

A Summary: How Young Adults View Social Connectedness and Access Resources

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VisibleNetworkLabs

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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, making 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.

This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.



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 a 19-year-old 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 Geoorgia State University studying Marketing. She is a member of Atlanta Glow, through which she connected with VNL. 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 propose four research questions to answer in this project:

- How do young adults think about and describe social connectedness?
- How is social connectedness different for different groups of young adults compared to older generations?
- How do those differences impact how young adults access resources?
- How does that align with how young adults want to be connected to resources?

This report focuses on providing insights on these research questions using information from key informant interviews with young adults. The goal was to conduct exploratory interviews with young adults across the ages of 14-24 and from different locations throughout the United States. These exploratory interviews were used to deepen our understanding of youth social connectedness, social support, and accessing resources. Results from these interviews were used to inform the development of a survey on social connectedness and support networks.

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. The fellows and VNL worked together to create the interview questions and target interviewees with the aim of learning more about how young adults think about social support and social connectedness and how they currently connect to resources to meet their needs. As we recognized that there are many perspectives and lived experiences we were intentional in our recruitment strategy to include youth groups, clubs, and the app ItsMe to diversify our sample beyond the fellows' own networks of family and friends.

We interviewed young adults in the United States between the ages of 16 and 24. Young adults were recruited to participate in the interviews by the fellows and through several organizations with a wide network of young adults.

The fellows and VNL refined proposed interview questions through multiple conversations and discussions between July and early August 2021. Each of the interviews included questions that related to social connectedness, social support connections, how those connections are leveraged to meet the needs of young adults and how young adults are accessing programs to meet their needs. The interview guide can be found in the Appendix. From August-September, two individuals (typically one fellow and one VNL member) conducted each interview, with one person serving as the interviewer and one as the notetaker to capture the key themes. Interviewees were also compensated with a $15 emailed gift card from Target for their participation in the 30–45-minute interview. Most interviews were also recorded for note-taking purposes but were not transcribed.

We used a rapid qualitative analysis approach to analyze the interview data, taking the key themes from each interview question (or topic) and transcribing them into a data analysis spreadsheet by interviewee type and topic. The data were then reviewed, discussed, and analyzed to identify salient topics by interview question and topic. The fellows and VNL team finalized the key themes and summarized them in the following sections.

Demographics

We interviewed young adults between the ages of 16 and 24, with almost half being between 19 and 21 years of age. They came from across the country.

We hypothesized that introverts and extroverts may have different needs when it came to connecting with others and their satisfaction with the size of their support networks. For this reason, we asked them if they considered themselves extroverts or introverts. There was a pretty equal split of introverts and extroverts and several that considered themselves both.

Young adults were involved in many activities. They most frequently mentioned school, music, arts, video games, and technology. However, reading, sports, outdoor activities, advocacy, cosplay, work, and time with their families were also discussed. Young men were slightly more likely to discuss video games while young women were slightly more likely to discuss other hobbies like reading and the arts. Young men were slightly more concise in their discussion of their interests than young women. But overall, there were not large differences in their responses by gender or age.

