housing that enable them to continuously learn and work

Invest in universal broadband access and digital connectivity

Employ trainings, policies, and practices that address all forms of bias and discrimination

Provide adequate financial assistance to young people who need it, when they need it



Racial and Ethnic Equity

Create well-developed response mechanisms for children experiencing direct and secondary racial trauma

Commit to disaggregating data, being used for research or administrative decision-making, by race/ethnicity

Provide workforce with ongoing, level setting racial equity trainings, experiences, and healthy dialogue environments designed to raise awareness, mitigate bias, dispel racialized myths and stereotypes, and enhance culturally responsive practice

Utilize racial equity impact tools in all decision-making: budget development, contracting, practice and policy development, Continuous Quality Improvement, outcomes

Assess organizations utilizing tools like the Anti-Racist Organization Continuum

Engage in systemic efforts embracing anti-racist strategies and initiatives designed to mitigate impacts of racial injustice, dismantle structures that perpetuate racial injustice, and ultimately eliminate institutional and structural racism in our child- and family-serving systems.

Ensure cross-system and silo-busting anti-racist efforts

Across All Domains

- Be prevention focused
- Embrace a life-course perspective, moving away from a circumstance focus
- Provide authentic opportunities for and intentionally engaging young people to inform decision making about plans affecting them, and to share insights, critiques, and considerations about the systems they experience
- Commit to inclusion of community and the voice of lived experience in developing and measuring anti-racist efforts
- Ensure policies and practices mitigate the impact of racial and ethnic bias and discrimination and work to eliminate inequities, creating safe and anti-racist settings that foster inclusion and belonging
- Encourage and enable healthy identity development
- Actively work to restore trust with young people, families, and communities
- Ensure smooth transitions between systems and settings
- Train and hire staff, including people from communities in which systems work

Well-Being and Well-Becoming Domains



Physical Health and Safety

All young people should have the opportunity and supports—through family, community, and public systems—to maximize their physical health, strength, and functioning, be physically safe and free from violence, abuse, and neglect, and have basic needs met.

The framework begins with physical health and safety because having basic needs met is necessary before we can focus on any other aspects of well-being. Young people need access to affordable and nutritious food. They need a safe and secure place to live. As they grow and develop, they need information about, and access to, all aspects of physical health, including nutrition, exercise and fitness, disease prevention, and sexual and reproductive health. This knowledge increases the likelihood that youth and young adults will engage in healthy behaviors well into adulthood, including regular exercise, and will be proactive in addressing and managing their own health care needs. This is particularly important for young people who have a physical challenge or medical condition. To be supported in their health, young people need continuity in health care providers and healers that respect and represent their culture and identity.

As youth approach adulthood, they should be able to increasingly assume responsibility for their own safety, in ways that minimize risks and offer healthy, safe, and inclusive environments.

To transition successfully, young people need to understand how to assess risks associated with various behaviors so they can make informed choices about risky behaviors and take reasonable and appropriate precautions to prevent or reduce the risk of injury. Young people also need protective and healing supports that minimize and manage the impact of trauma and violence. For young parents, continued access to reproductive health and the ability to access health services for their children are critical.

Families and communities should have the supports, resources, investments and opportunities they need to cultivate healthy, safe, and inclusive living environments for young people. Their communities should also offer them and their children a spectrum of healthy activities and provide access to an array of health care services that promote health (including access to nutrition and exercise) and that are free from toxic social and environmental conditions.

Government and public systems play an important role in investing in and partnering with families and communities to cultivate such healthy, safe, and inclusive environments. Public systems have a critical role in ensuring that all young people have health insurance for physical, dental, vision, and mental health needs. To support well-being, public systems should employ family-centered, culturally informed practices for responding to child safety concerns in the community, including allegations of neglect and abuse. They should also employ community-centered and culturally informed practices for responding to community safety concerns.



Cognitive and Mental Health

All young people should have the opportunity and supports – through family, community, and public systems—to experience continuous cognitive health and intellectual growth and to optimize mental health, managing any mental health issues as they arise.

Beyond basic needs, young people need to have the strategies and supports to manage, maintain, and strengthen their cognitive and mental health. Research and recent news make it clear that mental health issues are on the rise, and so is feeling a chronic sense of being mentally stressed and stretched. Young people need to be able to deal with cognitive and mental health issues, whenever and however they arise. This means they have opportunities to build habits and skills needed to stay cognitively fit, such as executive functioning skills, and effective self-care strategies and outside supports to preserve and prioritize their mental health.

