Youth Networks, Resource Connections, and Social Connectedness

Working and Learning from Young Adults to Understand Social Support, Social Connectedness, and How to Better Support Them

Summer 2022

VisibleNetworkLabs

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Introduction

Navigating through life can be challenging at any point, but it can be particularly challenging for young adults when the future may feel uncertain. It is critical to recognize their goals and aspirations for the future as well as think about how funders, youth-serving organizations, researchers, and others can best support them in achieving those goals to live happy and meaningful lives.

During the past several years of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen greater awareness and alarm over the mental health of children and young adults. In October of 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Children's Hospital Association, and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry declared the mental health of children a national emergency. This has been further emphasized by U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy who said, "Before the pandemic, one in three high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. That's a 40% increase from 2009 to 2019. In a similar time frame, suicide rates went up 57% among youth 10 to 24. And we've also seen that during the pandemic that rates of anxiety and depression have gone up. So this was a challenge before. The challenge has gotten worse."

Providing all the support we can to young adults facing these challenges is critical and understanding how their own support networks can provide some of the answers to these challenges is valuable. Personal support networks, with their ability to provide social support and identify available resources, can help young adults manage their mental health as well as achieve their goals and aspirations in life. It is, for this reason, that understanding and strengthening young adults' personal support networks is valuable in advancing the bright futures of the next generation.

Project description

Between June 2021 and June 2022, the Visible Network Labs (VNL) data science team partnered with young adult researchers with funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation to understand and strengthen youth and young adult personal networks and understand how the coordination of those networks might help to access the resources needed to advance their personal and career goals.

The primary research questions were:

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

Meet the Fellows

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.

Zoe Crocker, Orlando, Florida

Zoe is a recent graduate from the University of South Florida with a degree in Interdisciplinary Social Sciences and 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.
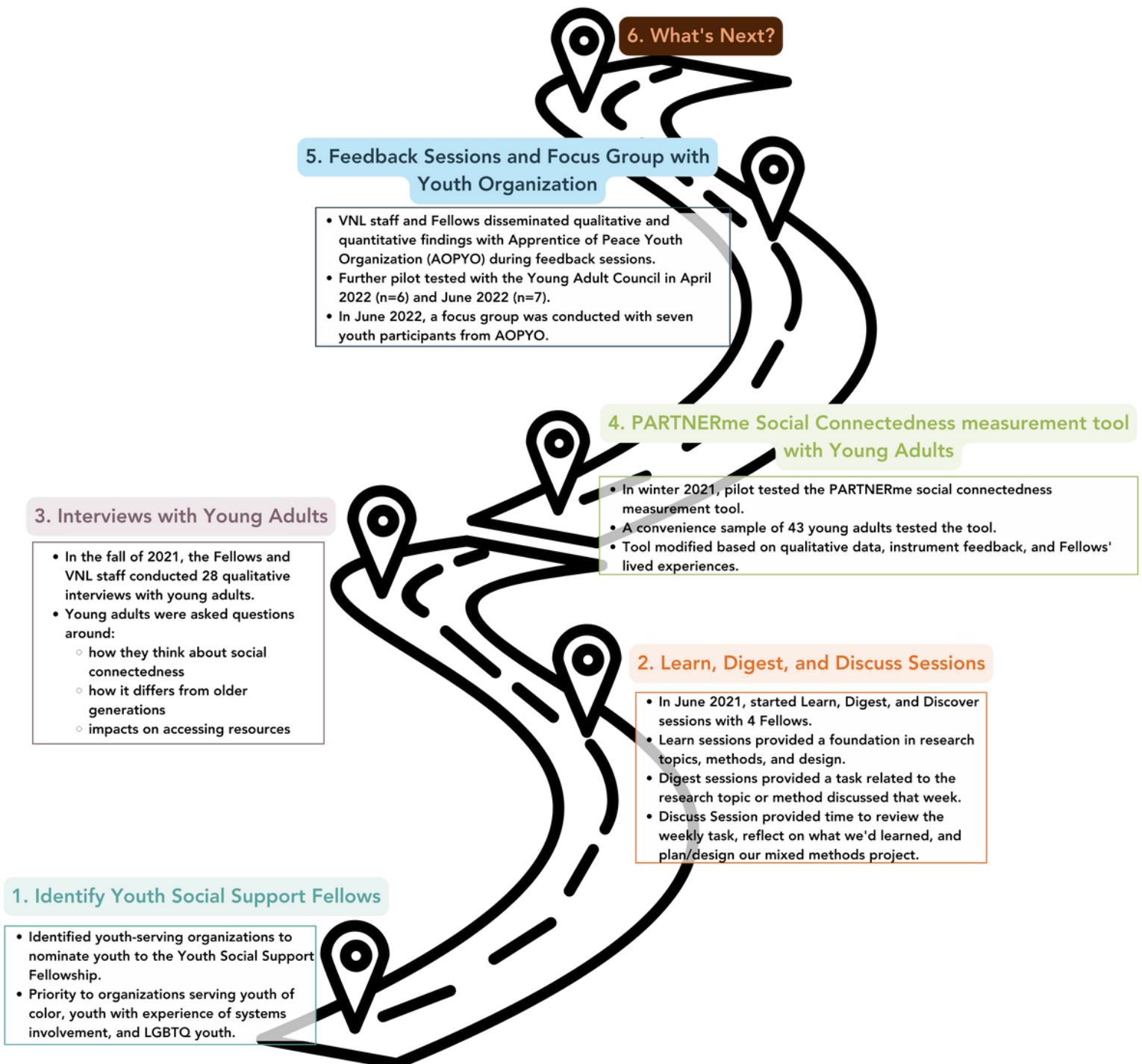
Kyra Stoute, Atlanta, Georgia