INTERVIEWEES BY GENDER

Non-binary: 2

Male: 13

Female: 13

INTERVIEWEES BY LOCATION



New York: 7

Georgia: 11

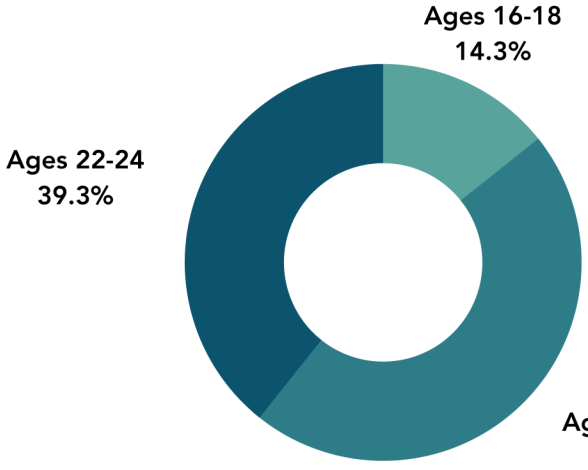
California: 1

Texas: 1

Florida: 6

Not Specified: 2

INTERVIEWEES BY AGE



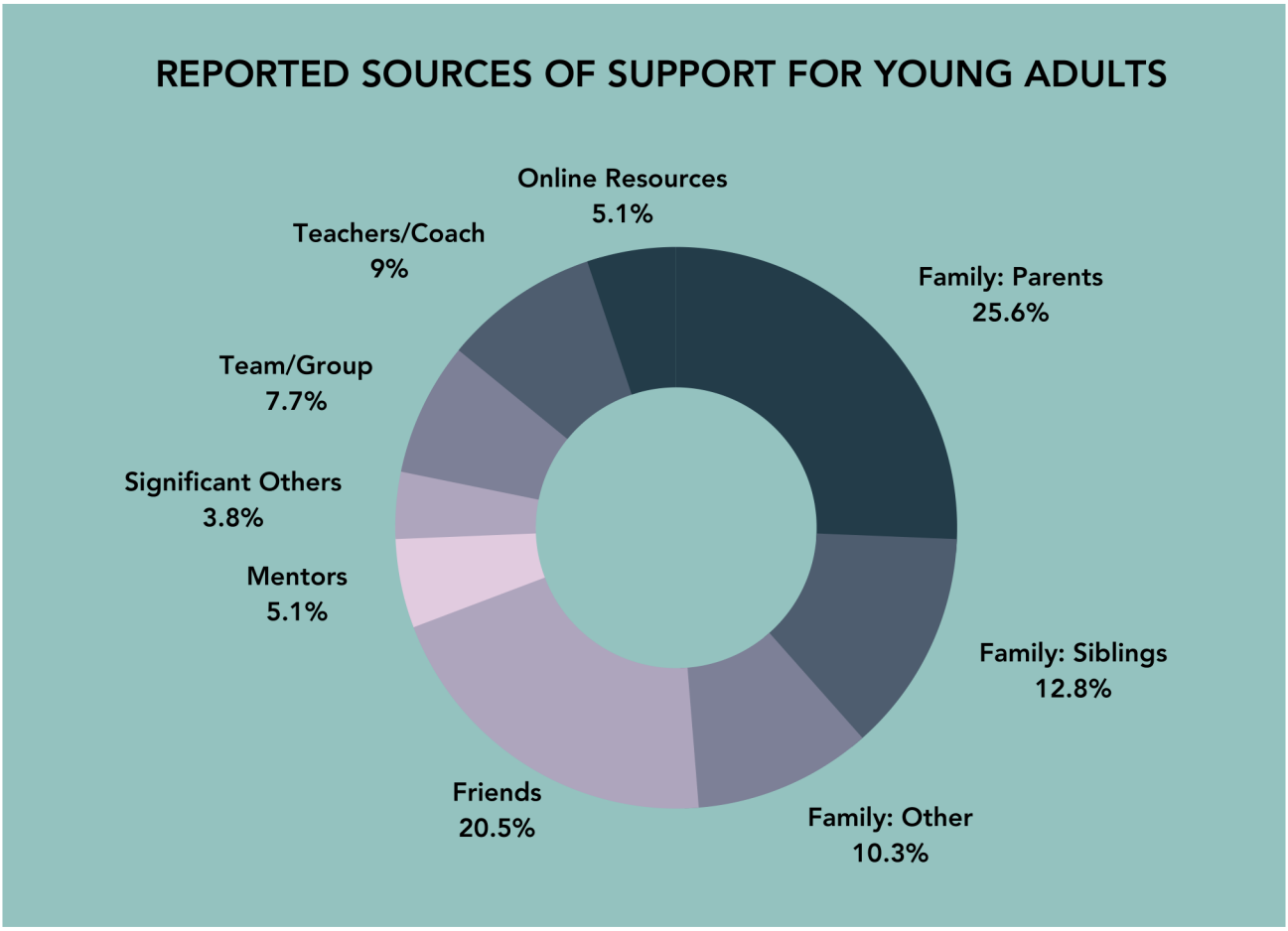
Ages 16-18
14.3%

Ages 22-24
39.3%

Ages 19-21
46.4%

Sources of Support

Young adults frequently go to informal support members like family, friends, and significant others or partners when they need help or support regarding their interests and ambitions. Mentors, teachers, and coaches were also mentioned as members of their support networks. Young men tended to report fewer people they would reach out to in times of need, most frequently mentioning immediate family members, partners, and at most a few close friends. One young man reported that he doesn't particularly reach out to others for help or support because he doesn't like to be disappointed by others.