When young people experience well-being, they can use their cognitive and mental faculties in ways that make life enjoyable, make learning possible, and prepare them for the future. In an unpredictable world, this requires effective coping skills and stress management techniques. It means having access to quality mental health care services and knowing how to seek and use those services when needed. It also means young people are in a position to make choices about their own therapeutic care and medications. That requires access to consistent mental health providers and healers that respect and represent their culture and identity. Young parents need access to tools and supports to manage the unique challenges of parenting.

Cognitive and mental health is closely tied to the presence of the other well-being domains. It is also an inward-facing domain that is deeply affected by relationships with family, community, and public



systems. At the family level, young people need positive supporters, people they can go to for love and care when mental health concerns arise. Family members should seek to provide environments that promote cognitive and mental wellness and put healthy boundaries in place. Familial relationships should support a young person's identity development, decision-making, and—if needed—decisions to seek out professional care.

At a neighborhood and community level, young people's well-being is optimized when they live close to the resources and supports they need. This means they are geographically proximate and able to get to places that support their ongoing learning, cognitive fitness, and mental health.

Neighborhoods should be connected or designed in ways that support young people during normal times, but also during times of disruption or disaster. As we have seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, the cognitive and mental health needs of young people intensify during times of crisis. To get them the support they need during this developmental period, neighborhood leaders must coordinate efforts and seek public and private support when needed.

Governments and public systems can do a lot to promote young people's cognitive and mental health. Leaders should prioritize training staff in "whole child" and "whole life" service delivery, mental health first aid, and healing-centered and youth-centered care. Investments should be made in infrastructure to

deliver and expand mental health and educational services and supports online or in-person, with mechanisms for transitioning seamlessly between the two. Systems should provide culturally relevant mental health care to young people free of charge, or affordably. In addition, systems must move from a “do no harm” commitment to a “net positive” one, understanding that they can go beyond treating risk, disease, or diagnoses, and move toward proactively and comprehensively promoting cognitive and mental health, focusing on present-day and future needs and concerns. This includes providing opportunities for restorative practices that repair harm.



Social and Emotional Wellness

Social and emotional wellness require both a strong sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem and supportive, nurturing, and mutually satisfying relationships. Emotional wellness requires the development of a positive racial, gender, sexual, and cultural identity. This begins and is nurtured throughout life within the context of a lifelong family. Every young person needs the opportunity to have a meaningful and positive experience of living in, connecting with, and belonging to a family.

The successful transition into adulthood improves when young people can recognize the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships, cultivate supportive relationships, and make good decisions about all the relationships they engage in—both physically and emotionally. Socially and emotionally healthy young people will be able to effectively communicate their wants and needs and persist through life’s struggles while maintaining a sense of hope for the future. For many, emotional wellness also includes the practice of self-care and a spiritual or religious practice. For young parents, having agency over the decisions and life events regarding their children is a critical aspect of well-

being. Young parents need trusting relationships with peers that can provide a safe space to honestly share the challenges, questions, and joys of parenthood.

Families and communities can support young people by cultivating healthy, safe, and inclusive environments rich with a diverse array of opportunities while limiting exposure to risk and unhealthy influences. Young people who have experienced trauma, violence, or other vulnerabilities often have difficulty acknowledging, regulating, managing, and expressing their own emotions, as well as interpreting emotional signals communicated by those around them. Young people will gain competence in emotional management and self-regulation and will engage in positive social behaviors throughout life. Additionally, youth and young adults need to be supported and affirmed by those around them in discovering and expressing their own cultural roots, spirituality, and sexual identity without facing racial, ethnic, or gender-based bias.

Young people are best served when communities and public systems honor families and provide resources and supports for parents and caregivers. Public systems need to invest in and ensure environments that promote social and emotional wellness and are free from toxic social and environmental conditions. Policies and practices must actively promote healthy relationships, be trauma-responsive and healing-centered, and affirm and support young peoples’ cultural, gender, and sexual identities and chosen religious or spiritual practices. Additionally, public systems need to ensure that a young person’s mistakes, which are an expected and important part of growth and development, don’t define their future through punitive and damaging practices.



