



# The Opportunity Youth Forum: Using Data to Facilitate Systems Change

Evaluation Brief for the Aspen Institute Opportunity  
Youth Forum

*Prepared for: The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions  
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**EQUAL**  
MEASURE

FINDING  
PROMISE  
FUELING  
CHANGE

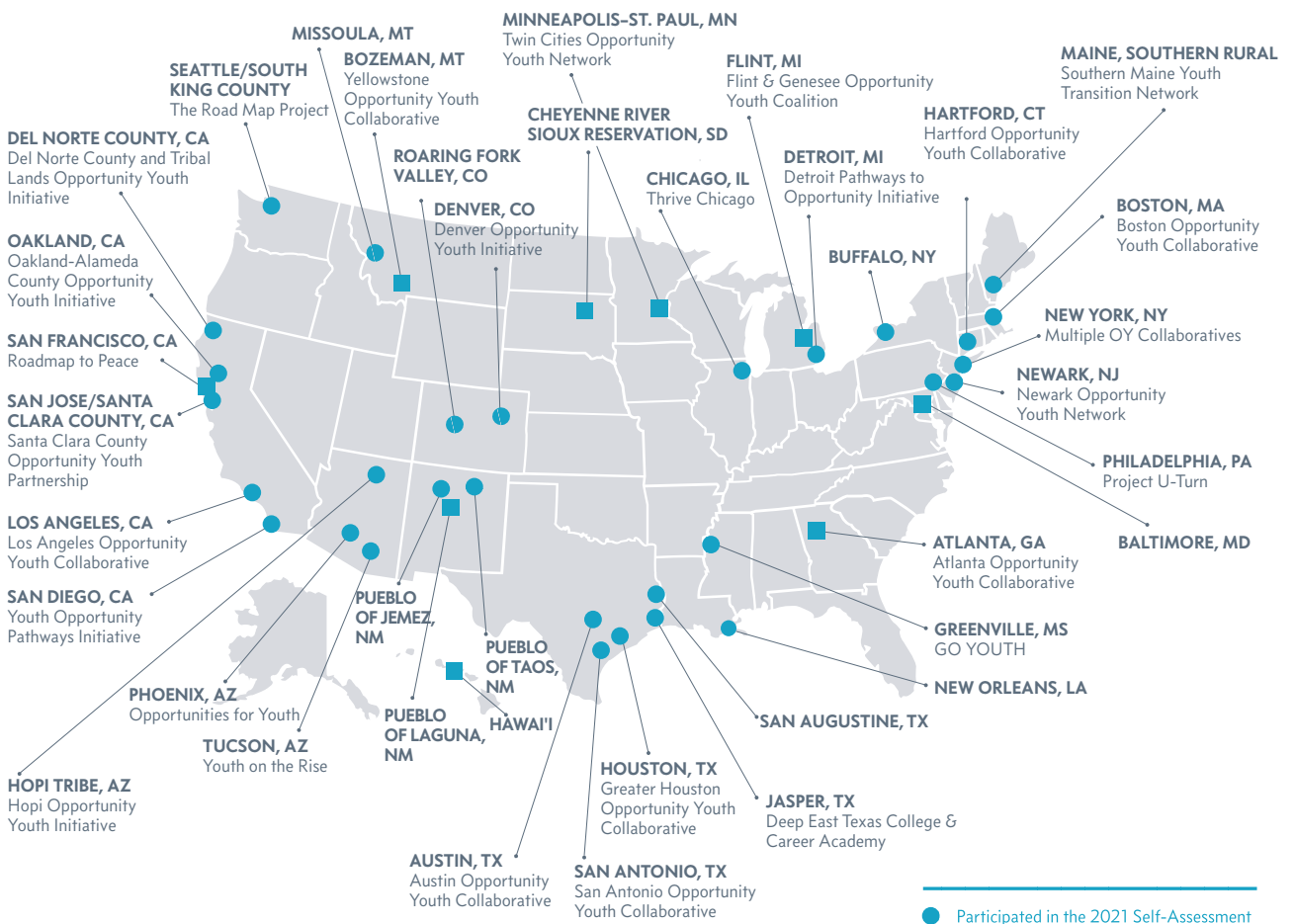




# ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This evaluation brief is drawn from the full 2021 evaluation report, “The Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF): Boosting Capacity to Drive Equitable Systems Change.”<sup>1</sup> In that report we detail OYF network-wide findings from data collection among 30 of 39 communities participating in the OYF network in 2021 (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Quantitative data was collected through a self-assessment administered to OYF network collaboratives in February 2022.<sup>3</sup> We collected qualitative information for the report through the same self-assessment, as well as through interviews with leaders from the collaboratives. In the full report, we provide a holistic summary of the state of and changes in the network’s collaborative capacity, systems change efforts, and articulation of OYF values from 2019 to 2021. We also provide a deeper dive into four focus areas: data use, public policy change, funding changes, and equity. This brief is a deep dive on data use, highlighting positive trends and promising practices in the OYF network’s capacity to collect and use data to improve systems and outcomes for opportunity youth.

