

Evaluating Services for Texas Opportunity Youth: A Community-Based Participatory Research Approach to Developing a Survey Tool

Abstract

Communities across the United States are challenged to provide equitable access to education/training and workforce development (ETWD) opportunities for youth and young adults aged 16 to 24. This paper reflects on the author's experience with a community-based participatory research (CBPR) collaboration involving two groups of youth and young adults receiving services from ETWD programs serving opportunity youth—young people aged 16 to 24 who are disconnected from education and employment opportunities. The collaboration developed a survey tool designed to inform a deeper understanding of the experiences of opportunity youth whose needs were not met by traditional education systems, to review the resources available that support opportunity youth in achieving their educational and career goals, and to develop recommendations regarding program practices that support the engagement of opportunity youth in education and training opportunities. As part of a larger study, Evaluating Services for Texas Opportunity Youth (ESTOY), the survey tool will be distributed to youth and young adults receiving community-based ETWD services in four Texas communities: Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, and Houston.

Key Words

Opportunity Youth; Education and Workforce Development Training; Community-based Participatory Research; Survey Development

Introduction

Communities across the United States are challenged to provide equitable access to ETWD opportunities for youth and young adults between the ages of 16 to 24. The [Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids Count Data Center \(2024\)](#) analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) data reported that across the United States in 2022, disparities in opportunities impacted approximately 4,349,000 (11%) youth and young adults ages 16 to 24. Within the education, training, and service community literature, this group of young people are referred to as opportunity youth. Ages 16 to 24 represent a period of development that has the potential for individuals to gain education and/or training that would "...provide the foundation for their occupational trajectories during the rest of their adulthood" ([Mendelson et al. 2018, p. 54S](#)). [Lewis and Gluskin \(2018\)](#) report that by the age of thirty, individuals who have been working or were enrolled in school as youth and young adults earn \$31,000 more per year and are 42% more likely to be employed than those who were not engaged in education and employment as young people.

To gain a deeper understanding of the experience of opportunity youth the Ray Marshall Center (RMC), an organized research unit in the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin, is conducting a five-year, longitudinal research study on the impact of ETWD programs serving opportunity youth in the Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, and Houston metro areas. The evaluation plan, procedures, and materials for, Evaluating Services for Texas Opportunity Youth (ESTOY), were reviewed and approved by the University of Texas Institutional Review Board (STUDY00001823). This project was funded by the J. P. Morgan Chase Foundation (Grant #66858001).

To address a broad range of research questions, the ESTOY evaluation applies a mixed-method approach with both quantitative and qualitative components. The objectives of the qualitative analysis are to pursue a deeper understanding of the experience of youth whose needs were not met by the community's traditional education systems, to review the available opportunities for youth to achieve their education/training and career goals, and to provide the rich information and insights that are essential to support evidence-based policy and practice recommendations.

This paper shares an account of the development and implementation of a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach to capture the lived experiences of and support the civic involvement of opportunity youth currently participating in ETWD programs. This paper reflects upon the qualitative evaluator's experience of developing relationships with two community-based organizations providing ETWD services for opportunity youth; and the development of collaborative relationships with two groups of youth and young adults receiving services through the two organizations. The purpose of the collaborative relationships between the evaluator and the two groups of program participants was to co-create a survey tool to be distributed to participants of ETWD programs serving opportunity youth in four Texas communities: Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, and Houston. Survey results and insights will be shared with organizations and advocacy groups serving opportunity youth and posted to the [ESTOY website](#).

Background

Within the population of opportunity youth there are distinct groups with unique experiences that impact connection for both the individuals and their communities. Thrive Chicago, a collaborative of programs serving opportunity youth addressing systemic barriers to achieving equity for young people and communities, has identified opportunity youth within the Chicago community into two broadly defined groups: Youth who are persistently disconnected from education and training opportunities and youth who are tenuously disconnected from education and training opportunities.

Persistent opportunity youth are youth experiencing a complex set of needs and have been, or are at risk of being, disconnected from work and school for prolonged periods. Reconnecting these youth requires case management support and coordinated services across agencies and service providers. Persistent opportunity youth may have experienced trauma, involvement in systems such as the juvenile justice and foster care systems, and they may be struggling as young parents or coping with mental and physical health challenges.

Tenuously disconnected opportunity youth have a more focused set of needs and typically require help finding sustainable employment. They may have work experience, and they usually have a high school degree or some college with goals focused on gaining employment or obtaining training to enhance their employability ([Krosin 2022](#)).

Within these two broadly defined groups of youth, persistently and tenuously disconnected from education, training, and employment, subgroups of opportunity youth have unique experiences within their communities that influence the equitable access to opportunities. Figure 1 employs data from the US Census Bureau ACS to illustrate the unequal rates of opportunity youth by racial and ethnic subgroups from 2010 through 2022. For all groups, the rate of youth and young adults identified as opportunity youth decreased across time, yet the relational pattern between groups remained the same. Across the period examined American Indians had the highest rate of opportunity youth, while the Asian community experienced the lowest.