Types of Support

When they did reach out, young adults were most likely to ask for emotional support. Emotional support could include simply having someone to listen to them, but it could also include providing advice or mentorship. They also reach out for physical or financial support, most often from family members. However, several mentioned that they were likely to go to family members for financial support but turn to friends when it came to conflicts with their significant others suggesting that the combination of topic and support member was an important consideration when they needed help. A significant portion mentioned the importance of mental health and having mental health support.

While they were willing to get help from both formal and informal members of their support networks they tended to turn to informal supports more often. Family members, friends, significant others were seen as reliable and more likely to know and understand them. They viewed less certainty about the help that formal support members could provide and what would be asked or required of them in order to receive the help they needed.



How Young Adults Think about Social Connectedness

How do young adults connect and socialize with their peers?

Among the youth interviewed, they frequently connected to their peers and their communities through in-person interactions as well as virtual ones. These virtual interactions could be further thought about in different ways. While there was a more passive interaction (e.g. scrolling through Instagram or TikTok) there were other modes of virtual interaction that met different needs. More active virtual interactions (e.g. conversations on Discord) could bring together people with similar interests or who could answer questions a young adult might have. These more active virtual interactions could be with people that interviewees had never met before but felt closer to than those in their immediate family. While passive virtual interactions may be frequent among young adults, it can lead to them comparing themselves to a curated perfect version of life and feeling that others don't have the same struggles that they have and consequently less likely to reach out for help when they need it.

There was a strong correlation between phone and text connection, suggesting that youth regard these modes of connection as interchangeable, or at least similar. Interviewees that discussed receiving support from the community through activities like community meetings and church gatherings were often self-identified extroverts, suggesting that larger social gatherings were more welcome among extroverts than introverts.

Young women were twice as likely to report having "genuine/authentic" support compared to young men. Several young men expressed skepticism when it came to others offering support. Like young women, they were looking for a more genuine or authentic relationship but often felt that there was no personal connection and that the relationship often felt "one-sided" and that potential support members like guidance counselors and teachers "didn't really care about them" or had made clear that they were only there as a "favor" rather than due to a genuine interest to help.

Do young adults feel more connected with their internet or in person friends?

Most youth reported being closest to their in-person friends, or being equally close to their in-person and online friends. The COVID-19 pandemic likely has impacted many of these connections. One interviewee preferred in-person interactions but acknowledged that due to the pandemic, online connections were safest at the moment. They indicated it had been difficult to adjust but now it seemed relatively normal. While a few said that they felt closer to their online friends, many said they were more connected to their in-person friends. They often pointed to those relationships being "real" or more "intimate." The in-person nature allowed for non-verbal cues to be understood, or "vibes" to be appreciated. With online friends, you control what people see and some of those non-verbal cues and "real" moments are lost.

Introverts tended to voice a closer connection to their in-person friends than extroverts and place a higher value on those relationships compared to extroverts. Extroverts were more likely to say that in-person connections and those they fostered online held similar weight to them and felt it varied depending on the person. Many indicated that these in-person connections were closer because those friends were able to see all of them and not just what they shared online.

Most youth who were interviewed believed that their peers experienced similar connection patterns to themselves.





What are the main things that young adults get out of their relationships ?

Most young adults get emotional support and friendship out of their relationships. They valued those connections that brought "joy" and were empathetic and "non-transactional." This was especially true for those between the ages of 16 and 18.

Those between the ages of 19 and 21 tended to receive more things out of their relationships, including advice and guidance. While emotional support was still important, as these young adults had more interests and life goals, the guidance and mentorship they needed also increased.

How do young adults feel about the size and quality of their support system?