**FIGURE 1**  
**OYF Collaboratives in 2021**





# An Overview of the Forum for Community Solutions’ Commitment and Investment in Data

Since the start of OYF a decade ago, FCS has been committed to a culture of data-driven decision making throughout the OYF network, to better understand where and how systems are failing opportunity youth, to drive strategies for change, and to demonstrate impact. Over the last five years, FCS has made significant investments in building the capacity of OYF collaboratives to collect and use data to improve systems and outcomes for opportunity youth in their communities. Data strategies have occurred across two phases of investment:<sup>4</sup>

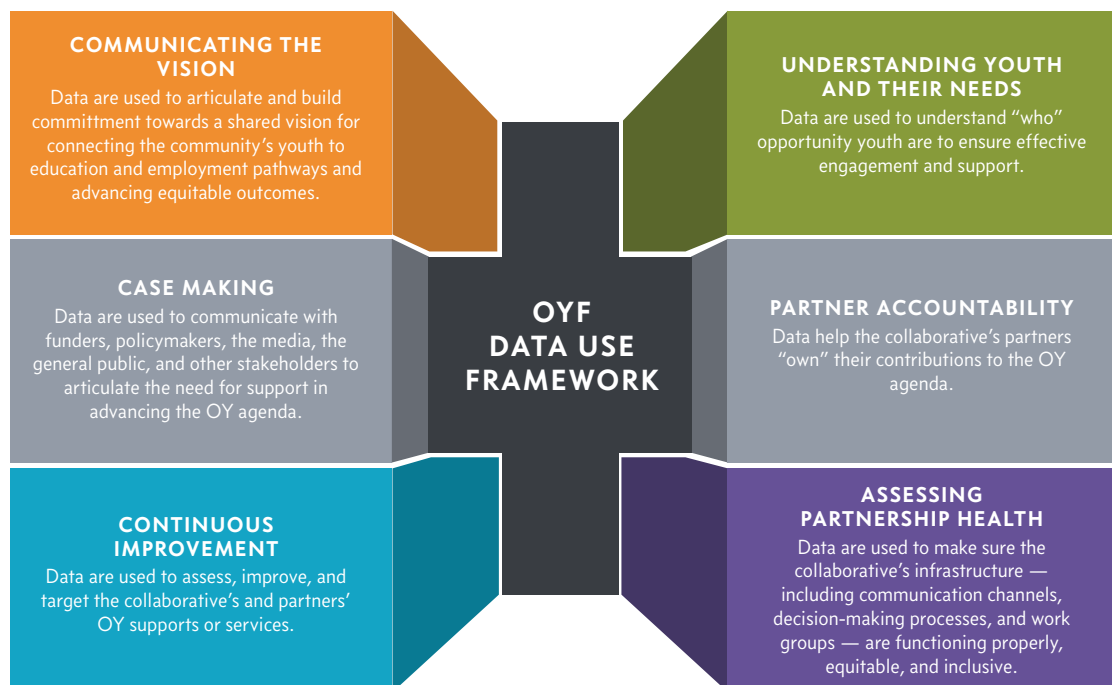
## PHASE I

**Phase I** of FCS’s data collection, analysis, and use initiative, **Equity Counts**, launched in the fall of 2018 with support from the Ballmer Group. Equal Measure worked with six OYF communities participating in the Equity Counts Data Collection Pilot, co-developing a way to consistently track opportunity youth outcomes across communities in the OYF network. An additional 11 OYF communities participated in a community of practice. Through Equity Counts we developed:

- A framework for how cross-sector efforts like OYF can use data (see Figure 2).