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 methods

In order to answer our primary research questions, we conducted a mixed methods project grounded in community-based participatory research (CBPR), social network analysis (SNA), and design thinking. At a high-level, the project methods are described below. More details on the methods are provided throughout this white paper.

6. What's Next?

5. Feedback Sessions and Focus Group with Youth Organization

- VNL staff and Fellows disseminated qualitative and quantitative findings with Apprentice of Peace Youth Organization (AOPYO) during feedback sessions.
- Further pilot tested with the Young Adult Council in April 2022 (n=6) and June 2022 (n=7).
- In June 2022, a focus group was conducted with seven youth participants from AOPYO.

4. PARTNERme Social Connectedness measurement tool with Young Adults

- In winter 2021, pilot tested the PARTNERme social connectedness measurement tool.
- A convenience sample of 43 young adults tested the tool.
- Tool modified based on qualitative data, instrument feedback, and Fellows' lived experiences.

3. Interviews with Young Adults

- In the fall of 2021, the Fellows and VNL staff conducted 28 qualitative interviews with young adults.
- Young adults were asked questions around:
  - how they think about social connectedness
  - how it differs from older generations
  - impacts on accessing resources

2. Learn, Digest, and Discuss Sessions

- In June 2021, started Learn, Digest, and Discover sessions with 4 Fellows.
- Learn sessions provided a foundation in research topics, methods, and design.
- Digest sessions provided a task related to the research topic or method discussed that week.
- Discuss Session provided time to review the weekly task, reflect on what we'd learned, and plan/design our mixed methods project.

1. Identify Youth Social Support Fellows

- Identified youth-serving organizations to nominate youth to the Youth Social Support Fellowship.
- Priority to organizations serving youth of color, youth with experience of systems involvement, and LGBTQ youth.

Identify Youth Social Support Fellows

The recruitment process began by searching for organizations across the US that serve youth and young adults using search engine platforms and network connections. We gave priority to organizations that serve youth of color, young people with experience of systems involvement, and LGBTQ young people, as well as those that sought to empower young adults and provide opportunities for leadership and growth. VNL reached out to these organizations directly asking them to nominate any young people that they thought would be a good fit for the Fellowship. VNL then reached out to those young people to conduct a brief interview and asked them to draw their own network map as part of the recruitment process.

At the end of the recruitment process, four Fellows were brought on to participate in the project. Their biographies can be found on page 5 of this white paper. The Fellows were compensated for their time through a monthly stipend in the summer and fall of 2021.

We decided to extend the Fellowship beyond the initially conceived six months to 12 months to continue the work we had started. As a result, three of the Fellows, who were able to continue with the project beyond December 2021, remained in the Fellowship through May 2022. They were again compensated for their time through a monthly stipend through the end of the Fellowship.

In addition to weekly group project meetings, each Fellow had a monthly 1:1 meeting with the VNL staff to check in on their schedules, their perceptions of the Fellowship, things that could be improved upon, and if there were ways that the staff could further support them.