While most young adults felt that their networks were small or adequate in size, 100% of those between ages 16 and 18 believed their networks were small. Only 25% of those between 16 and 18 thought their network was meeting their needs and reported they were very satisfied with their social support networks. One young adult spoke about the difficulties of growing that network as they entered college. While they were optimistic that their network would grow, finding new friends, in the beginning, can be difficult. Several spoke about wishing their network included those that could help with school and career aspirations. They also wished for more peer support and had not yet found it.

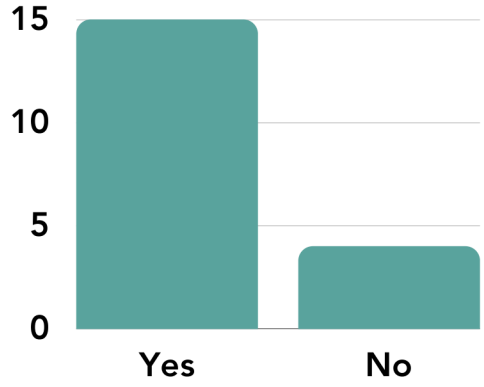
About 50% thought the quality of their network was good. 69% of those between ages 19 and 21 were satisfied with their social support network. Those between the ages of 19 and 21 often had those mentors and teachers supporting their school and career aspirations which may increase their satisfaction with their support networks.



How do young adults offer support for others/their peers?

Most young adults provide support to their peers through existing connections and when the help is requested. They were likely to provide the same type of support that they wanted themselves. One young man said he was more likely to offer advice than emotional support or comfort because he didn't think he was particularly good at providing that type of support. Many gave time and friendship to their peers. As peer mentors and support came up as a need among younger adults, helping build their confidence to provide that type of support, beyond friendship, to their peers could be valuable.

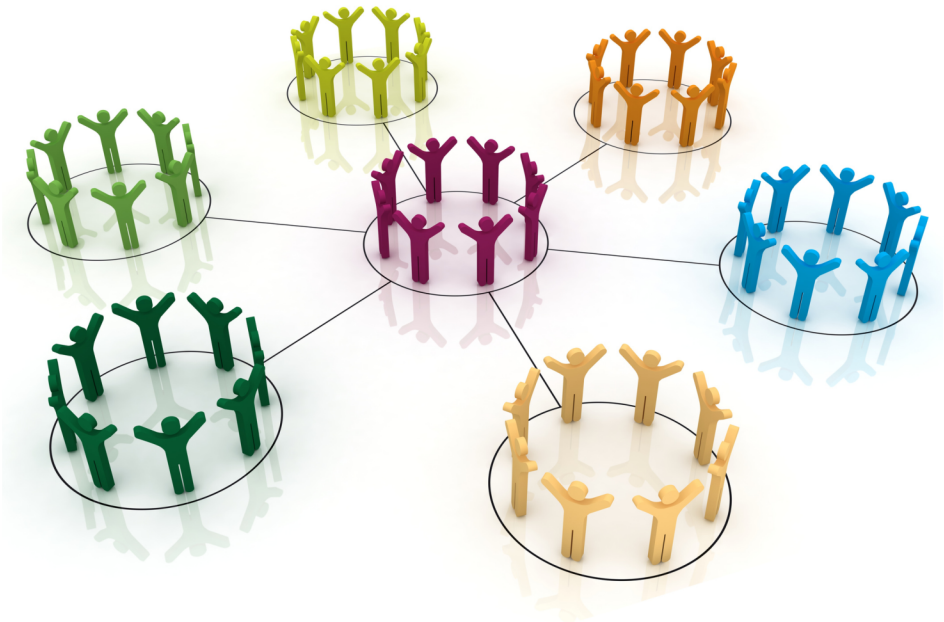
Do you receive this same support from others?



Many were only comfortable going to people that they already knew when they needed support or help. Further suggesting that peer mentors could be valuable to young adults.

While some said that they checked in regularly on their friends and teammates, others only provided support when it was requested.

As many young adults only asked for help from those they were confident could help them and would not judge them, ensuring that such resources are available to them will be important.



How would young adults like others (peers, mentors, organizations) to connect with and offer support or resources to them?