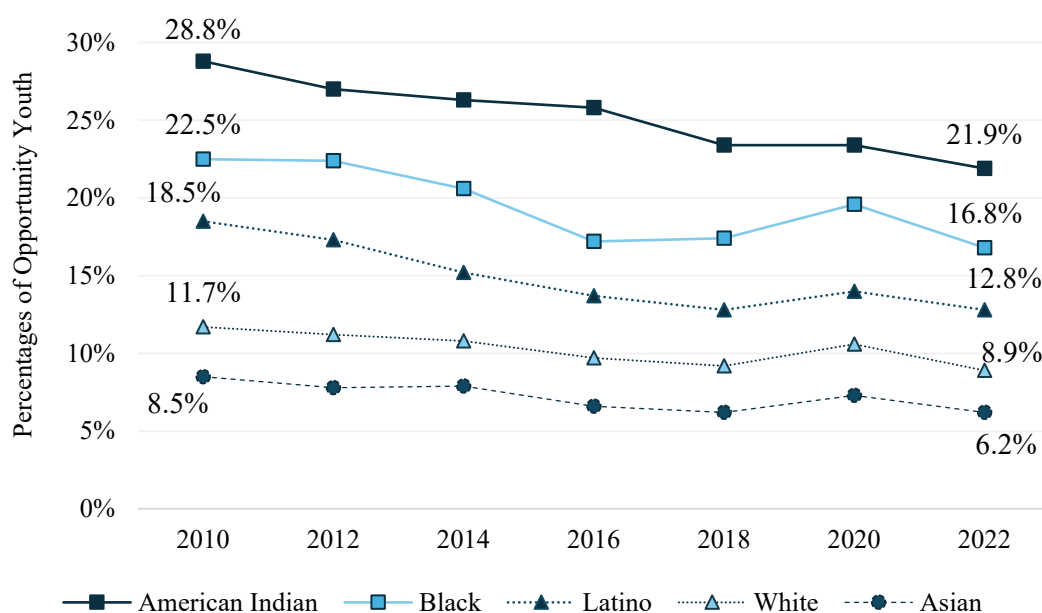


Figure 1. Opportunity Youth by Race and Ethnicity: 2010–2022

Source: [Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau ACS data 2022](#)

Access to opportunities also varies by geography with urban communities offering more opportunities and support services for training/education and employment compared to rural communities. Communities also vary in their availability of opportunities unique to the needs of different subgroups of age ranges within the 16-24 age group. Further, community support structures may vary in their acceptance of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, as well as in providing support to assist with complex challenges facing opportunity youth who are parenting; homeless; coping with a disability, mental, and physical health issues;

involved with the justice or foster care systems; and struggling with the challenges of addiction. Legal status (citizenship, immigrant, legal immigrant, etc.) may also influence access to opportunities. While many factors influence access to opportunities, kin and kith networks offering acceptance, guidance, and support can provide a safety net for opportunity youth.

Figure 2 illustrates the 2022 share of opportunity youth compared to their peers who are connected to education and/or employment by three characteristics: poverty, disability, and motherhood. The light-colored rows represent opportunity youth; the darker rows represent youth and young adults connected to education and/or employment. Opportunity youth are twice as likely to be living in poverty, nearly three times more likely to be living with a disability, and young women are approximately four times more likely to be parenting compared to their connected peers.

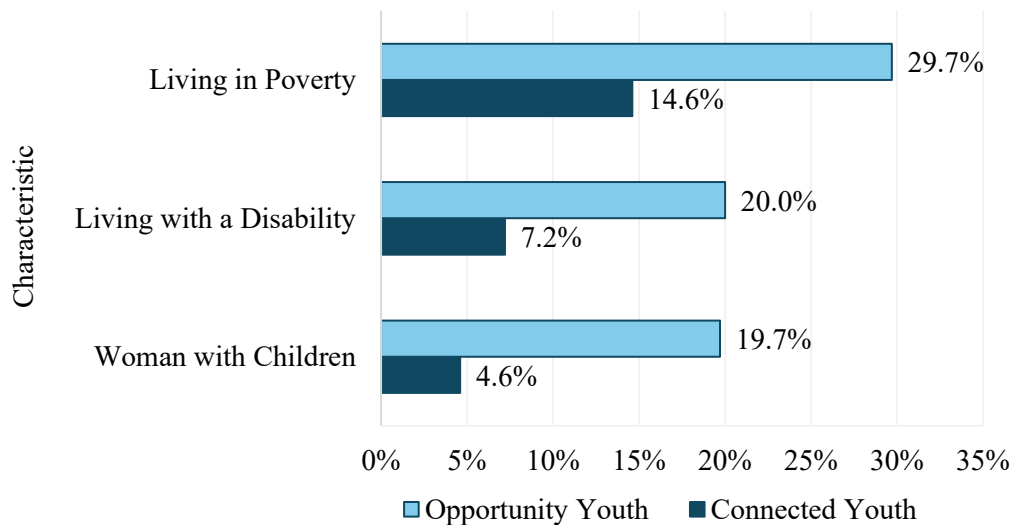


Figure 2. Share of Connected and Disconnected Youth by Poverty, Parenting, and Disability: 2022

Source: [Measure of America calculations using US Census Bureau ACS 2022](#)

In 2022, the U.S. Census Bureau ACS estimate of opportunity youth across the state of Texas was 486,000, representing 13% of all youth and young adults ages 16-24. Table 1 presents the estimates of opportunity youth residing in the four communities of concern to the ESTOY evaluation.

