Youth Social Connectedness and Social Support Networks: PARTNERme Findings

March 2022

VisibleNetworkLabs

This report was produced by VISIBLE NETWORK LABS using PARTNERme.

VISIBLE NETWORK LABS is a data science company developing tools and technology to help people measure, understand and evolve the personal and professional networks that influence the communities where they live.

PARTNERme is a person-centered tool designed to help identify who is at risk of adverse social connectedness, target their most urgent resource gap, and connect them to resources.

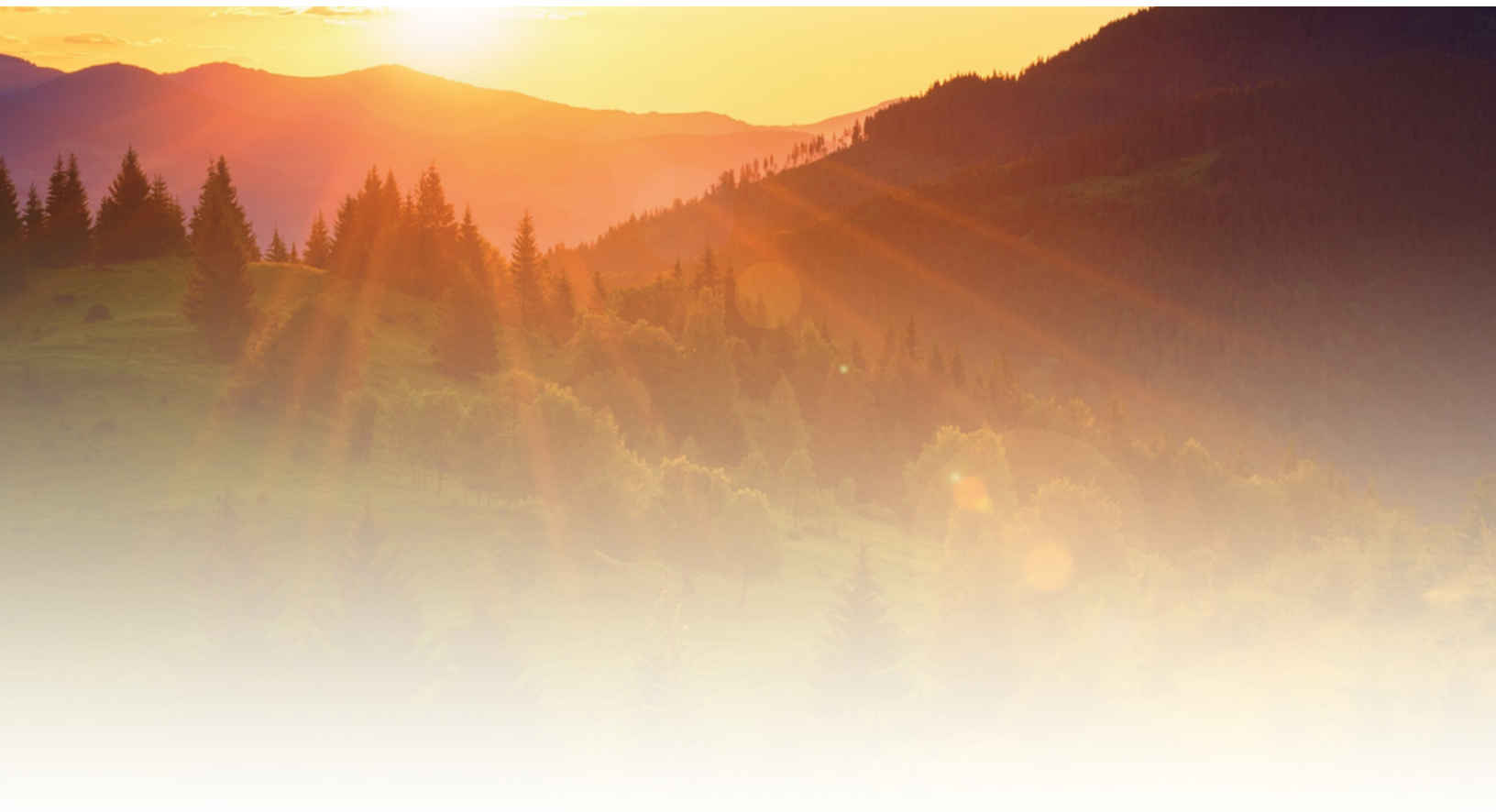PARTNERme is a registered product of Visible Network Labs.

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Introduction

Why is looking at social connectedness and social support systems important? The lack of visibility on personal social support networks of young adults is due in large part to the unavailability of tools and metrics to assess the health of these networks. This makes it nearly impossible to support young adults through programs and interventions designed to strengthen them.

Visible Network Labs (VNL) is a data science company developing tools and technology to help people measure, understand and evolve the personal and professional networks that influence the communities where they live.

With the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, VNL is hosting a fellowship to engage young people in exploring ways to strengthen social connectedness and support systems. During the past few months, VNL and four fellows from three states (Georgia, Maryland, and Florida) have explored new ideas around network science, social connectedness, and design thinking to better understand how social support systems play a role in creating outcomes for young adults ages 14-24.

Fellow Bios

Learn more about the four fellows participating in the Social Support Research Fellowship. More information on the fellows can be found in this blog post: https://visiblenetworklabs.com/2021/07/21/meet-the-fellows/.

Zoe Crocker, Orlando, Florida

Zoe is currently an undergraduate student at the University of South Florida pursuing an Interdisciplinary Social Sciences degree with concentrations in International Studies and Sociology. She is also the creator and moderator of a chatroom server for the Orlando Youth Alliance, a support group for LGBTQ+ youth. She is excited to join the Social Support Research Fellowship and gain experience in research that can help her in her future career in nonprofit administration.

Yamilex Acosta Cruz, Baltimore, Maryland

Yamilex is from the Dominican Republic. She is one of the co-founders of the Parqueologia Migrante project, a virtual participatory research project working to strengthen connections among migrant youth in the Baltimore area. She is excited to explore the ways young adults connect and find resources to further their educations and career paths.

Martha Gonzalez, College Park, Georgia

Martha Gonzalez loves expanding her network through new opportunities in the workplace or school environment. She is a current scholar at Atlanta Metropolitan State College through a program named Year Up. She is interested in the computer science field and has found various ways to expand her knowledge through different programs and research projects. She has learned the value of being resilient, detail-oriented, and innovative. Martha spends her spare time going on hikes and playing video games with her online friends.

Kyra Stoute, Atlanta, Georgia

Kyra is a student at Georgia State University studying Marketing. She is a member of Atlanta Glow, a nonprofit organization that provides mentorship, leadership development, and life skills training opportunities to underserved women and girls. Away from school, she loves creating digital art, along with crochet.

Project Description

VNL collaborated closely with the fellows to learn about how young people think about how the support networks of young adults form and evolve. This work was informed by their own perspectives and lived experiences as well as the perspectives and experiences of other young people. This project presents a unique opportunity to reshape how we imagine these connections can happen, how they can be leveraged, and how programs can be implemented to support young adults to build stronger, more resilient social support networks.

VNL collaborated with the fellows to conduct key informant qualitative interviews with young people between the ages of 16 and 24 about how they thought about social connectedness, how their thoughts about social connectedness differed from older generations, and their abilities to access needed support and resources. The underlined findings from that report were used to modify a quantitative survey on social needs, social support networks, and social connectedness for a young adult population.

VNL and the fellows worked together to analyze the qualitative survey findings, discuss what they meant, and write up those findings. The goal was to understand how young adults thought about social connectedness and how their social support networks helped them in times of need. This report is the result of that collaboration.

Methods

The fellows worked in partnership with VNL to identify young adults who have experiences that can inform our learning and provide insights to answer the proposed research questions. We first reviewed the original screener to understand our current conceptualization of social connectedness. This included how a person describes their level of social support, their perceptions of trust and dependency on members of their support network, and how they are currently able to use their networks to help address their needs.

During our discussions of the qualitative interviews and in preparing for the quantitative portion of this work, we talked about what factors influence how young adults connect with one another and what information they wish to share with others. The fellows lifted up that there may be varying levels of comfort in talking about certain topics with family members or friends. Topics like gender identity and relationship conflicts could be areas where talking to parents or certain family members was not a place to seek help or support. As a result, in our interviews with young people, we asked if they had varying levels of comfort asking for help from certain people. In those interviews, some voiced they were more comfortable accepting help from those that they believed truly cared about them and in situations where they did not think there were strings attached to that support or help. Many mentioned that they "went to friends first" when they needed help and were more comfortable with those that they "respect and admire." One youth said that they were more comfortable turning to friends because they "trust[ed] them not to involve authorities who may do harm in the situation."

Based on these findings, drawn from both the interviews and the youth fellows' lived experiences, we modified the PARTNERme screener, which is described in more detail on the next page. This included asking young adults how comfortable they were in going to that support member for support or help. We also added more things that young adults may need help or support to address. This included more areas related to school, one's identity, mental health, and future planning. In addition, we asked several open-ended questions to gain a better sense of how young adults thought about social connectedness and what made them more or less likely to accept help or resources. The survey we used can be found in the Appendix and the highlighted changes based on the fellows' lived experiences and the qualitative interviews are highlighted in yellow.