Outside of the weekly group meetings and monthly 1:1s, Fellows were given the flexibility and freedom to complete their hours of work and tasks on their own time. Fellows were also invited to a VNL Slack channel, a messaging app for business, as a primary way to communicate throughout the week, share ideas, and check in about weekly tasks.

Learn, Digest, and Discuss Sessions

The Learn, Digest, and Discover sessions focused on three main topic areas that would be used over the course of the Fellowship: research methods, network science, and design thinking. In the first six months of the Fellowship, each week consisted of a Learn session at the beginning of the week which provided a foundation in one of our research topics or methods, followed by completing a task related to that topic (Digest) and rounding out the week by having a group discussion related to the topic and task (Discover).

Over the six months VNL staff held regular Learn, Digest, and Discover sessions where the Fellows learned many things about research and each other. It was a time to lay a foundation for understanding how to explain and conduct research as well as consider how we wanted to design our work together. Through those sessions and monthly 1:1s, we could provide support and get to know one another. We were able to build more trusted and authentic relationships as a result of these sessions.
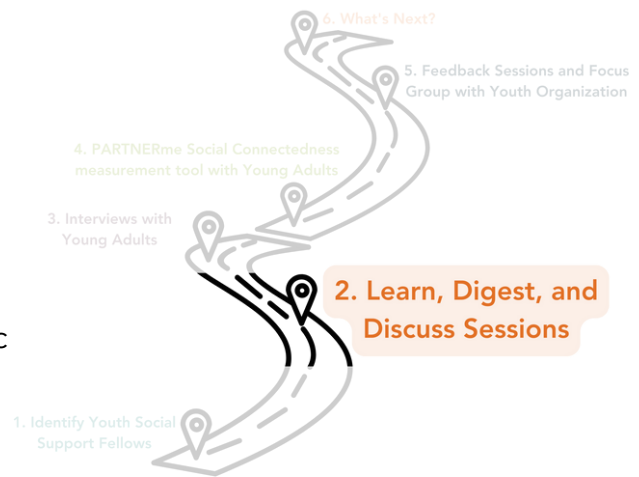
Those formal and informal interactions made the process of conducting research together meaningful. Additionally, it allowed the us as Fellows, to have vulnerable and nuanced conversations about how our different lived experiences (e.g., first-generation citizen or student, young women of color, LGBTQ+, experiences with foster care, managing chronic diseases) had impacted our lives and our supportive relationships.

Considerations for Researchers

Working with young adults can be invaluable if trust between team members is built.

- Create clear expectations around responsibilities and communicate them clearly.
- Provide multiple ways for people to contribute to a project (e.g., group discussions, written feedback, visual assignments, 1:1 meetings, creative assignments).
- Understand that life is complicated for everyone, and adjust expectations as needed.
- Include the perspectives of those you are studying in all phases of the research process. The Fellows provided valuable insights at all stages of the research process.
- Build in time to create and nourish authentic relationships, understanding that it takes time and continual attention to strengthen those bonds. Without care, time, and attention to relationship building, you will not get as much openness or willingness to share experiences.

If that trust is not built, the collaboration and analysis of findings will lack the nuance and true voice of young adults. Or to state it another way, it will not truly be centered on the experiences and voices of those most affected by your work.

What we've learned

We learned many things about young adults, how they feel about social connectedness, and how they connect to resources through our Interviews with Young Adults, our findings from the PARTNERme Social Connectedness measurement tool with Young Adults, and our Feedback Sessions and Focus Group with a youth organization.

Briefly, with the Fellows, we conducted qualitative interviews (n=28) with young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 in the Fall of 2021. The PARTNERme social connectedness measurement tool was refined as a result of these qualitative interviews, and the experiences of the Fellows and pilot tested (n=43) with young adults between the ages of 14 and 24. The PARTNERme social connectedness measurement tool was further refined after that pilot testing and through feedback sessions with Apprentice of Peace Youth Organization (AOPYO) in the spring of 2022. In addition, a focus group with seven members of the AOPYO Youth Advisory Council was conducted in the early summer of 2022. More detailed findings from those aspects of this project can be found here.