Texas City	Estimates of Opportunity Youth
Dallas	25,000 (14%)
Austin	12,000 (10%)
San Antonio	26,000 (13%)
Houston	49,000 (16%)
Total	112,000 (14%)

Table 1. Opportunity Youth Estimates for 2022 by City: Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, and Houston

Source: [Annie E. Cassey Foundation Kids Count Data Center 2024 analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 2022](#)

The geographic areas of interest for this evaluation cover approximately 11,200 square miles with a combined population of nearly 6 million people, representing one of the fastest-growing, economically successful groupings of regions in the country. In February 2020, prior to the pandemic and resulting severe economic contraction, the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) (BLS) reported a 3.8% unemployment rate for all U.S. metropolitan areas, while unemployment rates across the four metro areas of concern for this project ranged between 2.6% and 3.7% ([BLS 2024](#)). In February 2024, the unemployment rate across all U.S. metropolitan areas was 4.2% ([BLS 2024](#)), while the unemployment rates for the four areas included in this project ranged from 3.2% to 3.9%, mirroring the region's historically tight labor market ([BLS 2024](#)). In addition, the [Texas Workforce Commission's \(2024\)](#) employment projections for these four regions estimate an additional 1.25 million new jobs by 2030. Further, of these new jobs, 40.7% will require some form of postsecondary education and training.

With Texas' low unemployment rate and the future projections of job creation, employers across the state are seeking skilled labor, a need that will continue. Texas opportunity youth are a valuable resource that can fill critical in-demand jobs—both now and in the future. The opportunity facing Texas is in creating accessible and supportive pathways to education and training that will strengthen the connection between opportunity youth and the broader

community, including connections to job opportunities that will enhance the standard of living for Texas opportunity youth.

The national movement to acknowledge the value opportunity youth bring to communities was launched in 2012 when the [White House Council for Community Solutions](#) (the Council) released the report, Community Solutions for Opportunity Youth. This report helped to launch the opportunity youth movement, presenting evidence to support key attributes of successful community solutions connecting opportunity youth to programs, resources, and the wider community. The report recognized that, “Young people themselves are key to the solution” ([The Council 2012, p. 21](#)). The Council’s research established that opportunity youth have informed views of what works for them and their peers. The report recommends that opportunity youth be engaged as leaders in seeking solutions that work to enhance the effectiveness of programs and resources.

The findings of the Community Solutions for Opportunity Youth report contributed to the founding of the Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF). The OYF is a network comprised of community collaboratives across the United States that seek to build pathways that achieve better outcomes in education, employment, and to promote the overall well-being of opportunity youth. The Texas Opportunity Youth Collaborative is a member of OYF. Across the state of Texas communities and programs are collaborating with opportunity youth to design, improve, and enhance programs and resources. The ESTOY project engaged two Austin-area community-based programs providing ETWD services for opportunity youth. Both programs have established participant advisory councils that entered into a collaboration with the ESTOY evaluator to develop the program participant survey tool.

Qualitative Research Practice

Researchers are trained to meet the needs of funders, university and institution systems, and organizations participating in evaluations. The practice of qualitative research requires evaluators to engage in continuous self-reflection in response to learning about and experiencing others.

Qualitative researchers bring to each study the inescapable stories of their lives—cultures, histories, and experiences that impact the interpretation of the life experiences of others. Self-awareness, allied with ongoing self-reflection and the pursuit of relevant information informs the subjective process of developing the relationships required to conduct CBPR.

The philosophical approach to qualitative community-based research presented by [McMahon and McKnight \(2021\)](#) provided a context for this evaluator's internal process in approaching this evaluation. While the ongoing work of learning and processing one's own biases often identifies differences in perspectives and life experiences, [McMahon, and McKnight \(2021\)](#) explore the connectivity and overlap of communities between evaluators and research participants. They espouse that human beings live in communities that support multiple connections that overlap with other communities, fostering connections with people of shared similarities and differences. As members of overlapping communities, it is at the intersection of communities that we can identify connections and shared meaning.

The evaluators' personal reflections, evolution, and discovery of connections are woven throughout the remainder of this paper.

Research Study

Community-based Participatory Research

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) allows for the integration of marginalized voices into research by including community members in the purpose, objectives, and actions undertaken in a research project. [Wilson \(2018\)](#) notes that CBPR includes features that blur the distinction between evaluator and research participants "...minimizing power imbalances and researching in partnership with communities towards positive community outcomes that are sustainable beyond the life of the research" ([Wilson 2018, p.1](#)). Further, [Mocarski et al. \(2022\)](#) assert that CBPR often features a social justice component, structuring studies designed to reduce societal disparities and improve outcomes for vulnerable populations.

This paper describes the CBPR approach used to co-create a survey tool with two groups of youth and young adults receiving ETWD services from two Austin, Texas, community-based organizations. The qualitative researcher's practice, the process of continuous self-evaluation to pursue a deeper understanding of self, and the discovery of connections with others, are revealed throughout the descriptive narrative of the CBPR process presented in this paper.

Collaborating Organizations

Each of the four Texas sub-regions of interest to the ESTOY project support education/training and service delivery systems that include workforce development programs dedicated to serving opportunity youth. Unique to the ESTOY evaluation were the existing relationships between the

White paper pending publication.

evaluator and tenured staff at community-based ETWD organizations serving opportunity youth in the Austin area. Two Austin organizations providing ETWD services targeted to meet the needs of persistently disconnected opportunity youth were approached to participate in the ESTOY CBPR to co-create the program participant survey tool: American YouthWorks YouthBuild and LifeWorks.