We piloted this survey with young adults in the United States between the ages of 14 and 24 years of age and the results are presented below. A web link was sent by the youth fellows to young adults in their networks and youth organizations. As this included individual invitations and through organizations/discord channels, the response rate is unknown. Respondents responded to the online survey between November 2021 and December 2021. They received a $10 gift card for the completion of the survey.

PARTNERme Background

The problem we're trying to solve

While we know that a person or family's social support network influences health and wellbeing outcomes it can be difficult to know how young adults are using their support networks and who may be at higher risk for adverse social connectedness, loneliness, or social isolation.

The solution we've implemented

PARTNERme solves this problem by providing an interactive, quick way to screen for social needs, including social connectedness. It provides a way to quickly visualize a person's support network and link them to resources based on the findings.

PARTNERme was designed to honor what we have learned from thousands of hours of research, interviews, and data analysis - that people know best what they need. It was originally developed to use systems mapping, network science, analytics, and insights to visualize how health and public health systems convene and organize coordinated systems of care for individuals and families. With this project, we are working to adapt it to visualize the systems and networks that connect to young people more broadly.

PARTNERme measures

PARTNERme adds an innovative approach using social network methodology. Social network questions characterize personal support networks including both formal and informal members important in caring for a person, the quality and function of those relationships, and the coordination within this support network (Varda et al., 2008). The assessment gathers information on the personal support/service networks of young adults including services they need, identification of organizations/individuals in their personal support networks, and perceptions of those organizations/individuals.

Dependency, Trust, and Comfort are dimensions of support member relationships that we assessed in the Survey. Specifically, young adults responded to the following questions:
- How much do you depend or lean on these people/organizations/groups to get the help you need?
- How much trust or confidence do you have in them to get the help you need, when you need it?
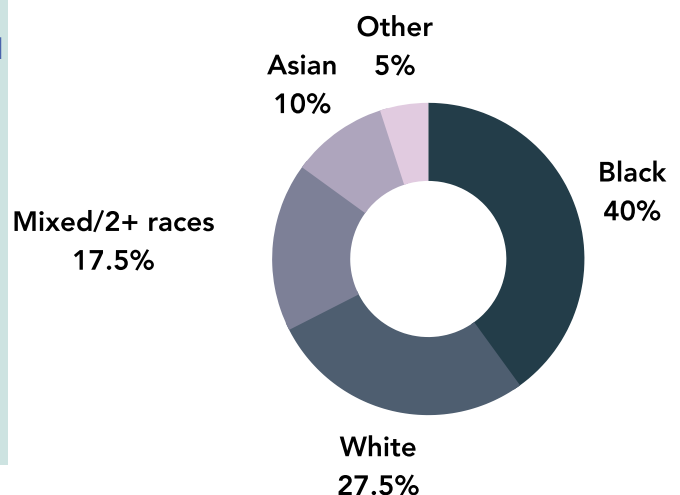- How comfortable are you in going to them for help?

Demographics

In total for the piloting of the survey, 43 young adults responded to the survey. Most came from the southeastern part of the country, specifically from Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. The majority described themselves as women (63%) while 20% described themselves as men. The other young adults described themselves as non-binary, genderqueer, questioning, or did not provide a response. They were between the ages of 14 and 24 with the largest percentage, 42%, in the age range of 18 to 21. Approximately 40% of the young adults described themselves as black while 17.5% described themselves as "Mixed" or reported at least two races. Almost 14% described their ethnicity as Hispanic.

These racial and ethnic categorizations came out of open-ended questions where youth were given the opportunity to describe their race, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds in their own words. When these young adults were asked to describe their racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, much richer identities were described.

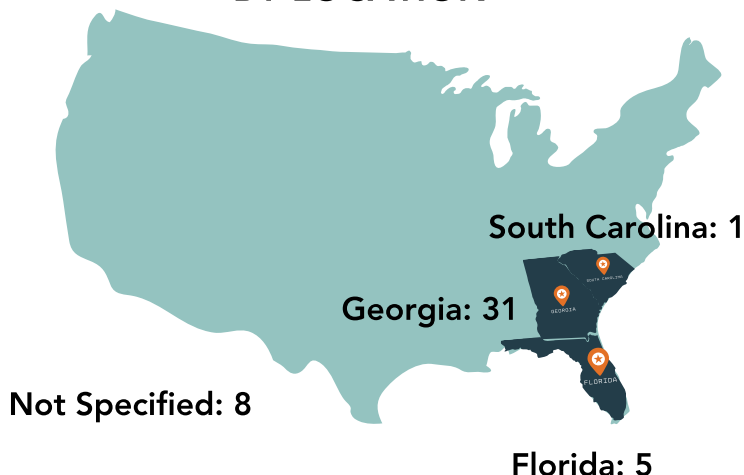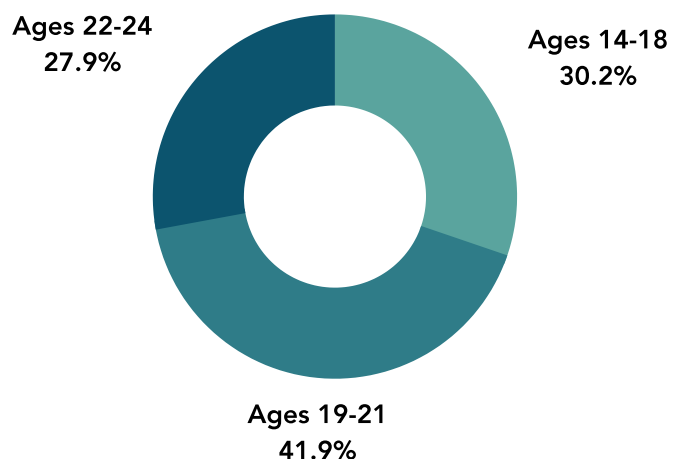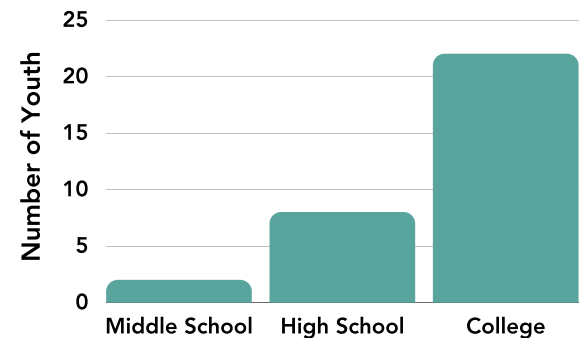### RACIAL, ETHNIC, CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS

BY RACE

Black 40%
White 27.5%
Mixed/2+ races 17.5%
Asian 10%
Other 5%

BY LOCATION

South Carolina: 1
Georgia: 31
Not Specified: 8
Florida: 5

BY AGE

Ages 14-18 30.2%
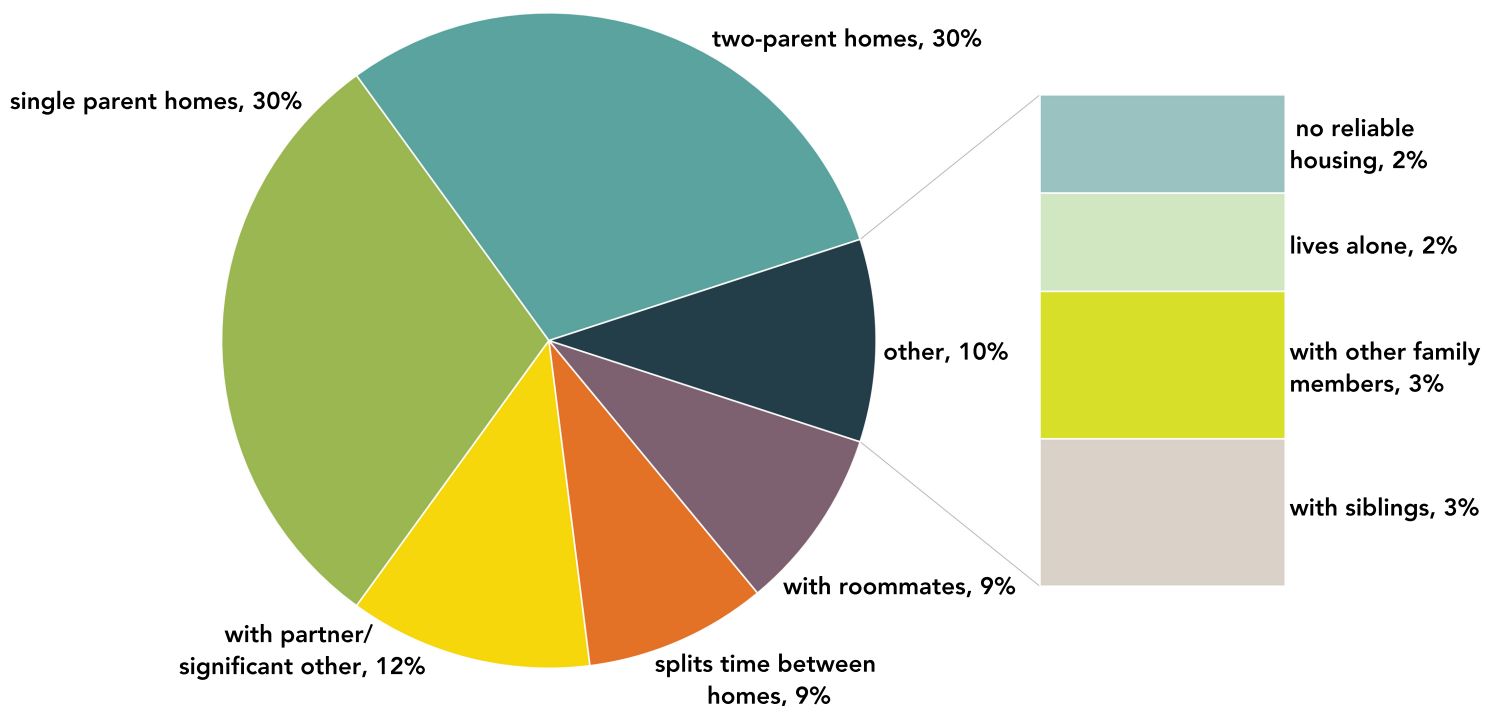Ages 19-21 41.9%
Ages 22-24 27.9%