Economic Well-Being

All young people should have the opportunity and supports—through families, community, and public systems—to obtain the learning and work opportunities they need in order to experience economic security and advancement and to accrue the financial and social capital needed to afford and access quality education, employment, and housing.

In order to experience well-being, young people must have more than internal resources. They must be able to experience the external resource of continuous economic stability and desired economic mobility. This well-being domain is multifaceted.

It is possible to achieve a level of well-being no matter what part of the economic cycle a young person is experiencing, whether that is a time when they need economic relief, a time of economic security, or a time of economic prosperity. But economic mobility can sometimes compromise overall well-being and exacerbate inequities, especially when the pursuit of educational, financial, or employment goals means the loss or rejection of identity, family, or community.

At the individual level, young people need access to a high-quality education. This is an essential foundation for economic well-being. Young people should also be able to easily find and benefit from the resources and opportunities they need to experience economic relief, economic mobility, and periods of economic prosperity. This includes the chance to learn and work in systems and settings that meet their needs and interests. This also means access to adequate financial resources (including earnings opportunities for older youth), reliable housing and transportation, and affordable health care. For young parents or for those who care for family members, this includes affordable and reliable dependent care. As young people transition into adulthood, they should be able to participate in a range of experiences that enable them to accrue social and

financial capital, as well as experiences that educate and equip them for jobs and careers for the future.

Families are active partners with young people in their learning and work journeys. Young people need the support of their family (biological or chosen) and friends as they engage in different educational and employment opportunities. Family members—immediate or extended—often provide young people with needed financial and housing supports into young adulthood.

At the neighborhood and community level, young people should live in places that offer ample connections to quality learning and work opportunities, healthy and safe housing, affordable and reliable transportation, and affordable health care and dependent care. Neighborhoods should work hard to avoid “pricing out” young residents and to make sure that young residents have access to high-speed internet and the types of enrichment and extracurricular activities that are vital for their healthy growth and development.

Government and public systems can have an outsized impact on supporting the economic well-being of young people and their families. Public leaders can provide financial assistance and other benefits to young people and families beyond supports for housing, health care, childcare, and transportation. These leaders can also ensure that young people have access to well-resourced education and workforce development opportunities. They can invest in transition support services, career pathways programs, financial assistance, and free or affordable education and employment training. In addition, government and systems leaders can work to ensure that education and work settings are safe, do not perpetuate the criminalization of young people of color, and are inclusive, equitable environments.



Racial and Ethnic Equity

All young people should have the opportunity—through family, community, and public systems—to be treated with fairness and respect, have equitable access to opportunity, and have their wellness not determined by race or ethnicity.

Young people have a vivid sense of justice and fairness. Racial and ethnic equity is a necessary and foundational condition for young people's well-being and well-becoming. Inequitable treatment and access to resources and supports based on race is harmful and traumatic. This framework is founded on the notion that well-being is inextricably linked to racial justice. There must be an intentional focus on unlearning and dismantling racist policies and practices at every level of the ecosystem. This is essential for realizing the well-being and well-becoming of young people of color.

At the individual level, young people desire and deserve agency. They need to be owners, planners, and decision-makers in the systems that govern their lives. They need opportunity and support to develop healthy racial and ethnic identities and protective mechanisms to counter and heal from exposure to racism. Young people need to experience institutions and structures that reinforce and affirm a sense of fairness, inclusion, and justice. Young parents need to feel and experience respect for their parenting role and be free from punitive supervision and oversurveillance. They also need support to help their own children develop healthy racial and ethnic identities.

Families provide critical environments to support healthy identity formation and create the essential bonds and relationships that support healthy growth and development. Families can also encourage culturally relevant role models and positive messages that counter negative racialized messaging. Nurturing neighborhoods play an important role in introducing and encouraging culturally relevant role models and accurate history that exemplify depictions of success, character, and integrity, and also offer positive messaging which contributes to healthy identities. These family and community relationships provide a resource for young people to reach toward when navigating the impacts of injustice, and they offer critical protective factors and environments to support growth and development, and most importantly, healing.