The YouthBuild program is a Department of Labor pre-apprenticeship program that combines education and job training. Participants range in age from 16-24 years old, have an income at or below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines, and are typically disconnected from education and training opportunities. YouthBuild programs use a service-learning model that combines occupational skills training and high school and General Education Diploma (GED) academic instruction with community service projects. Training tracks include construction, media/information technology, healthcare, and manufacturing. The YouthBuild referral network includes public school student recovery programs and the juvenile and adult justice systems.

LifeWorks is the Austin-area foster youth transition center funded through the Texas Workforce Commission to provide a system of support for youth aging out of foster care. In addition, LifeWorks provides services to youth and young adults experiencing homelessness, involvement with the justice system, and young parents. LifeWorks provides housing, education, and workforce development support. Education and workforce program offerings include Adult Basic Education and GED test preparation classes, connections to other area workforce training opportunities, workforce placement, and workplace skill-building support.

Both organizations approach service delivery with a focused and intentional effort to include participant voices in the program's evaluation and evolution, and facilitate formal groups of program participants to ensure participant voices contribute to the shaping of the organizations.

Survey Development

Within the broader scope of the ESTOY evaluation, the research team determined the objective of the program participant survey: To gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of opportunity youth who have enrolled in community-based ETWD programs in four Texas communities: Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, and Houston.

The research team convened an ESTOY advisory committee comprised of ten professionals from across the state dedicated to the education/training, employment, and overall well-being of

opportunity youth. The advisory committee partnered with the RMC research team to develop the following four research questions used to guide the survey tool development:

- How do opportunity youth learn about ETWD services?
- What program elements contribute to participants' sense of well-being, and help participants continue and complete the program?
- What elements of the programs are most important in meeting participants' needs?
- What are youth and young adults enrolled in ETWD programs striving for?

A literature review of published opportunity youth research using survey instruments and focus group questions was conducted to identify questions that will address and support the ESTOY research questions. Questions related to goals and aspirations were gleaned from the insights shared by three focus groups with TX opportunity youth enrolled in re-engagement programs ([Crockett et al. 2019](#)). An opportunity youth needs assessment survey tool developed by the Coalition Supporting Young Adults (CSYA) of Louisville, KY, contributed questions regarding connection and program evaluation ([Deck 2017](#)). [Nemoy and Miles \(2018\)](#) reported on the continuum of youth engagement approaches from various organizations and groups across the U.S. Insights from this report shaped questions relevant to youth engagement in the development and implementation of programming and provided guidance into the process of engaging youth and young adults to participate in the survey development.

To fully address the four research questions, additional survey questions developed by the ESTOY evaluation team were added to the questions from the literature review. The final list of potential survey questions was reviewed by the RMC team and determined to be relevant to different opportunity youth subgroups, and free of value judgments and triggers that may cause distress for members of the program participant advisory groups. The final list of questions was used to guide the conversations with the opportunity youth advisory groups in the development of the survey tool.

Engaging Programs

YouthBuild

The relationship between the evaluator and the YouthBuild initial contact person was forged over the years through the organization's participation in local workforce development evaluations conducted by RMC, and numerous encounters through community coalitions and gatherings. The YouthBuild main training facility serves as a Red Cross blood donation site

where the evaluator is a donor. The initial YouthBuild contact person referred the evaluator to YouthBuild's director of Restorative Justice Practices (RJP Director) who coordinates the activities of the Restorative Justice Practice Leadership Crew (Crew), an individual the evaluator was not acquainted with.

During the initial meeting with the RJP director, he questioned the motivation of the J. P. Morgan Chase Foundation in supporting the ESTOY research project. The RJP director addressed how Black and Brown bodies have been and continue to be exploited and abused by society and expressed his concern regarding the ESTOY project being supported by a major corporation's foundation. The RJP director spoke of YouthBuild's environment as a healing space where young people learn about themselves in an atmosphere of respect and acceptance where they can feel safe and valued. The evaluator listened and offered validation of the presented concerns while feeling the response to the RJP director's concerns was inadequate. As the conversation closed, the RJP director agreed to ask the RJP Leadership Crew if they were interested in a meeting with the evaluator to learn more about the proposed project.

The evaluator was unprepared to respond to concerns regarding the motivation of the project funder and systemic racism. The conversation caused the evaluator to reflect and develop a broader understanding of the dynamics of trust in CBPR relationships and a deeper understanding of the environment organizations create to promote the well-being of program participants. The RJP director's concerns assert the organization's protective stance regarding outsiders coming into the YouthBuild participant environment. The evaluator's reflection on the conversation with the RJP director led the evaluator to deliberate upon the intersections of racism and exploitation within social science research and specific to the ESTOY project.

The following is an excerpt of the follow-up email the evaluator sent to the RJP director.

“... As I continue to think about our conversation, I see the connection of current workforce development programs to this country's long history of systemic abuse of the labor of Black and Brown people to meet the economic needs of each era. The workforce training programs that are currently being funded ride on this same wave of dehumanization: valuing people only when they are needed to plug holes in the economy, often in low-wage jobs.

So, what happens now? My work with the ESTOY project is to pursue a deeper understanding of the experience of youth who have been disenfranchised from

opportunities and to develop recommendations regarding program practices that support youth in their process of recovery, and in their engagement in education and training opportunities. ..." (ESTOY Evaluator, personal communication, February 29, 2023).