Demographics

Most of the survey respondents were in school, almost 75%. Of those in school, the majority were in college, while a quarter reported they were in high school.

Almost 30% of respondents reported they lived in single-parent homes with or without siblings. Another 30% reportedly lived in two-parent homes with or without siblings. Another 9% split their time between parents' homes. Finally, about 31% were not living with their parents.

IN SCHOOL

HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE

- two-parent homes, 30%
- single parent homes, 30%
- with partner/ significant other, 12%
- splits time between homes, 9%
- with roommates, 9%
- other, 10%
  - no reliable housing, 2%
  - lives alone, 2%
  - with other family members, 3%
  - with siblings, 3%

RESPONSIBLE FOR OTHERS IN HOUSEHOLD

- siblings/young(er) adults 14%
- child 4.7%
- no one 81.4%
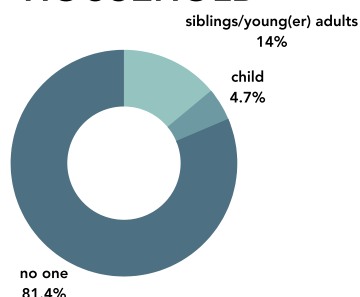
On average, young adults were living in households with two other members. Approximately 14% of respondents had at least some responsibility for caring for their siblings or other younger adults in the household. Almost 5% were caring for their own children.

Defining Social Support

In an open-ended question, we asked young adults to define social support. We wanted to gain greater insight into their own ways of thinking about social support and not be constrained to any of our preconceptions. Young adults had various ways of defining social support and social connection. For some, it was family members, friends, and others who were there for them in any situation, and that showed care and encouragement as they moved through life. For many, it included someone that was just there to listen to them and show understanding. For others, social support included helping with mental health and physical problems through communication and listening. Providing advice and guidance were also major themes as young adults discussed social support.

> Help one with mental and physical problems by talking.

> Someone who supports you in social settings. For instance, going with you to a new club or event where there's lots of people that you don't know. I'd be scared to go to a new place without bringing someone I know.

> Assistance in the areas of life dealing with community, friendships, and environment

> Your friends, family or whoever...being supportive of the moves you make in life.

> I would define social support as support that encourages connections, deepening those connections, and a support system that accepts you for who you are.
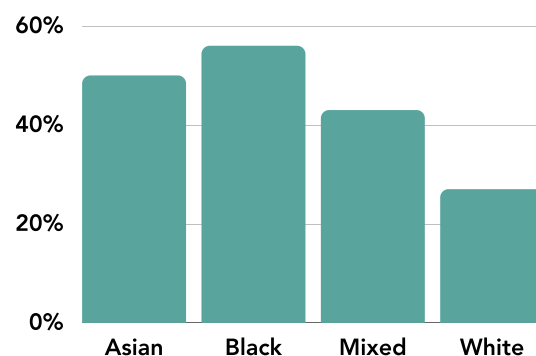
Youth Perceptions of Self

Most of the young adults surveyed relied on themselves a fair amount in times of need and were also fairly confident in themselves to get the help they needed when they needed it. Many youth of color indicated that they relied on themselves a great deal in those times of need. In addition, most had at least a fair amount of belief in themselves.

There were some youth that relied on themselves a fair amount or a great deal in times of need but lacked much trust in themselves to get the help they needed. When asked about what makes them more or less likely to ask for help,

**RELIES ON THEMSELVES
A GREAT DEAL IN TIMES OF NEED**

one respondent said, "fear of being judged...or having people use my less favorable traits against me make some less likely to ask for help." They were more likely to ask for help when "given sufficient time to open up and process things, when I'm not made to be a spectacle, or when I am respected for the boundaries I hold." Many felt these were reasons that young people often did not ask for help and possibly relied on themselves more often.

And as we think about how the pandemic, social connection, and care for each other is shown, particularly to young adults, it's worth considering what this moment looks like to youth of color. As one respondent said, "Well during the age of this pandemic, social interaction, connectedness, and more have changed a lot. As a black person being disconnected for months but watching the world rally behind BLM, then also watching it dissipate and become unimportant a few months later made me feel really disconnected as a person, and especially to so many people around me. It feels like so much in the world is hopelessness."

		Rely on yourself in times of need				
		not at all	A small amount	a fair amount	a great deal	Total
Trust in self to get help you need	Not at all	0	2	0	1	3
	A small amount	0	3	4	4	11
	A fair amount	0	2	9	8	19
	A great deal	0	1	4	4	9
	Total	0	8	17	17	42

What do young adults think they need help with?

Young adults were asked if they ever need help with a few different things: access to resources, getting to or from school, future planning, sex education, or transportation. Future planning was most frequently identified among young adults. There were some gender and racial differences with 68% of young women identifying this as a need compared to 33% of young men. In addition, 75% of black youth identified future planning as a need compared to 27% of white youth.

Transportation was another place where there were racial differences, with 72% of white youth identifying it as a need compared to 28% of mixed youth and 25% of black youth.

THINGS YOUNG ADULTS SAY THEY NEED HELP WITH
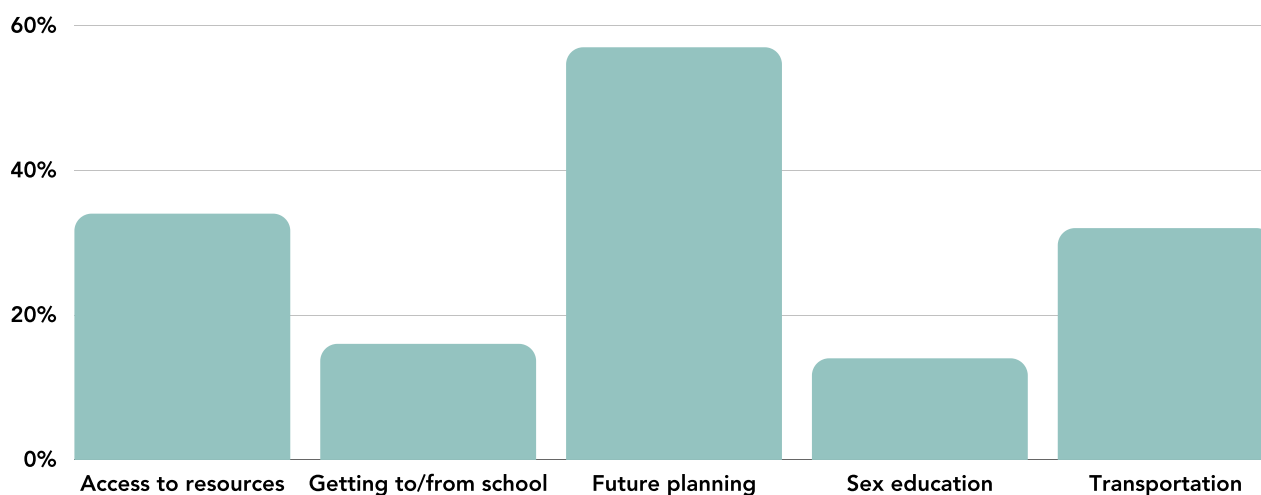
Social Support Networks

Who's in these support networks?

Young adults described networks that were mainly filled with family and friends. Teachers, mentors, medical professionals, and other more formal supports were not as frequently reported.

Most youth, 77%, reported that the people or organizations in their networks lived nearby and they interacted with them in-person. About 17% were people they interacted with virtually but lived nearby, and 13% with whom they interacted with virtually but lived far away.