This work allowed us to get a better understanding of how some young people were defining social support, advice they might have for strengthening connections, virtual setting implications for building support, and how technology can be used to measure and understand social support
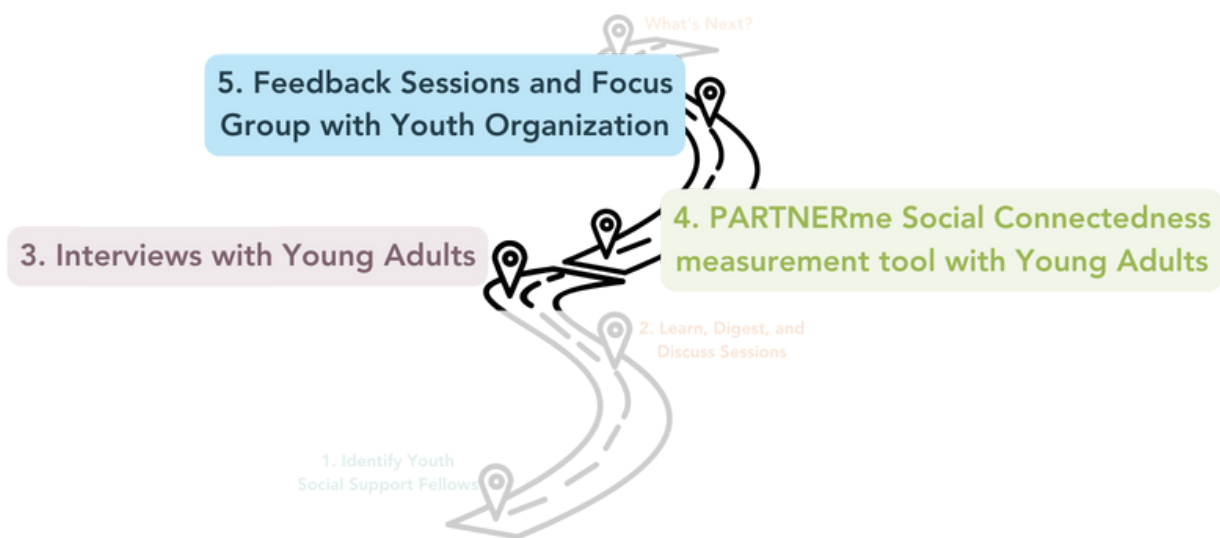
Social support networks and young adults

In qualitative interviews, young adults indicated they were most likely to ask for emotional support. That could mean simply having someone listen to them or could mean providing advice or mentorship. Most often this support came from family and friends. A significant portion of those interviewed indicated the importance of mental health and having mental health support.

We saw this again in the PARTNERme social connectedness measurement tool results, where many young adults indicated that their networks provided them with quality time, emotional support, and friendship.

Strengthening these networks has the potential to be helpful in addressing the mental health needs of young adults.

Percent of Young Adult with Different Types of Support they Received from their Networks
from PARTNERme survey results, n=43

QUALITY TIME	FINANCIAL	EMOTIONAL SUPPORT	FRIENDSHIP	MENTORSHIP/ GUIDANCE
59%	**56%**	**48%**	**46%**	**41%**

PHYSICAL TOUCH	OTHER IN-PERSON SUPPORT	OTHER SUPPORT
38%	**33%**	**5%**

Question: How do you define social support?
open-ended responses from PARTNERme survey

Social support is the kind of support you can ask for from people close to you to tend to your human needs.

A group of people that help you with situations whether they are financial or emotional.

To me, it's the pillars of mental health. Without social support, we are left with one singular pillar to hold all of our burdens.

Building supportive connections

In our AOPYO focus group, in addition to understanding how young people think about support networks, we also asked these young adults about their supportive connections and ideas they had for building those supportive connections.

Again, while much of that support came through family members and friends, some of the activities that were perceived to contribute to feelings of support included: journaling, exercising, and gaming.

Context Matters

What we heard from young adults is that there's not a one-size-fits-all approach to building supportive connections. When asked to talk about finding people to connect with and maximizing the positive aspects of those relationships while minimizing the negative aspects, focus group members said that it really depends on the individual and the type of connection they are looking for.

Connection vs. Escapism

Sometimes these young adults are seeking connection and support by pursuing these activities and other times they are looking for a place to escape from their stresses and "get into a quiet headspace." When asked if these activities were more about connection or more about having alone time, one young adult from the focus group noted:

> *"Depending on how I feel, it's a little bit of both, at least with gaming, because I am able to talk to people through playing video games. But sometimes I really don't want to talk to anybody so I'd rather just play by myself and it mainly is that escape factor where I'm looking at something, I'm hearing stuff, and I'm kind of having to think of stuff that's not actually dealing with what's happening around me."*

Face-to-Face vs. Online

Some young adults expressed feeling comfortable making connections in person while others feel more comfortable in online forums and social media platforms.