Most young adults prefer genuine and authentic relationship quality types. Relationships in which they felt valued and were not transactional. Many were skeptical of support offered to them by others and worried that they would be a "burden" when asking for help. They were also aware of the potential consequences and complications that could occur if they did ask for help, including child protective service involvement or just a more detailed look into their family's life that they did not want. Considering who is a mandatory reporter has the potential to complicate their options when they seek help.

They also prefer interactions that allow for more active participation, both in-person and online (with participatory apps like Discord), rather than passive scrolling through Snapchat or Instagram.

Young adults who were interviewed were split when it came to how much they want to share with their peers, mentors, and other support system members. Many were open to speaking about any topic and others felt they limited the topics based on the person they were speaking to. Their reasons for being more comfortable with certain support members differed. For some it was about their closeness to that support member, for example, some only felt comfortable getting support or resources from family members and friends. Others only felt comfortable getting that support or resource from someone that they felt they were similar to or a peer. Several were warier of institutions and organizations because they were less familiar with them. One young adult said that they were comfortable with anyone providing support or resources but that it was important to make clear that it was not an obligation.

How Social Connectedness is Different for Young Adults

How do young adults' idea of connecting with others differ from how older generations connect to one another?

20 out of the 28 youth interviewed said yes that older generations connect with one another differently than they do. Many of them expressed that older generations seem to prefer connecting in-person over connecting on social media, although that does not mean that they won't use social media at all. Most of the interviewees claim that their peers connect on social media more, but those that expressed preferring in-person connection to online connection reported having "old souls."

Several discussed that they had fewer responsibilities and thus more freedom to connect with others. One young man called it the "freedom of youth" and discussed how he had more ability to go out and do things whereas older generations had more responsibilities and were less able to do things spontaneously.

How do young adults see the ways in which older generations connect and offer support/resources to each other differ from their generation?

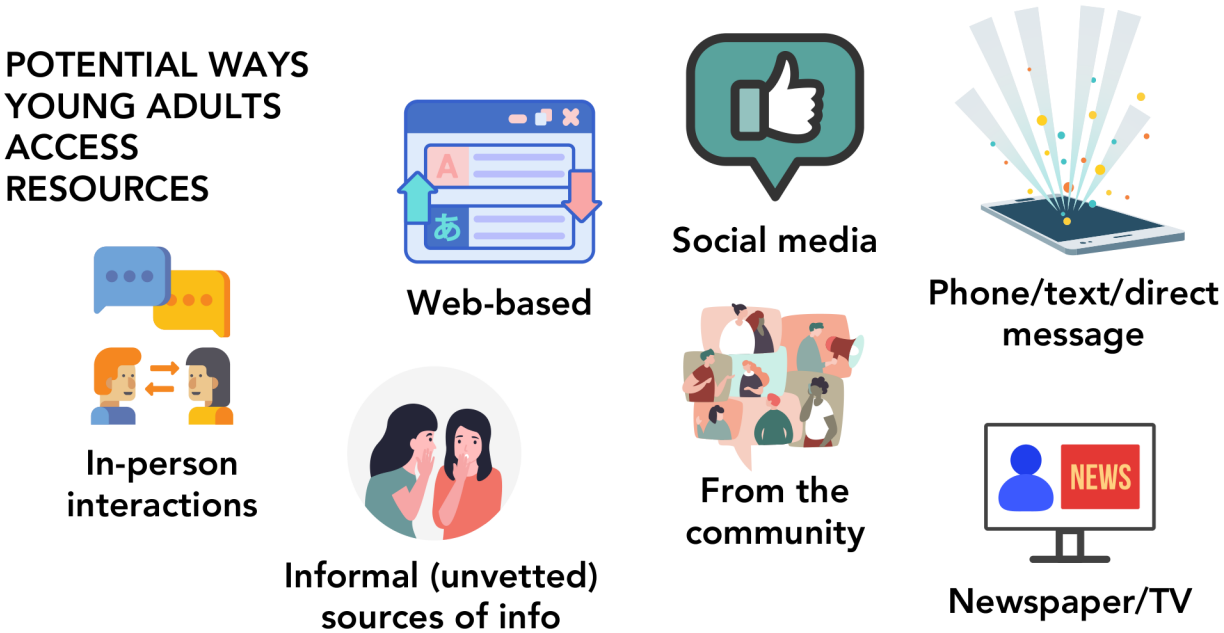
Younger adults tended to believe that older generations connected through more in-person and formal methods, like phone calls and in-person interactions. 16 to 18 year-olds were more likely to perceive older generations as connecting and offering formal support and resources as opposed to informal support and resources. Fewer young adults over 18 perceived these interactions to be formal.