While their dependency on people that lived nearby was higher, their trust and comfort going to these people when they needed help did not differ if they interacted in-person or virtually.

others 3.5%
teachers 4.4%
medical professionals/others 4.4%
friends 24.6%
family 63.2%
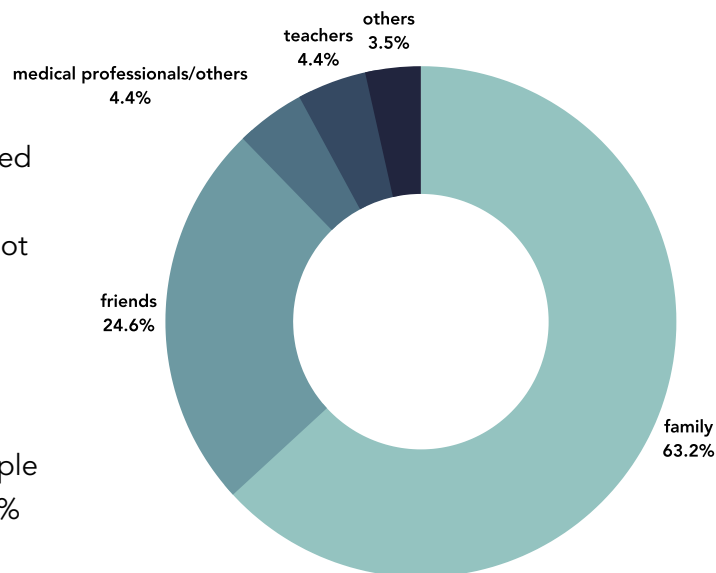
What are young adults receiving from these relationships?

Most young adults were receiving financial support or some form of emotional connection (quality time, emotional support, or friendship) from the relationships in their support networks. Mentorship and other in-person support were also mentioned.

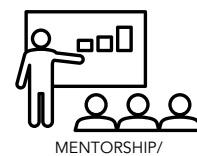**Percent of Young Adult with Different Types of Support they Received from their Networks**

QUALITY TIME
59%

FINANCIAL
56%

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT
48%

FRIENDSHIP
46%

MENTORSHIP/ GUIDANCE
41%

PHYSICAL TOUCH
38%

OTHER IN-PERSON SUPPORT
33%

OTHER SUPPORT
5%

Support Member Relationships: What are important qualities in order to get the help you need?

Our previous research using the PARTNERme tool has indicated that the trust one has in a support member's ability to help them when they need help and their dependency on that member to help when they need it are important qualities in a support network. For example, having people or organizations that you can turn to in times of need that you really trust will help you is important. In addition, it may be good to have several people that can help you out so that you aren't overly dependent on the support or time availability of one person or organization. For that reason, we have hypothesized that higher trust in a support member to help when you need it and lower dependency on that support member to help when you need it can be good things.

As mentioned in our Methods section, we talked with the youth fellows about the importance of comfort level when turning to someone for support or help. Certain topics might be more difficult to discuss with family than others, such as gender identity or relationship conflicts. For that reason, we also added comfort level in going to that support member for help as another dimension of support member relationships to explore.

As a result of our previous work and the work with the youth fellows, we asked respondents to answer three questions about every single member of their support network:
- How much do you depend or lean on this person/organization/group to get the help you need?
- How much trust or confidence do you have in them to get the help you need, when you need it?
- How comfortable are you in going to them for help?

We find that in general trust and dependency are similar across racial and gender differences, young adults had different comfort levels going to the people in their support networks. White youth and non-binary/gender-questioning youth have lower levels of comfort in asking for help.

Dimension of Support Relationships by Race
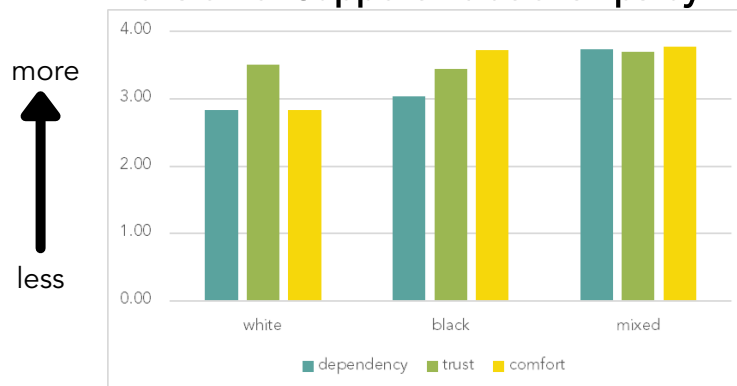
The graph on the left displays the average trust in, dependency on, and comfort in asking for help from all the members of white, black, and mixed-race youth social support networks.

Social Support and Social Connectedness: How do we measure it?

Relationship Quality Matters

We use the relationship dimensions of dependency, trust, and comfort described on the previous page to understand a person's support network. Using these measures at the individual support member level, we calculate a person's network relationship quality by weighting their relationships by the level of social connectedness.

Relationships that are considered more adverse (higher dependency, lower levels of trust and comfort) are given lower weights while relationships that are considered more positive (lower dependency, higher levels of trust and comfort) are given higher weights. As a result, a young adult with many network members that they highly trust, have high comfort in asking for help from, and do not highly depend upon would be considered to have a higher quality network. By contrast, a young adult who has many connections to people they do not trust and don't feel comfortable asking for help from but do not have other options for help, would be considered to have a lower quality network.

Coordination Matters

Additionally, we think that having support members that are able to work together when a person needs help is a positive sign that they have a coordinated and healthy support network that can be "activated" in times of need.

Do you think you have support? That matters too!

Finally, we believe that even if a person has high-quality relationships and members that can work together in times of need, if they don't believe they have the support they need, then they are still at risk of not getting the help they need. How a person feels about the amount of support they receive is an important factor in understanding social support and social connectedness.

Social Support and Social Connectedness

Calculating a Social Connectedness Level

We take the things we think matter--high-quality relationships, coordination in networks, and self-perceptions of support--and calculate a social connectedness level. The scale goes from 0 to 3. Higher scores mean that a person has higher levels of social connectedness. Lower scores mean a person has lower social connectedness and may be at risk of not getting the support or help that they need.

How does it correlate with self-reported mental health?

When looking at young adults' social connectedness and their self-reported mental health outcomes, we are beginning to see correlations.

In the scatterplot on the right, we see that young adults that report worse overall mental health also have lower levels of social connectedness.

Similarly, in the scatterplot below, we see that young adults that report being lonely more frequently also tend to have lower levels of social connectedness.

Social Connectedness Level and Self-Rated Mental Health

Social Connectedness Level and Loneliness
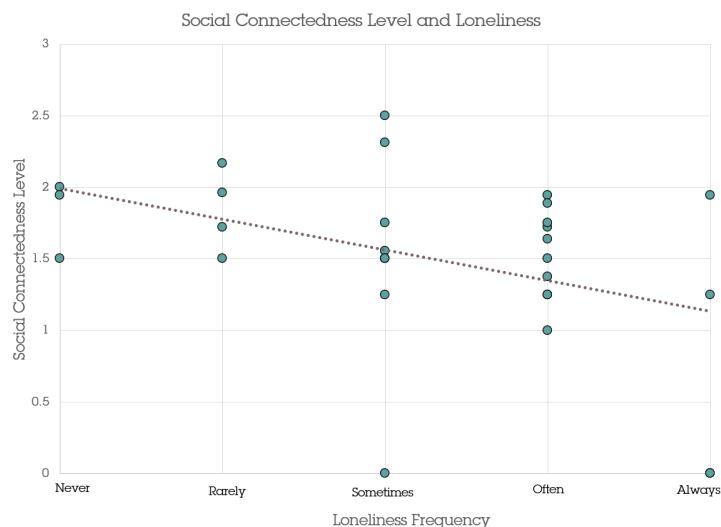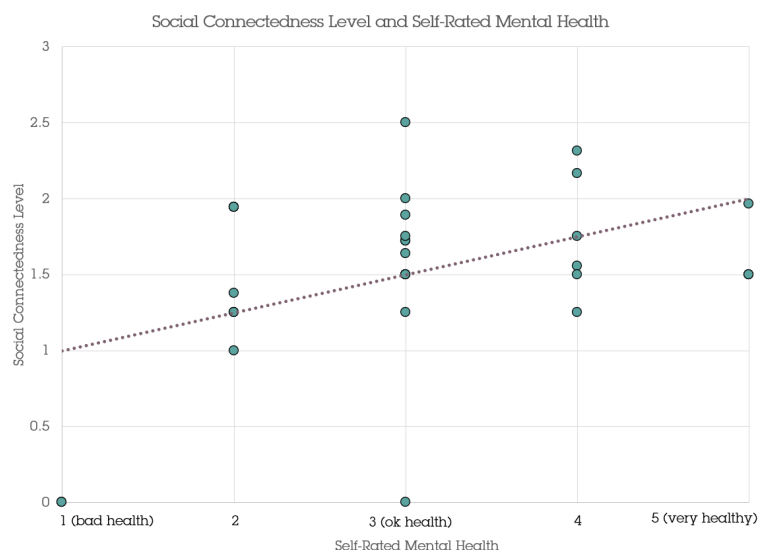
Helping young adults increase their social connectedness may have benefits on their health and wellbeing.