Strengths vs. Weaknesses of Social Media

Social media is often seen as lacking with regard to cultivating conversational skills and picking up nonverbal cues. These weaknesses may make it more difficult to forge connections. Nevertheless, it often allows for individuals to freely and authentically express themselves, which may make it easier for young people connect. As one person noted:

> **"Social media allows people to be their true selves, whoever they are, whoever they want to be, and how they want to be that person."**

How do we build positive and meaningful connections in virtual settings?

Through the interviews and the lived experiences of the Fellows, it became clear that there were both positive and negative virtual interactions. The more passive ones (e.g. scrolling through Instagram or TikTok) were viewed as less positive while more active interactions (e.g., conversations on Discord) were viewed as more positive. Those more positive interactions could bring people together with similar interests or provide some anonymity when asking questions about sensitive topics. By contrast, the more passive interactions could lead to more opportunities for young adults to compare themselves to a perfectly curated version of others and make them feel alienated or alone in their own struggles.

77% of support members were people or organizations that lived nearby and with whom they interacted in person. 17% lived nearby but were virtual interactions, and 13% were virtual far away interactions.

However, as virtual settings become unavoidable, especially during the pandemic when schools moved to virtual settings, determining ways that young adults are able to limit negative virtual interactions was considered important. Concerns over virtual bullying and the inability to leave some of these virtual settings prompted us to ask the focus group about how they managed those interactions.

Despite negative experiences, interviewees advised other young people to get out of their comfort zone, be open to making new friends, and not let fear of rejection keep them from trying new things. One practical suggestion was to engage with online groups where there are rules for conduct, allowing people to seek interaction and be themselves while also setting boundaries on how they would like to be treated.

Building Positive Social Connections

- Try to use social media for good.
- Find the right tools to build these connections.
- Cultivate strong communication skills for online and in-person interactions.
- Get out of your comfort zone.
- Be open to making connections.
- Don't be afraid of rejection, which can keep people from trying things.

What are some barriers to positive online connections?

Similar to what interviewees reported, focus group participants also thought that some young people were limited by fear of rejection and not wanting to go out of their comfort zone. They acknowledged that for some, it can be difficult to cross that gap.

They would advise other young adults to be open minded to making new connections and not allow any fear of rejection, embarrassment or discomfort to limit them from trying new things.

> "...if you're honest about who you are – you know the things you like and don't like – it makes it a lot easier to build a relationship with people who are similar to you and avoid relationships with people who are not similar to you." (Focus Group)

Positive and negative experiences with social support networks

The focus group was also asked about positive and negative experiences they had with social support networks. Among focus group participants, building new social connections is often structured by school groups and activities. Their relationships are forged through shared experiences and opportunities to bond.

Focus groups participants also acknowledged that for many young people, digital media is a place to seek and find connection.

However, online forums were also places where they themselves had experienced negative social connectedness, such as being 'catfished' and bullied. Because people online can maintain anonymity, people can misrepresent themselves, lie, or act cruelly without repercussions.

> "Every time I try to make new friends [online], I always keep in mind that there is the possibility that they could do something negative or like stab me in the back and stuff like that. So what I do is I try to detach my emotions and I look at it objectively. If I really have to interact with these people, then this is the kind of mindset I have to be on. It comes down to deciding what you need and what you don't. Always in the back of my mind, you should be warned, these people are not to be trusted." (Focus Group)

Technology and social connection

Technology and virtual connections are not going to go away, particularly for young adults. So the question becomes, how do we build and strengthen virtual connections that are valuable, and in what ways can technology be used to strengthen those valuable connections?

How do we improve technology to measure and foster social support among young people?

Focus group participants also had suggestions for how to improve the technology we use to measure and foster social support.

Regarding measurement of social connection, young adults recommended:

- Consider that there may be other venues where young adults seek support (e.g., gaming communities, exercising) besides people and organizations.
- Asking questions about digital support systems and social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, Facebook, Instagram) were also considered important to young adults.

Technology can be used to measure, map, and leverage social support among young people and **PARTNERme** is a tool for doing just that! Here's what some focus group members told us about what it was like to use this tool...