While many young adults thought that older generations were more open to accepting formal resources, one of the places that they often thought older generations differed was around accepting mental health resources. Several young adults indicated that they believed older adults were less willing to discuss mental health needs and less willing to address those needs in themselves and in their children.

How Young Adults Access Resources

What sorts of resources do young adults access that older generations in their life do not?

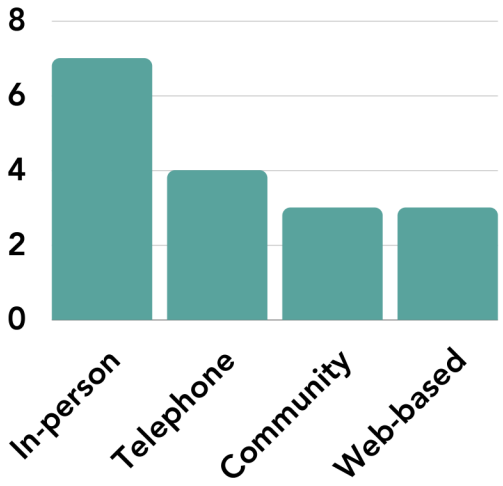
Young adults accessed resources in many different ways. Social media, newspapers/TV, websites, in-person interactions, and informal/unvetted sources of information were frequently mentioned by those interviewed. Interestingly some young adults felt that they had greater access to newspapers/tv and in-person resources compared to older generations. Young adults that were over the age of 18 were more likely to mention social media as a resource that older adults did not have access to while others thought everyone had access to social media these days.



What sorts of resources do older generations in their life access that young adults do not access?

Young adults reported that older generations in their life receive social support resources in-person, on the phone, through their communities, and through web-based resources. These resources were overwhelmingly described as formal resources (such as from the government, institutions, or organizations) and curated sources (such as television programs or newspapers). Most youth responded that the resources that older adults access are easy for young adults to find and access. The barriers that they did report included age restrictions, lack of knowledge on how to find or access the resource, and preference for informal resources by and for young people.

Modes of Resource Provision



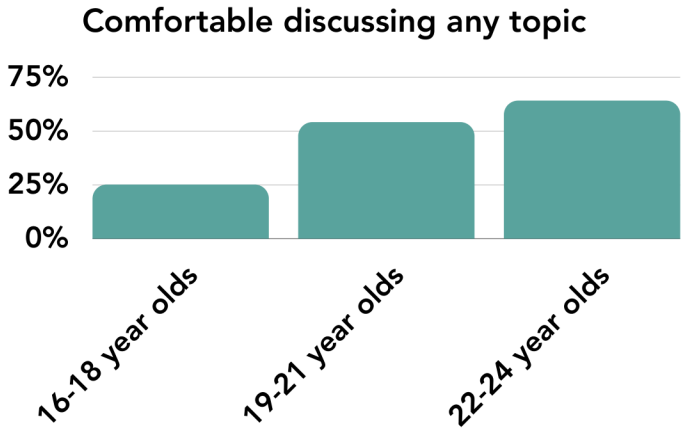
How comfortable are young adults in receiving resources/support from others?

Most young adults are comfortable in receiving resources/help from others. For some, they were comfortable accepting resources as long as the resource fit their need. For others, resources and support they were willing to accept include offerings from similar people, peers, formal familiar services, and recognized/well know resources.



Do young adults' comfort level change based on who offers this support?

Almost half of young adults were open to talking about any topic with their social support networks, with most of those identifying as extroverts. And the older the person, the more willing they were to talking about any topic.