How do young adults use their social support networks?

We wanted to begin to understand how young adults could use their social support networks to help with things that come up in their everyday lives. Understanding how the people and organizations in their networks help them with any needs they currently face can help us understand where there are gaps and what we can do that will be helpful.

What are young adults currently getting help with?

We asked young adults to let us know what they were currently getting help with and who in their support networks were helping them with those things. In other words, how their support networks were currently helping them in their everyday lives. They were asked to draw a line to show the things a member in their support network was helping them address. A graphical example is shown to the right.

While all youth frequently mentioned mental health and wellbeing areas as those they were currently addressing, white youth and non-binary/questioning youth more frequently mentioned getting help with anxiety and depression. This raises questions about whether racial disparities are impacting who has access to mental health care and whether certain groups of youth, such as non-binary and gender questioning youth, require greater mental health care support.

low dependency on and high trust in support member — support member helps with a need
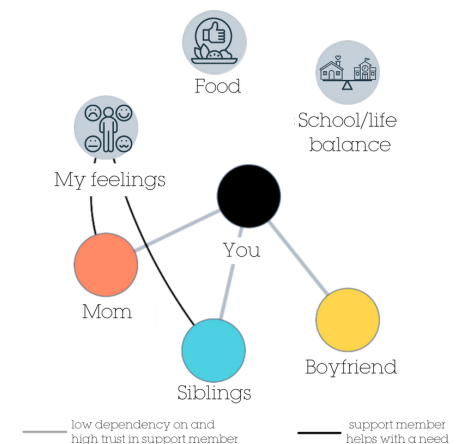
Example of how a young adult's social support network helps them

What do young adults currently need help with?

In addition, we asked young adults to identify the areas that they currently needed help with and how they thought the members of their support network could help them with those needs. This leaned on a strengths-based approach to get youth to consider how the people and organizations in their lives could help them address some of the things they faced in their lives.

There were more areas identified that young adults said they needed help with than compared to areas they were currently getting help with. Anxiety, depression, talking about my feelings, and schoolwork were frequently identified areas that they were both getting help with and needed help with. However, young adults frequently reported several other things they needed help to address. Some of these can be seen on the following page.

high dependency on and high trust in support member — support member could help with a need
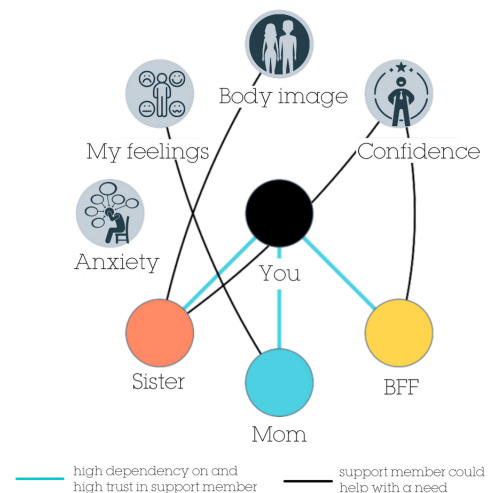
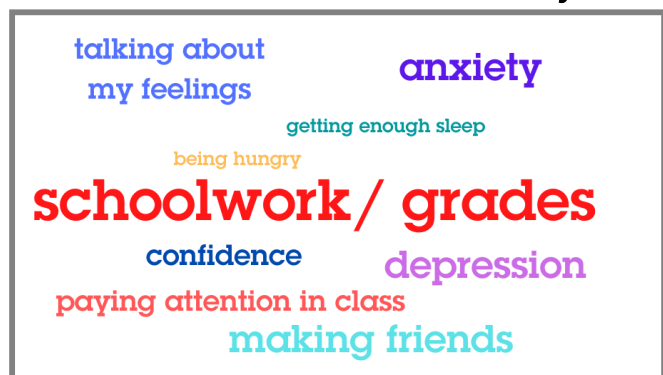**Example of how a young adult thinks their social support network could help them with the things they currently need help with**

Do the things young adults get help with differ by age?

We see some differences in the needs that young adults are addressing by age group. Below are word clouds of the needs that their support networks were currently helping them address by different age groups. Mental health needs were frequently being addressed across all age groups (i.e. talking about my feelings, anxiety, depression). However, even among young adults, different ones are likely to take priority at different times in their lives.

Most Addressed Needs of 14- to 18-year-olds

talking about my feelings
anxiety
getting enough sleep
being hungry
schoolwork/ grades
confidence
depression
paying attention in class
making friends

High school-aged young adults reported that schoolwork/grades and other school-related things were frequently the needs they were addressing. Anxiety and depression were also frequently mentioned. Sleep was another area where they were likely to report getting help. Schoolwork, mental health, and sleep were frequently mentioned together.

College-aged students tended to have more things they were currently working to address. More of these needs were around what we consider social determinants of health (i.e., having a reliable place to stay, financial security, being hungry) and mental health. This is a time of great transition and ensuring that young adults are able to thrive will require us to consider how to support these young adults in addressing these needs.

Most Addressed Needs of 19- to 21-year-olds

dating/ relationship conflict
making friends
being hungry
getting enough sleep
talking about my feelings
anxiety
financial security
depression
schoolwork/ grades
having a reliable place to stay

Most Addressed Needs of 22- to 24-year-olds

identity (knowing who I am)
confidence
financial security
worried about paying the bills
talking about my feelings
depression
being hungry
anxiety
making friends
body or body image

Young adults between the ages of 22 and 24 tended to report fewer things that they were currently addressing. However, mental health, identity considerations, and financial concerns were frequently mentioned as things they were currently working to address.
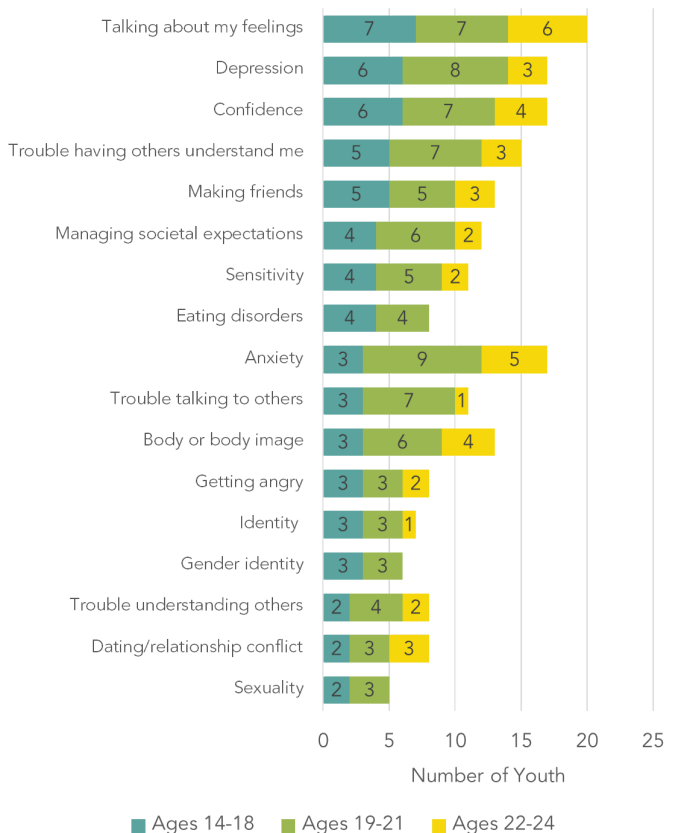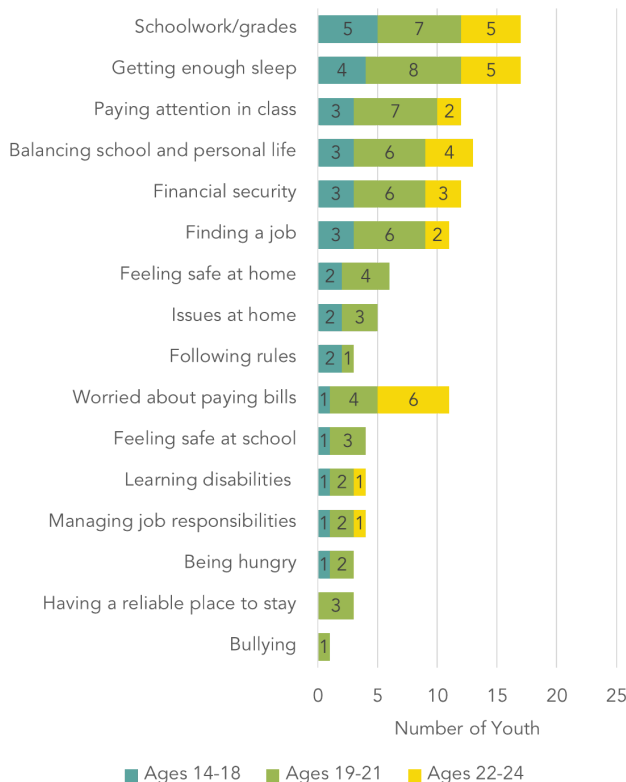
Where do young people need help or support?