Given our long history of racial injustice and systemic racism, government and public systems have a critical responsibility to proactively support racial and ethnic equity for young people of color. This responsibility extends far beyond "doing no harm" to young people of color; it requires active dismantling of racist policies and practices. System leaders and policymakers must reimagine the role for youth-serving systems toward collective efforts that honor, partner with, and invest in young people and their families and communities. The voice of lived experience is critical. Systems and organizations must intentionally engage young people, families, and community members as community experts in planning, development, and evaluation of policies and practices. A commitment to the inclusion of community experts and the voice of lived experience in developing and measuring anti-racist efforts is critical. Public systems must actively develop strategies and investments in anti-racist policies and practices to mitigate the impact of racial injustice and eliminate inequities. Public and private entities working with young people must commit to intentional efforts to become anti-racist. These efforts are integral to ensuring the well-being and well-becoming of Black and brown young people.

Recommendations for Youth System Leaders, Policymakers, and Public and Private Funders to Improve the Well-Being of Vulnerable Youth and Young Adults

1

Support and elevate the leadership of young people and their families.

2

Actively and intentionally design and implement anti-racist strategies to mitigate the impacts of racial injustice on young people and to build a more just society.

3

Deconstruct harmful policies and practices that are inconsistent and incompatible with well-being.

4

Reorient and transform youth-serving systems toward well-being and racial justice.

5

Create policies and practices that promote youth wellness and invest in essential supports for well-being and well-becoming.

6

Create and invest in policies and practices that include employers as essential partners in offering economic opportunities and providing employment supports to young people.

7

Identify and customize support for vulnerable youth populations within youth-serving systems, and engage in intentional and meaningful cross-systems alignment, investment, and coordination to build on their unique strengths and address their diverse needs.

8

Invest in ongoing research and evaluation.

9

Develop effective financing and other investment strategies to support the implementation of well-being and well-becoming recommendations.

Recommendations

1

Support and elevate the leadership of young people and their families.

Support and elevate the leadership of young people and their families. Ensure that young people and their families are central in planning and decision making and create spaces and ways for them to advocate for themselves and to promote improvements in policy and practice. This approach is a fundamental shift in following the lead of young people and community and investing in community-driven and youth- and family-centered solutions. While this shift takes time to fully implement and requires intentional leadership and investment, it will yield powerful and transformative results.

- Provide **authentic opportunities** for young people both to inform and drive decision-making about plans that affect them and to share insights, critiques, and considerations about the systems and environments they experience. Intentionally engage young people with lived experience and community expertise in **planning, developing, and evaluating policies and practices.**
- **Equip young people** and families with skills, knowledge and resources needed for decision making and leadership.
- **Ensure that young people and families have** seats at the table where decisions are made. Invest in **community leadership tables**, and meet community leaders where they live and work.
- **Equip system professionals** to embrace and respect the authority of lived experience, extending a welcoming environment for authentic youth and family engagement.
- **Assess and remediate** structural barriers for authentic youth and family engagement, including setting meeting times and locations that allow for participation, covering childcare and travel costs, and ensuring payment for time committed.
- Invest in and support opportunities for **civic engagement and youth organizing efforts.**
- **Hire staff with lived experience** as a model for engagement and as credible messengers. If **employing young people**, commit to equity and inclusion, and seek the input of young people into hiring and other talent management decisions.

2

Actively and intentionally design and implement anti-racist strategies to mitigate the impacts of racial injustice on young people and to build a more just society.

Actively and intentionally design and implement anti-racist strategies to mitigate the impacts of racial injustice on young people and to build a more just society. Dismantle structures within youth-serving agencies that perpetuate racial injustice and white supremacy and work to ultimately eliminate institutional and structural racism in our child- and family-serving systems.

- Commit to inclusion and compensation of community members, young people, and others who bring the voice of lived experience in developing and measuring anti-racist efforts. (See above.)

Recommendations

3

Deconstruct harmful policies and practices that are inconsistent and incompatible with well-being.

- Ensure policies and practices mitigate the impact of racial and ethnic bias and discrimination and work to eliminate inequities.
- Within youth-serving agencies, provide ongoing level-setting racial equity trainings, experiences, and healthy environments designed to raise awareness, mitigate bias, dispel racialized myths and stereotypes, and enhance culturally responsive practices.
- Utilize racial equity impact tools and principles in all decision-making, including budget development, contracting, practice and policy development, and continuous quality improvement efforts. Critically assess when and how racial disparities arise.
- Utilize anti-racist organizational principles and assessments to support a healthy workforce and work environment.