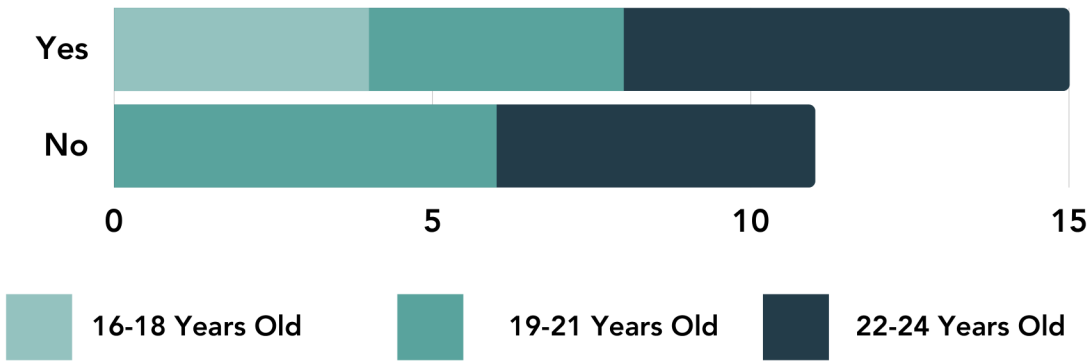


Younger adults (those between the ages of 16 and 18) were more likely to limit the topics they would talk about with their support members. Younger adults were less likely to talk about their romantic relationship conflicts with family members. These high-school-aged young adults were more likely to reach out to family, friends, and peers, for emotional and financial support.

About a third of the young adults interviewed said that their comfort level did not change depending on the person with whom they were connecting. Most young adults tended to be more comfortable talking to their family, friends, peers, and with resources that were either recommended or that they recognized.

Have young adults ever denied resources offered to them? Why or why not?

A little over half (52%) of the young adults interviewed had denied resources that had been offered to them at any point in their lives. That could include things many different things like food, financial support, career or school guidance, tutoring support, mental health or substance use treatment, and transportation



For some, these rejections of help were due to concern that they would "owe" the person if they accepted the help. For others, they were uncomfortable with the person that offered the help, either because they felt judged by them, or didn't see how that resource would be helpful to them. For example, several turned down college guidance or help with schoolwork because at that moment, they didn't see its value even though they now look back on it and wish they had accepted the help. Guardians can also make accepting resources more difficult especially when they feel there is a stigma around the needed resource, whether that be mental health therapy or access to food at a food bank. Young adults may need to look for resources that do not require approval or participation from their guardians. It is an added complication to accessing needed resources.

For many, the immediacy of the need, feeling that they were not judged, feeling that the person or organization offering supportive services genuinely cares about them all made them more likely to accept help.



Points of Consideration

After analyzing the interviews and incorporating their own lived experiences, the Social Support Research Fellows had several points of consideration for young adults and how we strengthen their social support networks.

There may be multiple ways to help high school-age young adults access helpful financial and mentoring resources. While gift cards are one way, identifying scholarships and apps that pay for studying, like Take Off, are other possibilities. Making sure that these young adults know about these resources and how to access them will be important. Many may use social media platforms like Discord, which could be used to create a place to recommend different resources available to young adults and create a community of young adults that are actively seeking out such resources. Creating awareness of resources could also be done by mentors, friends, peers, or youth organizations. Identifying authentic and informal settings for connecting to youth will be critical.

There may also be ways to create more connectedness among young adults when it is identified as a need. While some of this is dependent on individuals and their preferences, some ways to create that connectedness could include:

- Recommending that they join a Discord server with an interest of the young adult
- Creating and attending social events
  - Playing cards
  - Games
- Creating and attending social events at school
  - Designating tables at school for icebreaker activities
- Creating a space for more peer-led groups and activities

What's Next?

The information collected from these interviews also helped to inform quantitative data collection around social connectedness and young adults. Some of the ways that these interviews informed the quantitative tool development included what qualities we wanted to measure in our support relationship. Those qualities included trust, value, and how comfortable one was in turning to that support member in times of need. We also included new dimensions to further understand how young adults were connecting with various members of their support networks, in-person and virtually. We further used data from these interviews to create a more comprehensive list of potential needs that young adults may have.

These are just a few of the ways we have incorporated the things we learned from these qualitative interviews 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 as they partner with young adults and youth-serving organizations.



This social network analysis 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.

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