"[PARTNERme] made me comfortable enough to answer the questions." (Focus Group)

"[PARTNERme] did a good job of putting me on the spot and thinking truthfully [...] and [it was] a reality check of what my options are and being honest with myself. And it gave me ideas - thinking about things I probably hadn't thought about until I looked at [it]." (Focus Group)

Considerations for Tech and Product Designers

- Find ways to allow young people to express themselves authentically.
  - Open-ended questions can allow people to respond in ways that may not be captured when response options are limited to a predetermined list.
  - Being able to add photos, change fonts, and modify color schemes may help people feel more invested in the product.
- Young people were receptive to applications that are more interactive.
- Consider gamifying health screeners to increase engagement.

Reaching out for help and accepting resources

In this work, we have found that embarrassment, stigma, and trust were significant factors in whether or not young adults asked for help or accepted offered resources. Considering how we continue to normalize that all people need help from time to time may be valuable in supporting young adults when they eventually need help.

Balancing and celebrating growth and self-sufficiency in young adults while also ensuring that they know they can reach out when they need it can be tricky but worth greater consideration, particularly for youth-serving organizations.

Question: What makes you more or less likely to accept formal resources? (ex. referrals to a food bank, tutoring, counseling)

open-ended responses from PARTNERme survey

> I'm more likely to accept if it's nearby and a friend recommends it. I'm less likely to accept help from strangers.

> Just being close and knowing I can trust this person.

> If my mom and dad say it's not okay.

> I feel embarrassed that I need help. I don't normally admit I need help either.

> Formal resources are always a last resort for me. Until all else fails, I aim to resolve all problems myself.

Focus group participants indicated that it would be helpful for a health screener to link individuals directly to resources because many people may not want to go to the trouble of researching help on their own. When reflecting on what makes a resource more trustworthy, focus group participants mentioned that it helps when the resource is well known and has good reviews. In particular, being able to read testimonials from people who have used the resource was compelling. Other important factors for engaging with a resource was proximity, ease of access, and knowing that it's good for someone like you.

Considerations for Youth-Serving Organizations

Reaching out for help can be a truly vulnerable position for many young adults. Ensuring those situations feel safe, non-judgmental, and easy is critical.

- Build trusted and authentic relationships with young adults to foster these safe, non-judgmental spaces.
- Recognize the personal lives and time constraints on young adults when creating your expectations of them.
- Ensure you properly value their time and contributions.
- Leverage peer supports and trusted information sources.
- Anonymity may be particularly important to some young adults and concerns over how information will be shared with others may stop them from sharing or asking for help.

## Allowing for self-expression

Building that trust and reducing the stigma or shame that young adults may feel when asking for help from others includes fostering authentic relationships and allowing young adults to express their identities in ways that make sense to them.

In the PARTNERme social connectedness measurement tool, we asked young adults how they would describe their race, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds. The focus group members said they appreciated that the survey allowed them to write in their responses rather than choose from a pre-defined set of responses.