Deconstruct harmful policies and practices that are inconsistent and incompatible with well-being. As an essential first step, leaders must stop policies and practices that harm and hold back young people. Public and private leaders should work to:

- Eliminate the pathologizing, adultification, and criminalization of normal adolescent behavior (including school behavior) in policy and practice.
- Reduce family separation and termination of parental rights. Disallow separation of children from minor parents.
- End requirements for systems involvement to access services.
- Remove policy barriers that make it difficult for systems-involved youth to make steady academic progress, participate in employment, or gain access to housing or health care, including disqualifications based on criminal records or prohibitions on children in campus housing.
- Eliminate detention and incarceration for youth in institutions, youth prisons, or training schools. Ensure that no youth should be placed in an adult system. Ban placement of youth in facilities for status offenses and technical violations.
- Eliminate group foster care placements, unless medically required and only for short-term therapeutic needs.
- Eliminate harmful practices within facilities, including shackling, solitary confinement, choke holds, pepper sprays, and other chemical restraints.
- Eliminate the option of allowing young people to age out of a group setting or shelter or into homelessness or housing instability.

4

Reorient and transform youth-serving systems toward well-being and racial justice.

- Strengthen legal autonomy and privacy protections in seeking health services, including crisis mental health and reproductive health services.

Reorient and transform youth-serving systems toward well-being and racial justice. Leaders should prioritize and center well-being as a core function for all practices of youth-serving systems and settings. As work to eliminate harmful practices continues, leaders can build back and transform systems to focus on well-being in new and powerful ways. The practices of public systems dramatically affect who enters a system, who receives supports and services, and what those supports and services are. Public systems should work with young people with a clear focus on and orientation toward well-being. Public and private leaders should make investments to:

- **Recognize and reconcile the origins of youth-serving systems.** It is the moral responsibility of system leaders to support healing and restoration from the harm that systems have caused young people and communities, especially young people and communities of color.
- **Value family and relationships** as core functions of youth-serving systems, whether biological or chosen.
- **Value and respect community** through authentic partnership and power sharing. Invest in community-driven and community-approved solutions.
- **Invest in healing** as an essential strategy to support well-being, including the use of restorative practices both for those who have been harmed and for those who have caused harm. Incorporate positive behavioral interventions and utilize **restorative justice practices** as effective tools for acknowledging and repairing harm to victims and communities while supporting youth, building their skill sets, and holding them accountable.
- **Respond to trauma and exposure to violence** with a focus on healing, recognizing that physical and emotional trauma often manifest as disruptive or delinquent behavior. Design trauma-responsive systems, policies, and procedures that do not exacerbate problems or retraumatize youth.
- **Prioritize prevention services** as a cornerstone of well-being supports, ensuring that young people have access to health and wellness services to prevent conditions from worsening or becoming chronic challenges. Prevention services should be available without requiring formal systems involvement.
- **Strengthen measurement and accountability measures.** Use and track indicators that measure well-being and well-becoming and collectively hold public systems accountable for making progress toward those results.

Recommendations

5

Create policies and practices that promote youth wellness and invest in essential supports for well-being and well-becoming.

- **Divert the majority of youth from formal systems involvement** through approaches that promote adolescent development and well-being.
- **Develop practice models that ensure a focus on well-being.** Practice models need to ensure well-being in a broad sense, including reflecting the critical interconnection between social, emotional, economic, and physical well-being with permanency and safety.
- **Invest in systems coordination and alignment** to ensure collective effort toward common goals.

Create policies and practices that promote youth wellness and invest in essential supports for well-being and well-becoming. With critical transformational infrastructure in place, leaders can focus on prioritizing and investing in the policies and practices that promote wellness, especially those that are culturally relevant and affirming.

- Invest in and ensure access to **safe and reliable housing**. Strengthen policies and safety nets to prevent homelessness.
- Invest in and ensure access to a quality education, including during periods of placement and transition. Ensure educational continuity and seamless school re-enrollment after systems placement, mitigating or eliminating any transfer, time, or credit issues, and for parents who leave school to have children.
- Expand existing investments in workforce and education opportunities, including expanded financial aid and debt-free college policies that prioritize students with low incomes, particularly students of color and first-generation college students.
- Expand eligibility for the **Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)** for workers without dependent children who are 19 years or older. Explore the use of cash grants to meet basic needs.
- **Invest in health, dental, vision, and mental health partnerships**, and provide robust federal investment in state and local cross-sector collaborative partnerships to improve systems and policies that address youth and young adult physical and mental health needs. Require that health services be continuous, culturally relevant, and of high quality, especially during times of transition. Remove prior diagnosis as a criterion for service.
- **Support identity development and independent decision-making** through all systems interactions with young people (e.g., transition planning for young people in foster care; education and career services).