Young people were additionally asked about areas where they needed help or support. Whiel we saw that many young adults were addressing mental and emotional wellbeing, we also found that these areas were commonly identified as areas where greater support was needed.

These differed by age as well. For example, trouble talking to others was a frequently identified area where college-aged youth needed help but was less frequently mentioned by those older than 21. Anxiety was another area where older youth needed help but was less frequently reported by younger adults, many of whom indicated it was an area they were already addressing.

Areas where young adults need help by age

Areas where young adults need help by age (mental health chart). Categories top to bottom: Talking about my feelings (7, 7, 6); Depression (6, 8, 3); Confidence (6, 7, 4); Trouble having others understand me (5, 7, 3); Making friends (5, 5, 3); Managing societal expectations (4, 6, 2); Sensitivity (4, 5, 2); Eating disorders (4, 4); Anxiety (3, 9, 5); Trouble talking to others (3, 7, 1); Body or body image (3, 6, 4); Getting angry (3, 3, 2); Identity (3, 3, 1); Gender identity (3, 3); Trouble understanding others (2, 4, 2); Dating/relationship conflict (2, 3, 3); Sexuality (2, 3). X-axis: Number of Youth. Legend: Ages 14-18, Ages 19-21, Ages 22-24.

Areas where young adults need help by age

Areas where young adults need help by age (school/work/home chart). Categories top to bottom: Schoolwork/grades (5, 7, 5); Getting enough sleep (4, 8, 5); Paying attention in class (3, 7, 2); Balancing school and personal life (3, 6, 4); Financial security (3, 6, 3); Finding a job (3, 6, 2); Feeling safe at home (2, 4); Issues at home (2, 3); Following rules (2, 1); Worried about paying bills (1, 4, 6); Feeling safe at school (1, 3); Learning disabilities (1, 2, 1); Managing job responsibilities (1, 2, 1); Being hungry (1, 2); Having a reliable place to stay (3); Bullying (1). X-axis: Number of Youth. Legend: Ages 14-18, Ages 19-21, Ages 22-24.

While all these areas can be interrelated, we separated some of the ones related to mental health (chart above) from those more related to school, work, and home life (chart to the left). While younger adults more frequently reported schoolwork and grades as areas where they needed help, those between 22 and 24 often mentioned that they were worried about paying the bills and needed more help with these concerns.

Ensuring that we are providing the right resources and support across the ages and transitions of young adults is important.

Youth of Color

We were also interested in understanding the specific needs of youth of color. In assessing those needs, we looked at how those needs also think that needs are interrelated. For example, if a young person is having trouble balancing their personal and school lives, it wouldn't be uncommon to find that they are also struggling with schoolwork/grades and financial security. For this reason we looked for some areas of need that were frequently reported together. In the maps below, we see the areas that young adults are dealing with as circles. They are sized by how many chose that area, so larger circles indicate that more youth of color said they were getting help with it (in the map on the left) or that they needed help with it (in the map on the right).

Thicker lines indicate that more youth of color reported both areas. For example, the thick line between "talking about my feelings" and "anxiety" seen on the lefthand map means that youth of color reported that they were getting help to deal with both anxiety and talking about their feelings.

It is worth considering how some of these areas of need, for example, sleep, are related to schoolwork, school/life balance, depression, and managing societal expectations. Or how say, helping young adults increase their confidence or communication skills could also help those that are having trouble making friends. Learning how these patterns of needs are connected, may provide insight into how best to support these young adults in ways that they will actually find useful.

What youth of color are getting help with	What youth of color need help with
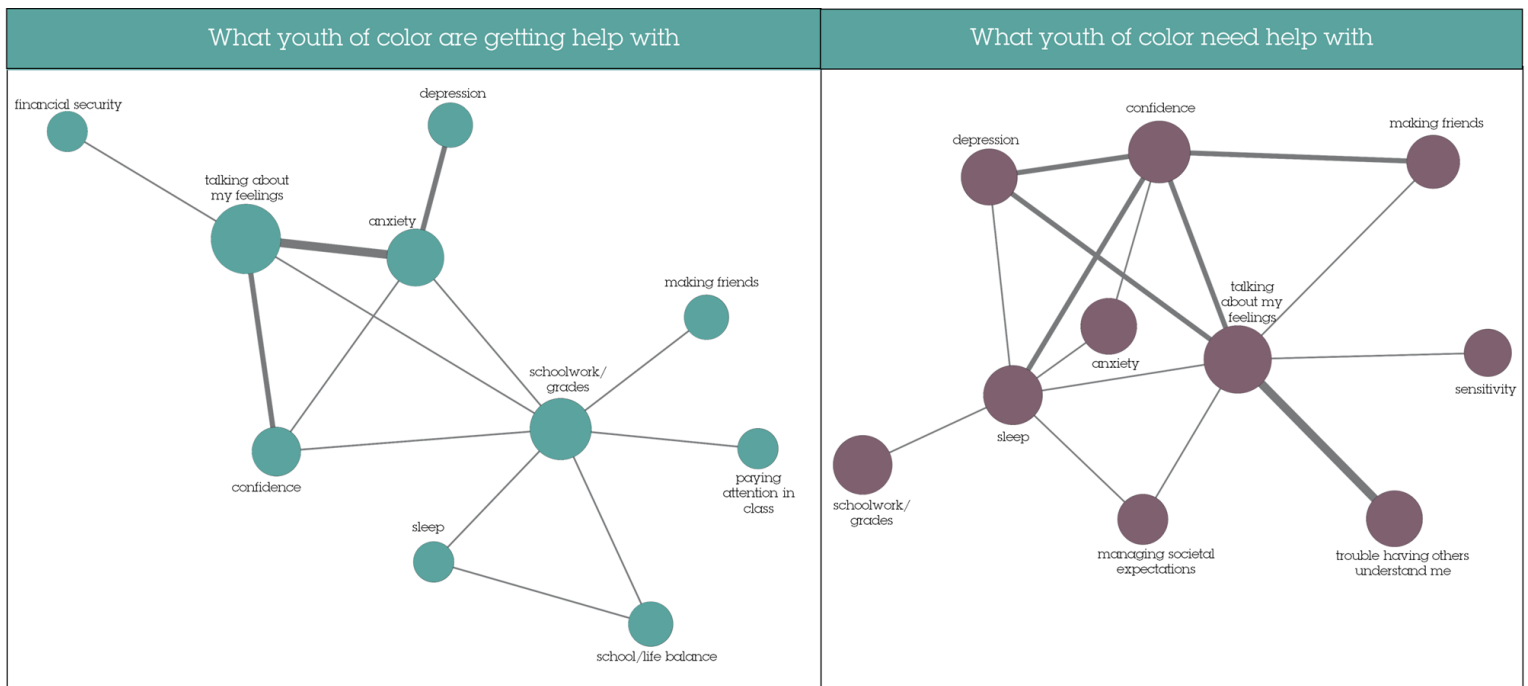
These maps represent the most frequent ways that these areas are interconnected in the lives of young adults. Circles represent areas with which young adults were getting help (left box) or needed help (right box). They are sized by the number of young adults who chose that area. So in the box on the left, larger circles indicate that more young adults reported they were addressing that area. A line between two circles means that a young adult chose both needs and a thicker line means that more young adults chose both areas. For example, many young adults said they were getting help to address both "anxiety" and "talking about their feelings."

Youth of Color (cont.)

Greater exploration of how racism (in all its forms) and racial privilege impacts youth expectations for help and support from society and others. We found that about 35% of youth of color said they were not addressing any of the areas listed, and 25% of youth of color said they did not need help with any of the areas listed. By contrast, none of the white youth chose these answers. Survey response options and differing expectations from society can and should help them may impact how youth of color answer this question compared to white youth. White youth may be more likely to believe and expect that others should help them while youth of color may not have the same beliefs or expectations.

Youth of color that indicated they did not need any help with any of the listed areas had slightly smaller, though not statistically significantly smaller, networks. They reported being lonely less frequently than youth of color who reported needing help with at least one of the listed areas. The types of support members may influence whether or not they needed help. Youth of color who did not need help with any of the listed areas more frequently reported that their support networks included more parents than youth of color who reported needing help with at least one of these areas. On average, youth of color who did not need any help with the listed areas had 1.6 members of their network that were parents while youth of color who needed help with at least one of these areas had 0.6 parental members in their network.

Considering how loneliness and the types of social support impact the needs of youth may be important in understanding how best to address their needs.