Young Adult Expressions of Their Race, Ethnicity, and Cultural Backgrounds
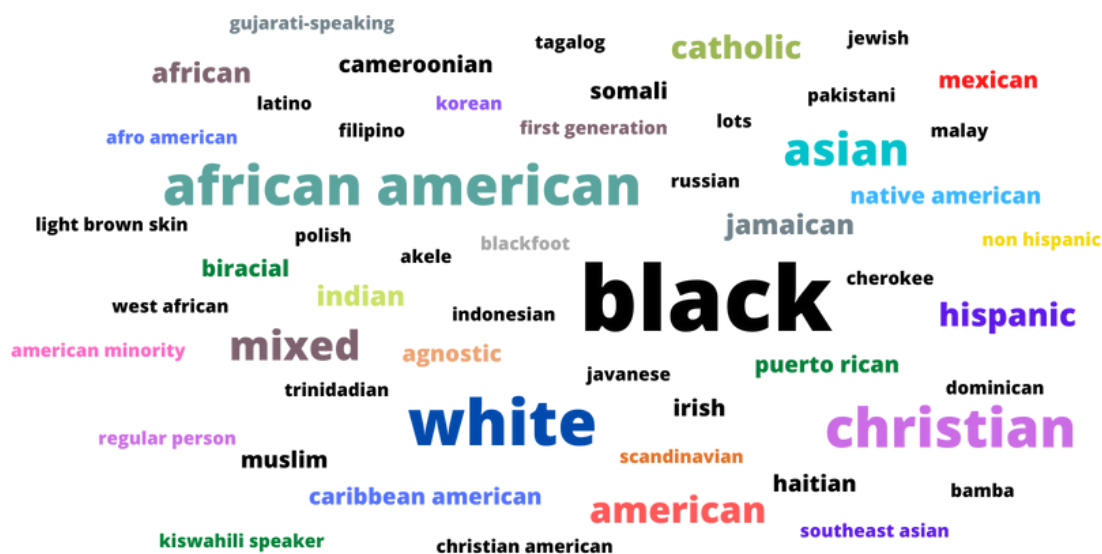
Focus group respondents suggested that it would be nice to be able to customize their support networks within the PARTNERme social connectedness tool, such as creating their own avatars, being able to add pictures or icons for the members in their networks and modifying colors or fonts.
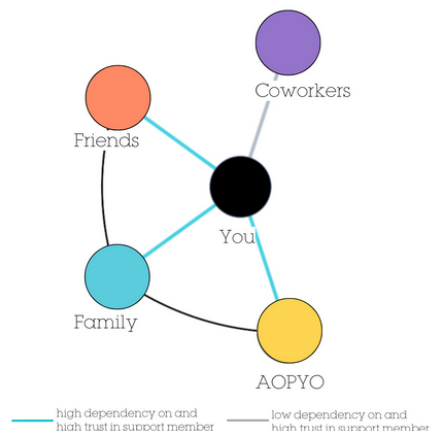

Rather than having colored circles – as displayed in the map on the left – focus group participants indicated that it would be more engaging if they could customize the look and feel of their network maps.

VN1

What does it mean for those supporting young adults?

Over the course of a year, we have learned many things working with young adults to better understand their social support networks, the factors that would make them more likely to reach out for help, and the resources they would find acceptable.

While it may seem obvious, building meaningful, authentic relationships with young adults requires trust and time. It is essential to create non-judgmental spaces for them to share their experiences, dreams, and goals and allow them to direct how they'd like to achieve those dreams and goals. Youth-serving organizations, funders, and others who care about young adults can help by providing ways to build valuable supportive connections, connections young adults would feel comfortable using to help achieve their goals in life.

Understanding that young adults are more likely to turn to their informal supports and their peers before reaching out to more formal organizations could mean a greater focus on peer mentorship and systems for peer recommendations of resources. It could also mean demonstrating authentic, tangible ways that young adults' voices are centered in the work of these organizations and funders.
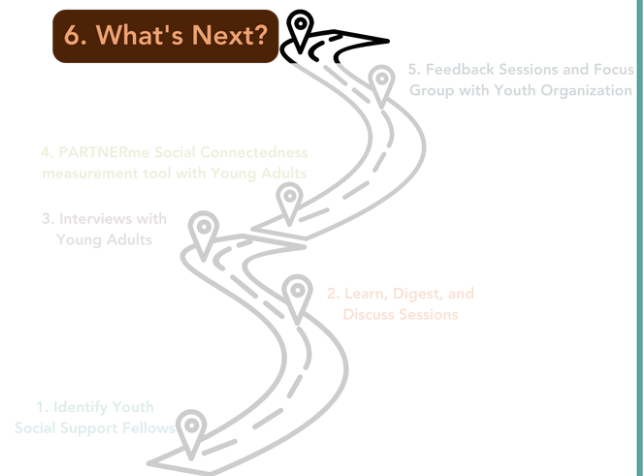
Considerations for Funders

Funding youth-serving organizations and programs is important work. Those programs and organizations benefit when the voices of youth are centered, and young adults are engaged at all stages of the funding process. Doing so can help ensure that the services offered will be seen as acceptable and valuable to the youth they are intended to serve.

- Center the voices of those you intend to serve is valuable at all stages of the funding process.
- Value their time and work, there should be clear benefits to them for engaging in this process.
- Future directions of work with young adults could include:
  - Creating processes for youth recommended resources.
  - Refining social support building tools and identifying how best to use these tools effectively.
  - Identifying what kinds of social and mental health needs can be addressed by different types of settings (in-person, virtual, hybrid).
  - Identifying the ways that virtual interactions can be improved.
  - Further investigation into how young adults build valuable virtual connections and limit negative virtual connections.