Recommendations

6

Create and invest in policies and practices that include employers as essential partners in offering economic opportunities and providing employment supports to young people.

- Invest in and create supports for the **unique needs of young parents**, including childcare supports, legal services, case management, and transportation. Ensure parental rights and authority for minor parents.
- **Invest in mentors and coaches** who represent and respect young people's culture and identities, including unique identities such as a parent, or being the first to go to college.

Create and invest in policies and practices that include employers as essential partners in offering economic opportunities and providing employment supports to young people. Partnerships with employers in the public and private sectors are key to supporting young people's economic well-being and futures. It is imperative that systems work with employer partners to remove barriers to entry and success in the workforce. Employers should also extend internship, apprenticeship, and career training options to youth who are eligible but otherwise unable to participate because of their assigned education settings or personal situations.

- Increase the minimum wage so that it is a living wage, including the removal of the federal subminimum wage for youth and for young people with disabilities.
- Expand unemployment insurance to include gig workers, those in temporary or seasonal employment, and those participating in youth summer jobs programs.
- Invest and expand apprenticeship programs and partnerships, within technical fields and into other sectors, such as health care and early childhood education.
- Invest in employer incentive policies for hiring and retaining youth workers who would otherwise struggle to find the work and wages they need
- Strive to create and sustain safe, welcoming, inclusive work environments.
- Invest in sector-based skill-building and credentialing programs at community colleges.
- Expand existing investments into workforce development and education opportunities that target those engaged with or otherwise affected by the criminal justice system, including incentives for Ban the Box policies.
- Lift state occupational licensing bans for individuals with a criminal record, and equitably expunge records after individuals have fulfilled their requirements to the justice system.
- Eliminate barriers to employment and education for young people who are undocumented and/or English language learners.

7

Identify and customize support for vulnerable youth populations within youth-serving systems, and engage in intentional and meaningful cross-systems alignment, investment, and coordination to build on their unique strengths and address their diverse needs.

Identify and customize support for vulnerable youth populations within youth-serving systems, and engage in intentional and meaningful cross-systems alignment, investment, and coordination to build on their unique strengths and address their diverse needs. Leaders must embrace individualized and contextualized approaches to serving youth and families. As a young person goes deeper in systems, a stacking of marginalization becomes apparent—increasing risks for harm. Additionally, as systems downsize, young people who remain in systems have multiple identities and challenges that need therapeutic and personalized supports and interventions, often unavailable in the systems they are in.

- Adapt basic practice frameworks to ensure that practice addresses the circumstances, strengths, challenges, and vulnerabilities of specific vulnerable populations.
- Invest in supports for communities to customize supports for vulnerable populations.
- Test, implement, scale, and sustain approaches to support the immediate and long-term well-being of vulnerable populations of youth and young adults, including the following subgroups (young people often associating with multiple subgroups):
 - Girls and young women of color.
 - Young people who are newcomers, immigrants or children of immigrants, undocumented, and/or English language learners.
 - Those who are across the spectrum of gender identity, expression, and sexual orientation (e.g., LGBTQ youth).
 - Those who are indigenous, including those living within and outside tribal communities, recognizing and honoring tribal sovereignty.
 - Those who are involved with multiple public systems.
 - Those who have disabilities (e.g., cognitive, mental health, physical, medical) and/or chronic health conditions.
 - Those who are pregnant, parenting, or full-time caretakers.
 - Victims of human trafficking.

8

Invest in ongoing research and evaluation.

Invest in ongoing research and evaluation. Continuous improvement occurs when system and community leaders better understand the well-being and well-becoming needs of young people, build the base of evidence for what works, and design new programs and services to improve social, emotional, and physical well-being for young people as they transition to adulthood. Public and private leaders should invest to:

Recommendations

9

Develop effective financing and other investment strategies to support the implementation of well-being and well-becoming recommendations.