The email also included information about the evaluator's previous work experience and an explanation of the personal motivation for engaging in this work. In short, "I believe in peace; therefore, I work for social justice as my life's mission." Sharing this information exposed the honest vulnerability of the evaluator's need to continue to learn and to strive to understand while exploring the connectivity and overlap of communities of meaning between the evaluator, the YouthBuild staff, and program participants.

Within two weeks, the RJP director invited the evaluator to attend an RJP Leadership Crew meeting.

The first meeting with the RJP Leadership Crew followed an agenda beginning with an introduction of the evaluator and first name introductions of Crew members followed by how their confidence will be guarded, compensation for participation, the purpose of the ESTOY project, identification of the project funder, how the information gathered will be used, and how the Crew can participate. Also, conversations would not be recorded, but with the Crew's permission, the evaluator would take notes during the discussion.

The group asked additional questions regarding how the information gathered would be used and expressed a general curiosity about the motive of the research funder. The evaluator provided information about the grantor and answered questions regarding how the grantor may benefit through the funding of projects such as ESTOY. A vote was taken, and Crew members agreed to collaborate on the ESTOY survey development.

At this first meeting, one of the Crew members was accompanied by her preschool daughter. While distributing the gift cards, the child approached the evaluator, asking if she too could have a gift card. The evaluator explained the gift cards were for the grown-ups, but the evaluator had something special that the child could have. The evaluator happened to keep a small picture of a favorite cat in her billfold. The evaluator took out the picture, held it to her heart, and explained, "This is very special to me. It's a picture of my favorite kitty. I want to give it to you." The child's face brightened with a smile. She accepted the gift and skipped across the room to show her mother the prize. The child's mother and the evaluator shared a smile across the room,

experiencing a connection of the shared value of children. At that moment, the evaluator acted as an Auntie, assuring the child in the room felt seen, heard, and valued.

Upon the evaluator's request, the next meeting was rescheduled due to the death of a family member and the need for the evaluator to travel out of town to be with family. The RJP director shared this information with the Crew, and a new meeting date was set.

At the beginning of the second meeting, while Crew members entered the room, the RJP director placed his arm around the shoulders of the evaluator and offered his condolences, recounting that he had recently lost a family member saying, "I know how important family is". Reflecting on this moment, the compassion, affection, and the sharing of intimate family information between the evaluator and the RJP director, displayed to the Crew a level of trust in the relationship and the interconnection of experiences: The experience of being a member of a family, of loss, and the vulnerability of acceptance care from others during difficult periods in life.

Before meeting the evaluator, the Crew trusted the RJP director's discernment regarding outside individuals being invited into their safe space. The sharing of personal information, affection, and compassion between the RJP director and the evaluator further supported the potential for a trusting relationship and sense of connection between the evaluator and the Crew.

As the evaluator facilitated the Crew discussion regarding the development of the survey, the flow of information was comfortable with no echoes of strain from concerns discussed during the first meeting. A handout was distributed that included the four primary research questions and sample questions selected from the literature review. The Crew contributed the following to the survey development:

- Some of the sample questions were selected to address the four areas of interest.
- Adjustments were made to the language used in the selected questions to clarify the meaning and intent of the questions.
- Questions that were likely to be perceived as asking for similar information were identified and the duplicates were eliminated.
- New questions were written and added to the survey.

- The Crew agreed that open-ended response options made more sense than providing a list of possible answers to choose from. The Crew expressed that a list of possible answers may direct and limit the thinking of survey respondents when answering a question.
- The Crew agreed that the survey was to be translated into Spanish as some program participants may be more comfortable reading and writing in Spanish.
- The questions were ordered and clustered, creating a sense of flow and continuity to the survey.

During a third meeting, the draft survey was reviewed, and minor changes were made to the order of the questions. The Crew conducted a final review to identify if any language used or questions asked would be likely to cause a respondent distress. The Crew determined the survey to be unlikely to trigger distress for respondents.

LifeWorks

The Lifeworks staff member initially approached had worked with the evaluator on one previous research project; however, the organization had participated in a six-year ongoing local evaluation conducted by RMC. The evaluator was referred to the organization's chief program officer who in turn referred the evaluator to the organization's chief research and evaluation officer. Two lengthy email exchanges responded to 14 questions that further explained the ESTOY research project and the role of the program participant advisory group. This seven-week process resulted in a decision by the LifeWorks staff that they were unable to accommodate the evaluator's request.

Following the development of the draft survey by the AYW Crew, the evaluator decided to reapproach the LifeWorks chief research and evaluation officer with the following email.

“The American YouthWorks Restorative Justice Crew helped me develop a survey to increase my understanding of the experiences of youth participating in ETWD education and workforce development training programs. I am seeking permission to meet with a group of LifeWorks program participants to learn about me and my project, and if they agree to help me, to review the survey to make suggestions to improve the survey . . .”

(ESTOY Evaluator, personal communication, July 22, 2023).

Within two days the chief research and evaluation officer invited the evaluator to complete the LifeWorks research application and submit verification of the University Institutional Review Board's approval of the research project. The LifeWorks research application was approved, and

the evaluator was introduced to the manager of the LifeWorks Impactful Voices Team (Team) to schedule a meeting for the evaluator to introduce the project to the Team.