**Loneliness among Youth of Color that do or not not need help**
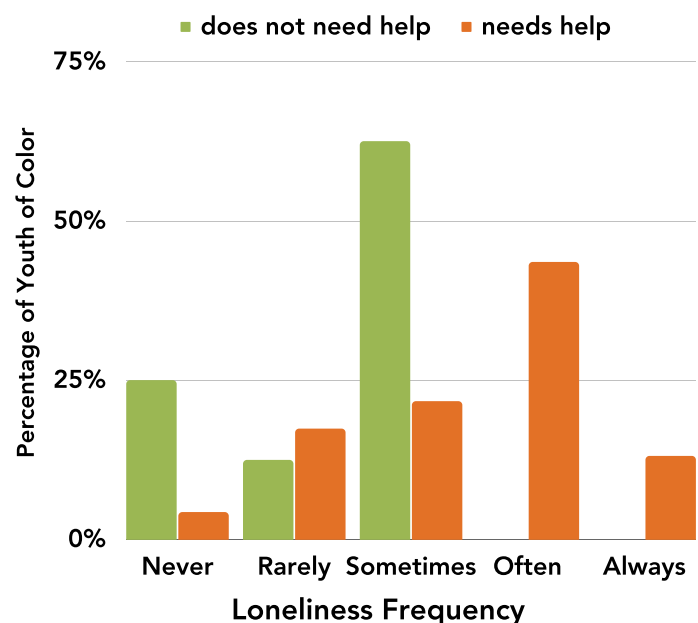
Because our sample of white youth also included all of the non-binary and questioning youth in our sample, we feel that more investigation is needed to understand all the areas they are working to address and the supports that would be valuable to them. As the main function of this survey was to pilot the assessment tool, our sample is too small to make any conclusions about cisgender and gender nonconforming/questioning youth. However, there do appear to be differences that are also worth further assessment with more intentional surveying of such youth.

Where do young people need more help or support?

It was not uncommon for young people to indicate that even though they were getting some support, it wasn't sufficient to fully meet their needs. The graph below shows which areas were only partially supported. Anxiety and talking about my feelings were areas where more help may be needed across the age groups. Areas like schoolwork/grades, depression, and making friends may be places where high school-aged and college-aged youth may benefit more from greater supports and resources.

While most youth indicated that they had at least one person in their network that was helping them with the areas that they were addressing, they did not always believe their current support networks could help with areas where they needed help.

Areas where more help may be needed
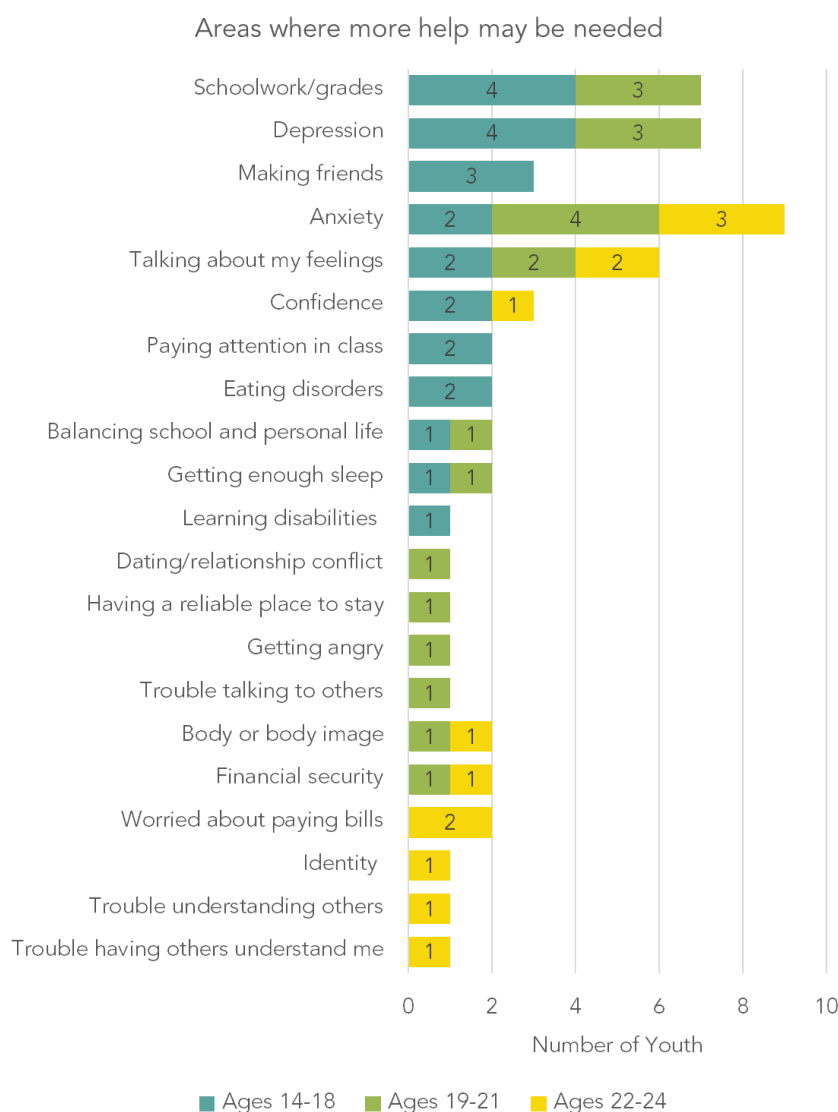
For example, 67% of youth that said "schoolwork or grades" was an area where they needed help did not think they had someone in their current support network that could help them. Alternatively, 36% of youth who said "talking about my feelings" was an area where they needed help did not have someone in their network that they thought could help them address that need.

Helping youth to expand their networks to include supports and resources for schoolwork and grades while also encouraging them to consider how their current support system can help them address expressing their feelings could be valuable.

VNL

Accessing Resources and Support

Asking for Help

To that point, we asked young adults about some of the qualities that made them more or less likely to reach out when they needed help or support. Many young adults mentioned that those that had gone through similar struggles and were non-judgmental were important qualities. In addition, trust was another important characteristic. They wanted someone who would focus on them and they did not feel was offering help with ulterior motives. They worried that the things they shared would be shared without their consent or would lead to police involvement and so confidentiality and anonymity were important qualities and something that should be considered in the context of mandatory reporters.

In addition, some mentioned that they've been taught to rely on themselves, and thus asking for help is often seen as a weakness or there is a stigma attached to it. While we want to use a strengths-based approach it's important for young adults to realize that asking for help is not a sign of weakness. Many worried that they would be a burden or were bothering the person if they asked for help.

Young adults mentioned that convenience made them more likely to accept a formal resource. By that they meant that it was within walking or public transportation distance from them, that it was free and did not require them to jump through a lot of hoops to access the resource. They were more likely to accept if it was recommended by a trusted source.

PARTNERme Feasibility

The main objective of this pilot survey was to see if youth found it easy to understand and use. We also wanted to know if they had suggestions for clarifications and recommendations for ways to make it better.
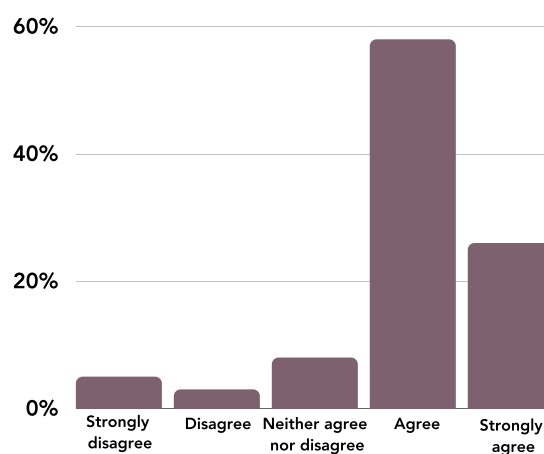
We found that 84% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the survey was easy to understand. Approximately 60% said that there wasn't anything unclear about the survey and they had nothing that they would change or re-word about it.

The most common theme regarding unclear or difficult things about the survey related to drawing the lines in the support network question. One respondent said, "I would change the line drawing thing. I kept trying to answer it and the survey was saying that my answer was incomplete." Another said, "It was kinda hard to use the line-drawing tool." Others asked for more clarification regarding the "nodes activity." One person said, "What happens if someone doesn't have any real support? Some people don't have family or close friends. It might be hard for them to do the drawing activities." In the next iteration of the survey, more clarification may be required around how to complete the support network drawing portion and some thought about how people may feel if they don't currently have many (or any) support members.

PARTNERme was easy to understand

One found the wording of the question "How much do you rely on yourself in times of need?" confusing. Finally, several had suggestions for more options related to school grade and current geographic location. In the next iteration of the survey, we will work to address these concerns. However, overall, it appears that most found the survey understandable and had no major challenges to completing it.

Final Thoughts

Young adults from many different backgrounds took part in this PARTNERme survey. While we have learned many things with their help, it also raises more questions about what young adults need help with and how we can best support them in advancing their life goals.

Have we identified all the things that young adults need help with, and are we asking them in the right way? As we think about mental health and discussing our feelings, does the stigma of mental health impact how young adults respond to these questions? How do we go about further supporting their mental health needs?

Has the pandemic had different impacts on young adults by gender and race? Who has been most impacted by the isolation and remote aspects of the pandemic?