- **Expand capacity to define and measure well-being and well-becoming** across ages, stages, and settings.
- **Prioritize data collection** and ongoing analysis so that systems can better understand and respond to the populations they serve.
- **Measure outcomes based on youth, family, and community well-being indicators**, not just system outcomes (e.g., recidivism, costs). Similarly, measure student growth, not just student achievement.
- **Design new interventions that focus on social, emotional, and physical well-being.**
- **Balance evaluation of evidence-based practice with evaluation of practice-based evidence.**
- **Clarify what we need to know more about.** Investments into new areas of research related to well-being will help expand the knowledge base around well-being and target issues for additional support.

Develop effective financing and other investment strategies to support the implementation of well-being and well-becoming recommendations. Financing strategies and policies can support or hinder the implementation of recommendations included here. Public and private leaders must focus on improvements to financing and investment policies to ensure effective implementation of services and supports aimed at improving the well-being of vulnerable youth and young adults.


- **Allow flexibility** and the blending and braiding of funds in the use of federal, state, and local funding streams to better meet the needs of vulnerable youth.
- **Advance a reinvestment strategy** that effectively shifts funding from deep-end treatment and remediation to front-end community-based prevention and early intervention and from racist policies and practices to anti-racist policies.
- **Create partnerships with communities** that provide for local control of public resources to support well-being, including participatory budgeting practices.
- Develop and implement effective and functional **performance-based contracting relationships** that support healing and multidimensional life course well-being.

Conclusion

Many older youth and young adults have experienced abuse, separation from family, and/or physical or mental health challenges. They may have fallen off track and are disconnected from schools and other pathways to successful adult life, or they may have experienced homelessness or housing instability. Young people of color may have experienced racialized trauma and racial injustice. Young people approaching and navigating adulthood while carrying the weight of these extra challenges need and deserve a broad range of opportunities and supports to help them form and strengthen connections and healthy relationships, learn to make informed and healthy decisions, and build on their own strengths and resilience.

To move toward wellness, young people need strong relationships, healthy family and family-like connections, and social networks to manage their health, to succeed in school, to locate a place to live, and to find and keep a job. They need ample and equitable opportunities to acquire new knowledge, develop and practice new skills, and safely struggle or fail. They need the supports to succeed personally, socially, and economically.

This document provides a robust framework for understanding well-being in an equitable, inclusive, and holistic (whole person, whole life) context and offers a series of recommendations to transform public systems and communities to nurture and enhance lifelong well-being for vulnerable young people as they make the transition into adulthood. These recommendations include significant and long-term policy and funding changes as well as practical, concrete strategies that individuals, families, and advocates can immediately begin to implement.



To move toward wellness, young people need strong relationships, healthy family and family-like connections, and social networks to manage their health, to succeed in school, to locate a place to live, and to find and keep a job.

Young people are growing up and transitioning into adulthood during especially challenging times. The cost of inaction, inadequate investments, and the perpetuation of historic inequities is great. We have also witnessed the incredible strength and resilience of this generation of young people, who despite facing steep structural barriers and unprecedented challenges, continue to find a way to grow and succeed. The benefits of strategic, thoughtful, coordinated action and investment centered on well-being to support young people are nothing short of limitless.

Endnotes

- 1 For the purpose of this paper, the terms *youth justice* and *youth justice system* are used to describe the combination of what have been traditionally called juvenile justice, the juvenile justice system, and youth and young adults involved with the adult criminal justice system.
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- 5 See Appendix A for a full list of contributors to this document.
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- 20 Ben-Arieh, A., & Frønes, I. (2011). Taxonomy for child well-being indicators: A framework for the analysis of the well-being of children. *Childhood*, 18(4), 460–476.
- 21 This framework draws upon and is influenced by a diverse set of philosophies, approaches, and ideas, including the expertise of the group of researchers, content experts, and funders who contributed to this effort. A full list of contributors is included in Appendix A. This framework was informed in particular by the ideas and concepts of the Readiness Project of the Forum for Youth Investment. This framework is intentionally aligned with tools and concepts of the Readiness Project and is intended to serve as a companion to those efforts.

Appendix A

We gratefully acknowledge our thought partners and members of the YTFG Well-Being Subcommittee who influenced and contributed to this document.

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