After being introduced to the ESTOY project, the team agreed to assist with the survey development. The Team made three changes to the survey that are discussed below.

- Highlight key words in certain questions to clarify the meaning of the question. For example: Q1.1 How did you **first learn about** LifeWorks?

At the beginning of the survey review session, one of the participants initiated a discussion of a specific question when another Team member stated, "...that's not what that question means." The original speaker read the question again and agreed that they had misread the meaning of the question, and their prior comments should be disregarded. At that moment, the evaluator paused the group discussion to affirm the value of the first speaker's interpretation of the question by saying, "If one person read and viewed the question in that way, others will too". The Team was informed that the ESTOY research team would be reviewing the question for clarity. This exchange presented the evaluator with the opportunity to assure participants that all ideas are valid and valuable and that researchers make mistakes and can miss important nuances that influence the research being conducted. This exchange was another opportunity to acknowledge the interconnection of a community of individuals working together to improve a project knowing that as humans, mistakes can be made and that everyone's contribution to the discussion was valuable.

Following the evaluator's validation of the contribution of the first speaker, the group conversation took on an ease and flow and the Team came to an agreement that the problem of question interpretation might be solved if the salient issue for each question was highlighted. The Team reviewed the survey questions and made suggestions on highlighting certain words for some of the questions.

- In the section 4 introduction, provide a repetition of the voluntary nature of the survey:
"The next four questions ask about the support services provided at LifeWorks. ...
Remember, you can skip any question for any reason."

The Team explained that some respondents may not be comfortable responding to the questions about the support services they received at LifeWorks.

The introduction to the survey includes the phrase, “You can skip any question that you do not want to answer”. The Team adapted the phrase to read, “Remember, you can skip any question for any reason”.

- In the section 4 introduction, include this clarifying statement: “These responses will not be shared with program staff. If you have a need for additional support services, please talk with a LifeWorks staff person.”

The Team voiced concerns that if a respondent provides information about a need they have, they may expect program staff to follow up with them to address the issue. To remedy this, the Team added the above mentioned clarification.

The LifeWorks Team suggestions were incorporated into the final draft of the survey. The survey was sent to the YouthBuild RJP director and the manager of the LifeWorks Team to share with the Crew and Team. The director and manager were asked to ensure the Crew and Team members were aware of the final section of the survey instrument that acknowledges the contribution of the YouthBuild and LifeWorks program participants with the following statement: “This survey was constructed in consultation with the American YouthWorks Restorative Justice Practice Leadership Crew, and the LifeWorks Impactful Voices Team of Austin, Texas.”

Survey Tool

In the following survey, the word *Program* is a substitute for the name of the organization partnering with the evaluator to distribute the survey. To accommodate a range of reading comprehension levels, the survey was presented at a fifth-grade level.

EVALUATING SERVICES FOR TEXAS OPPORTUNITY YOUTH – ESTOY

Program Participant Survey

INTRODUCTION

This survey asks questions about your experience at *Program*. Your survey answers will be kept confidential; your name will not be linked to your answers. Participation in the survey is completely voluntary. The questions have been reviewed by other youth and young adults receiving similar services and they have determined the survey questions should not cause you any level of discomfort. The survey takes 10 to 20 minutes to complete. You can skip any question that you do not want to answer. You can also stop the survey at any time, for any reason. At the end of the survey, if you would like to receive a \$25 HEB gift card, you will be directed to a different site to provide your name and address. This way, your name will not be connected to your responses. Researchers at the UT Austin Ray Marshall Center will be writing a report that will include the information *Program* participants share in this survey combined with survey responses from several other groups of youth and young adults across the state of Texas. The final report will be posted on the Ray Marshall Center website and shared with organizations serving youth and young adults throughout the state of Texas. This research is funded by the J.P. Morgan Chase Foundation, the Aspen Institute, and the UP Partnership of Bexar County, TX.

Click ***INFORMATOIN*** to review additional information about the purpose of the survey and your rights as a survey participant.

INFORMATION

Section 1.0 The first two questions ask about how you learned about *Program* and your experience of enrolling in *Program*.

1.1 How did you **first learn about *Program***? Please read all choices then select the one that best describes how you first learned about *Program*.

1. *Program* staff person talked to me about the *Program*.
2. A staff person at another social service program, such as a caseworker or advisor, talked to me about *Program*.
3. A school staff person talked to me about *Program*.
4. **Someone who participated** in *Program* talked to me about the *Program*.
5. **Someone who did not participate** in the *Program* talked to me about *Program*.
6. The internet or social media.
7. I learned about *Program* in another way. Share with us how you learned about *Program*.

1.2 On a scale of one to five, with **one being very easy** and **five being very difficult**, how would you rank your experience of getting enrolled in *Program*, such as filling out forms, talking with staff, and turning in paperwork?

Response Options: 1 - Very Easy; 2 – Easy; 3 – Okay; 4 – Difficult; 5 - Very Difficult

Section 2.0 The next five questions ask about your feelings of acceptance and connection at *Program*. Each question offers you five possible answers. Please check the answer that best describes how you feel.

Response Options: All of the time; Most of the time; Some of the time; Not very often; None of the time; and open ended.

2.1 Did you feel welcomed when you first came to *Program*?

2.1a Would you like to share more information about your response to the question, "Did you feel welcomed when you first came to *Program*?"