How can we continue to build strong and resilient youth while also encouraging them to ask for help when they need it? How do we continue to acknowledge and honor their strengths and autonomy while also emphasizing that asking or needing help is not a sign of weakness or reason to be embarrassed? How can we create new ways for them to access help and resources that they will find trustworthy and are comfortable accessing?

Finally, ensuring that organizations and resources that seek to help these young adults consider some of the constraints of young adults (limited transportation, confidentiality issues, limited financial means) is essential to acceptance of these forms of support.

Things that young adults were grateful for

What's Next?

We will continue to work on understanding the themes from our key informant interviews and these survey results. We plan to do several focus groups with young adults to explore some of the racial and gender differences that we are beginning to see in the data. We want to ensure that we address the full context of a young adult's lived experience and identify better ways to support them.

The PARTNERme survey is shown below. All yellow highlights are changes that were made to the survey as a result of previous qualitative work and discussions with the youth fellows.

PARTNERme for Young Adults	
The Social Support Research Fellows are piloting this survey with young adults, ages 14-24, to learn more about their social support connections, how those connections are leveraged to meet the needs of young adults, and how young adults are accessing resources to meet their needs. The perspectives shared will be used to design an assessment to measure social connectedness more effectively for young adults and better connect them to resources. Ultimately, the tool and metrics created will be shared with the Annie E. Casey Foundation as a resource for the foundation. For your participation, you will receive a $10 Target gift card. Participation is voluntary, responses will be confidential, and information shared will be combined with other results to be analyzed at an aggregate level.	• Agree • Decline
Instructions This is a safe place where you can express your needs and get access to resources that can help you succeed in life. All of your answers are confidential unless you have agreed to share them with trusted people in your life. The goal of this app is to help you help yourself. When you are ready, you can start going through the app to answer questions about YOU and how you are feeling related to your health and mental health.	
Demographic Questions	
We appreciate your time, for your gift card please provide your email so we can send it to you.	Open-ended
What city/town and state do you live in?	Open-ended
How old are you?	Open-ended
What gender do you identify as?	Open-ended
Are you currently in school?	• Yes • No
[If Yes to the previous question]	• Middle School • High School Freshman

What grade are you currently in?	• High School Sophmore • High School Junior • High School Senior • Trade School • College Freshman • College Sophmore • College Junior • College Senior
Is English your first language?	• Yes • No
[if No to the previous question] What is your first language?	Open-ended
Who do you primarily live with (pick all)?	• One Parent • Two Parents • Split Time between Parent's Home • Other Family Members • Adult Non-Family Member • Siblings • Roommates • Partner/Significant other • I live alone • I don't currently have reliable housing • Other, please specify
How many people are (including you) are you currently living with?	• 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5 • 6 • 7 • 8 • 9 • 10 • More than 10
Are you responsible for other people in your household?	• Yes, siblings/young(er) adults • Yes, Parents/older adults • No • Other, please specify
How would you describe your race?	Open-ended
How would you describe your ethnicity?	Open-ended
How would you describe your cultural background?	Open-ended

==*ex. Nationality, religious affiliation, language, customs, traditions, tribal affiliation==	
Rate your mental health	• 1 (bad health) • 2 • 3 (ok health) • 4 • 5 (very healthy)
Rate your physical health	• 1 (bad health) • 2 • 3 (ok health) • 4 • 5 (very healthy)
How much do you rely on yourself in times of need?	• Not at all • A small amount • A fair amount • A great deal
How much confidence or trust do you have in yourself, to get the help you need, when you need it?	• Not at all • A small amount • A fair amount • A great deal
Do you believe in yourself?	• Not at all • A small amount • A fair amount • A great deal
How often do you feel lonely or isolated from those around you?	• Never • Rarely • Sometimes • Often • Always
Please explain why you feel lonely or isolated?	Open-ended
To what degree are you getting the support you need from the people and resources around you?	• Not at all • A small amount • A fair amount • A great deal • I'm not sure
Do you ever feel like you need help with any of the things listed here?	• Access to resources (library, grocery, doctor) • Getting to, and from, school • Future planning • Sex education • Transportation
Do you ==receive help or support== with any of these topic areas?	• Anxiety • Depression • Eating disorders • Managing expectations (societal norms)

	• Talking about my feelings • Trouble having others understand me • Trouble understanding others • Trouble talking to others • ==Financial security== • ==Worried about paying bills== • Following rules • Getting angry • Feeling safe ==at home== • Feeling safe ==at school== • ==Having a reliable place to stay== • Being hungry • Issues at home • Body (or body image) • Identity (knowing who I am) • Sexuality • ==Gender identity== • Confidence • Getting enough sleep • Sensitivity • Making friends • Bullying • Paying attention in class • Schoolwork/grades • ==Balancing school and personal life== • ==Learning disabilities== • ==Dating/Relationship conflict== • ==Getting a job== • ==Managing job responsibilities== • None of these affect me
Do you **need help or support** with any of these topic areas?	• Anxiety • Depression • Eating disorders • Managing expectations (societal norms) • Talking about my feelings • Trouble having others understand me • Trouble understanding others • Trouble talking to others • ==Financial security== • ==Worried about paying bills== • Following rules • Getting angry • Feeling safe ==at home== • Feeling safe ==at school== • ==Having a reliable place to stay== • Being hungry • Issues at home

	• Body (or body image) • Identity (knowing who I am) • Sexuality • <mark>Gender identity</mark> • Confidence • Getting enough sleep • Sensitivity • Making friends • Bullying • Paying attention in class • Schoolwork/grades • <mark>Balancing school and personal life</mark> • <mark>Learning disabilities</mark> • <mark>Dating/Relationship conflict</mark> • <mark>Getting a job</mark> • <mark>Managing job responsibilities</mark> • None of these affect me
Are you willing to accept help with any of the topic areas presented previously in the survey?	• Yes • No • Somewhat • Not sure
People in your social support network	
Who are the people, organizations, and groups that you rely on when you need help? *Names will appear in your maps, list them however is most useful to you (e.g., mom, friend 1, friend 2, co-worker)*	
Do any of these people/organizations/groups know of each other? Can they work together when you need help? If so, connect the two.	*Swiping between nodes and the areas of support they indicated* *Swiping between nodes*
<mark>Who in your support network could help you with the things that you need help with?</mark>	<mark>*Pipe in from the need question*</mark>
<mark>Who helps you with each of the things that affect you?</mark>	<mark>*Swiping between nodes and the areas of support they indicated*</mark> <mark>*Pipe in from the receive question*</mark>
Information about people in your social support network	
Is this person/organization a:	• Parent • Sibling • Other Family Member • Friend • <mark>Significant other/partner</mark> • <mark>Teacher /Coach</mark> • Neighbor

	- Boss - Counselor - Medical Professional - Formal Organization - Informal Organization - Other
How do you interact with this person/organization?	- In-person and lives nearby - Virtually (not in-person) and lives nearby - Virtually (not in-person) and lives far away - In-person and lives far away - Other
How much do you depend or lean on these people/organizations/groups to get the help you need?	- Not at all - A small amount - A fair amount - A great deal
How much trust or confidence do you have in them to get the help you need, when you need it?	- Not at all - A small amount - A fair amount - A great deal
How comfortable are you in going to them for help?	- Not at all - A small amount - A fair amount - A great deal
What kinds of support do you receive from this person/organization	- Financial - Other practical help (i.e., transportation) - Physical touch - Quality time - Friendship - Mentorship/Advice/Learning - Emotional support - Other
If you chose "Other" for the support you receive from others, what type of support is it?	Open-ended
How do you define social support?	Open-ended
What makes you more or less likely to ask someone (or an organization) for help around the topic areas you indicated?	Open-ended
What types of resources would you accept to help you with the topic areas you indicated?	Open-ended

What makes you more or less likely to accept formal resources? (examples: referrals to a food bank or tutoring or counseling)	Open-ended
To what extent does your support network change as you get older? In what ways?	Open-ended
Write three things you are grateful for, big or small.	Open-ended
To what extend do you agree with this statement: I thought this survey was easy to understand.	Strongly disagree Disagree Neither agree nor disagree Agree Strongly agree
Is there anything that was not clear in this survey? Anything you would change or re-word?	Open-ended
Is there anything that was not clear in this survey? Anything you would change or re-word?	Open-ended
Is there anything else you would like to tell us about social connectedness, social support, or how young people think about connection and reaching out for help?	Open-ended
Are you interested in participating in future work on social support and social connectedness related to young adults? You would be compensated for your time.	• Yes • No • Maybe/need more information
We have received your responses! Thank you very much for taking the time to provide them. If you have any questions, contact the PARTNER team at partnertool@visiblenetworklabs.com Based on what you said you might need help with, here are some resources you can explore now! Calming Down Techniques Career Choices Talking Mental Health	

The social network analysis was conducted using PARTNERme by Visible Network Labs. For more information about Visible Network Labs and the tools and resources available, please visit www.visiblenetworklabs.com.
Email: partnerme@visiblenetworklabs.com