2.2 Do you feel comfortable being yourself at *Program*?

2.2a Would you like to share more information about your response to the question, "Do you feel comfortable being yourself at *Program*?"

2.3 Do you feel *Program* staff value participants regardless of their background or individual characteristics?

2.3a Would you like to share more information about your response to the question, “Do you feel *Program* staff value participants regardless of their background or individual characteristics?”

2.4 Do you feel connected to any of the people you have met at *Program*?

2.4a Would you like to share more information about your response to the question, “Do you feel connected to any of the people you have met while enrolled in *Program*?”

2.5 Is there someone on staff at *Program* that you can talk to if you have troubles?

2.5a Would you like to share more information about your response to the question, “Is there someone on staff at *Program* that you can talk to if you have troubles?”

Section 3.0 The following two questions ask about your experience of support in your community outside of *Program*.

Response Options: All of the time; Most of the time; Some of the time; Not very often; None of the time

3.1 In your community, **outside of *Program***, do you have a support network?

3.2 Is there someone in your life **outside of *Program*** that you can talk to if you have troubles?

Section 4.0 The next four questions ask about the support services provided at *Program*. These responses will not be shared with *Program* staff. If you need additional support services, please talk with a *Program* staff person. Remember, you can skip any question for any reason.

4.1 What *Program* support services, such as transportation, childcare, or other supports, are most helpful in helping you achieve your goals at *Program*?

Response open ended.

4.2 Was there a key support service you received that you needed for you to enter and/or continue with *Program*?

Response options: Yes No

4.2a Please share with us the support service you received that you needed for you to enter and continue with *Program*.

Response option: open ended.

4.3 Is there something you need to be successful that is not available through the *Program*?

4.3a Please explain what you need to be successful in the *Program*.

4.4 Do you know anyone who left *Program* before reaching their goal?

Response options: Yes No

4.4a If you know why, please share with us why the person left the *Program* before reaching their goal (you can choose more than one).

Section 5.0 The next four questions ask about your goals for your life.

Response option: open ended

5.1 What are you reaching for in your life?

5.2 What is the most important skill you learned at *Program* that will help you achieve your goal?

5.3 What could prevent you from reaching your goal?

5.4 When you think about having a job or going on to additional schooling, what do you worry about?

Section 6.0 These last six questions ask about your opinion of *Program* and your thoughts about your experience at *Program*. Remember, you can skip questions.

6.1 In the past, have you been asked to give your opinion about *Program* services in any of the ways listed: (you can choose more than one)?

1. A survey that allowed me to give my opinion of the *Program*.
2. A *Program* participant advisory council.
3. I talk with a caseworker or other staff.
4. I can give my opinion in another way. Please explain.
5. I have not had a chance to give my opinion about the *Program*.

6.2 Are there any services or other parts of *Program* that could be improved?

Response options: Yes No

6.2a Please share with us how you think *Program* can be improved.

Response option for 6.2a and the following five questions: open ended

6.3 Is there a type of job training you would like to receive that isn't offered at *Program*?

6.4 What do you wish you knew about *Program* before you entered the *Program*?

6.5 What have you learned about yourself while attending *Program*?

6.6 What advice do you have for people who are thinking of entering *Program*?

6.7 What didn't we ask you that you would like us to know?

This survey was constructed in consultation with the American YouthWorks Restorative Justice Practice Leadership Crew, and the LifeWorks Impactful Voices Team of Austin, Texas.

Survey Pilot

The YouthBuild Crew agreed to pilot the survey at the YouthBuild main program site. The Crew selected a day and time and recruited program participants to complete the survey. The survey was administered in a computer lab where participants could link to the survey. A QR code was also available to connect to the survey with their phones. In addition, a paper copy of the survey was made available in both English and Spanish. The 19 respondents selected the English paper survey.

Reviewing the pilot responses did not yield any suggestions for survey changes; however, the evaluator noted that some respondents took twice as much time as anticipated to complete the survey and a few of the narrative responses were written in a phonetic script. Beyond the pilot, the survey is being distributed using a web-based software platform only.

Preliminary Results

While the survey continues to be distributed through ETWD programs across the four communities of interest to this evaluation, the following table presents preliminary results for seven questions related to connection and belonging from 143 survey responses representing three programs in two communities.

Survey results identified that 93.0% of respondents felt welcomed *most of the time* when they first came to the program. Feelings of acceptance, value, and connection while at the program were experienced *most of the time* by at least 85% of the respondents. While 70.1% identified having a support network outside of the program *most of the time*, and 69.9% reported they have someone outside of the program that they can talk to when they have troubles. Eighty-five percent reporting that *most of the time* there is someone at the program they can talk to when they have troubles. In general, survey respondents reported they experience a sense of connection and belonging.

N=143	All of the time	Most of the time	Some of the time	Not very often	None of the time
1. Did you feel welcomed when you first came to <i>Program</i> ?	76.2%	16.8%	7.0%	0.0%	0.0%
2. Do you feel comfortable being yourself at <i>Program</i> ?	72.5%	16.7%	9.4%	1.4%	0.0%
3. Do you feel <i>Program</i> staff value participants regardless of their background or individual characteristics?	67.4%	27.0%	3.5%	0.7%	1.4%
4. Do you feel connected to any of the people you have met at <i>Program</i> ?	51.6%	32.0%	10.9%	3.1%	2.3%
5. Is there someone on staff at <i>Program</i> that you can talk to if you have troubles?	62.3%	23.2%	10.1%	2.2%	2.2%
6. In your community, outside of <i>Program</i> , do you have a support network?	34.3%	35.8%	20.4%	8.0%	1.5%
7. Is there someone in your life outside of <i>Program</i> that you can talk to if you have troubles?	48.6%	21.0%	18.1%	11.6%	0.7%

Table 2: ESTOY Preliminary Survey Responses: Belonging and Connection

Many of the survey questions allow for open ended responses and preliminary results are not available at this writing. The evaluator is unable to return to the original groups who consulted on the construction of the survey due to the passage of time and program participants completing programs and moving on. However, the evaluator serves the Central Texas Opportunity Youth Collaborative which includes a Youth Advisory Council. The evaluator has scheduled time with the Youth Advisory Council to assist with the review of open ended responses and the development of meaningful and valid categories for responses to the various questions.

Upon completion of the survey distribution and analysis, findings will be made available to programs and organizations across the state of Texas, including those serving opportunity youth,

White paper pending publication.

the opportunity youth advisory collaboratives, and organizations advocating for services to meet the needs of opportunity youth within our communities.

Conclusion

To gain a deeper understanding of the experience of opportunity youth enrolled in community-based ETWD programs, two organizations serving distinct subgroups of opportunity youth were approached to facilitate a meeting between the evaluator and groups of youth and young adults receiving services. The CBPR approach endeavored to enlist the assistance of two groups of program participants to co-create a program participant survey tool for opportunity youth receiving services from ETWD programs in four communities across Texas: Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, and Houston.

Two Austin organizations providing ETWD services targeted to meet the needs of persistently disconnected opportunity youth were approached to participate in the CBPR project: American YouthWorks YouthBuild and LifeWorks. Both programs strive to create a healing community of relationships that support opportunity youth in their recovery while working to achieve their academic and career goals. This perspective, rightly so, creates a protective barrier designed to ensure that collaborators, community partners, and researchers align with this philosophical approach to relationships and service delivery.

Providing services to persistent opportunity youth requires a program service delivery model that supports the relational needs of youth and young adults. Trusting relationships that support the healing and development of persistent opportunity youth requires a commitment to the time needed to build relationships. Likewise, a CBPR approach requires significant amounts of the evaluator's time to initiate, grow, and maintain trusting relationships. The ESTOY evaluator invested months in developing relationships with program staff in the process of obtaining authorization to meet with the participant advisory groups. The first contact with the YouthBuild RJP director occurred in February, and the initial meeting with the RJP Leadership Crew occurred in March, with the final meeting to approve the survey draft was in June. The second LifeWorks inquiry was sent in July and the meeting with the LifeWorks Impactful Voices Team occurred in October.

Developing relationships with organization staff, the gatekeepers to participants, laid the path for program participants to be open to meeting with the evaluator. Establishing relationships with

program participants required the art and science of effective focus group moderation: careful listening skills, the flexibility to adapt to the flow of the conversation, the capacity to pick up on body language that appeared to indicate the participant had a question or concern to express and finding effective ways to invite individuals into the conversation while projecting an open and accepting persona. The evaluator's appearance and body language and the decision to share personal vulnerabilities that revealed the interconnection of shared communities of meaning and purpose while maintaining the focus on the process contributed to a richness of experience for both the evaluator and program participants.

Lessons Learned

The survey pilot brought to light the range of reading and writing capacities of youth and young adults seeking ETWD services. Although the survey was written at a fifth-grade reading comprehension level, this may not be sufficient for all program participants to participate comfortably and confidently. Future survey distributions for this population may consider providing an option for respondents to access a tool that can read the survey and record responses.

As researchers seek evidence to describe best practices and support policy recommendations to promote equitable access to services, the influence of systemic racism and inequities on communities, funders, and researchers must be intentionally and continuously questioned and discussed. Relationships and connections can be forged as researchers broaden their frame of awareness regarding these issues and the impact these issues have upon their perceptions and relationships with CBPR partners.

As this evaluator negotiated the line between professional boundaries and efforts to experience connections, it was the unanticipated circumstance of daily life, the death of a loved one, and the decision to share that vulnerability with the AYW Crew, rather than simply ask to reschedule the meeting, that seemed to cast the web of connection. As researchers enter into partnerships with communities to conduct CBPR, the continued awareness of opportunities for connection that naturally present themselves and the willingness of researchers to experience personal vulnerability will create community and serve the CBPR.

The challenge of circling back to the Crew and Team that worked to create the survey with information regarding the survey results was hindered by the nature of their participation in an

White paper pending publication.

ETWD program. Crew and Team members completed programs and move on. CBPR with transitioning communities present this challenge. One solution would be to provide each member of the original group with a business card that identifies where the results of their efforts can be assessed.

The ESTOY project CBPR approach reinforced the findings of the White House Council for Community Solutions ([The Council 2012, p. 21](#)) that “Young people themselves are key to the solution.” and when included, will provide valuable insights to guide research projects. The development of trusting collaborative relationships relies not only upon the foundation of the evaluator's communication and focus group facilitation skills but more importantly, the willingness of the evaluator to be authentic and to seize opportunities to experience and express vulnerability and to identify the intersection of shared communities of connection and shared meaning.

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