- The **OYF Common Measures**: a way to track disconnection rates across communities using population level data from the American Community Survey (ACS). The OYF Common Measures track the community disconnection rate and three segmented disconnection rates (disconnection from high school, postsecondary education, and the workforce) on both the community level (based on geographic area of focus) and across the OYF network, disaggregating the rates to better understand inequities. The OYF Common Measures have been produced using 2017 and 2019 ACS data and will be produced in 2023 using 2021 data.

FIGURE 2  
**OYF Data Use Framework**





## PHASE II

Phase II of the initiative, **Data for Impact**,<sup>5</sup> consists of learning opportunities and funding through data-focused technical assistance and communities of practice. FCS has recognized that communities have varying relationships with data, with some having experienced harm or invisibility, particularly in tribal and rural areas, and has provided more specialized technical assistance and community-building around local data sovereignty. These efforts honor communities' specific context and history, and helps them make meaning of data in ways that are important to, and determined by, the communities. Data for Impact consists of:

### Technical Assistance, Learning, and Dissemination

The technical assistance (TA) supports OYF communities in improving their capacity to collect and use data to promote continuous improvement, drive equity, and demonstrate impact. Culturally responsive strategies are co-developed with the rural and Native American, Indigenous, and tribal communities to contextualize the technical assistance strategies, and to center their culture and lived experience.

The technical assistance offered to the OYF network is both responsive and proactive.

- **Responsive TA.** One-on-one assistance is available to all collaboratives. Collaboratives can reach out regarding specific needs or gaps in their data capacity and work one-on-one with a TA provider to address those needs.
- **Proactive TA.** These one-on-one and group sessions are based on the priorities of the OYF network. For example, technical assistance on "target setting" is provided to the network to foster transparency and accountability in driving improvements in OY outcomes at the community and network levels. Using the OYF Common Measures, the TA provider guides communities in setting targets to work towards, guided by the priorities of the collaborative. The process of setting and monitoring progress on these goals helps collaboratives better align their activities with intended outcomes, and fosters a culture of continuous improvement.

### Grantmaking

FCS has adopted an equity-focused grantmaking strategy to streamline the application process and to reduce the barriers for rural and Native American, Indigenous, and tribal communities.

There are currently two types of data grants: Systems Improvement Grants and Data Enhancement Grants.

- Three communities received **systems improvement grants** to build data capacity at the community and partner levels to drive equity and improvement in outcomes for opportunity youth.
- Five communities received **rural and native, indigenous, and tribal data enhancement grants** to build capacity to collect and analyze data reflective of their communities.

Given the significant focus on data in the network, one area the OYF annual self-assessment examines is collaborative capacity for data and learning, as well as the collection and use of data to drive systems change. **In 2021, the OYF network exhibited strengths in internal collaborative data capacity and in use of data for systems change.** *Data and learning* was the highest rated collaborative capacity among the four capacities assessed. Furthermore, **collaboratives have seen substantial growth in data capacity and data use for systems change over the last one to two years.** We provide additional details about these trends and data practices in the remainder of this brief.



## Collecting and Using Data for Systems Change

Significantly, there has been consistent growth in data use to improve systems in OYF communities from 2019 to 2020 to 2021 (strong evidence: 19% to 26% to 34% - see Figure 3).<sup>6</sup> The particular areas of growth were in *common data definitions and indicators within and across key systems* (an increase of 18 percentage points from 2020 to 2021) and *data analysis and sharing learning*, or using data across systems to guide strategies and decisions (an increase of 13 percentage points from 2020 to 2021) (Figure 4).

FIGURE 3  
Growth in data use for systems change in OYF network, 2019-2021

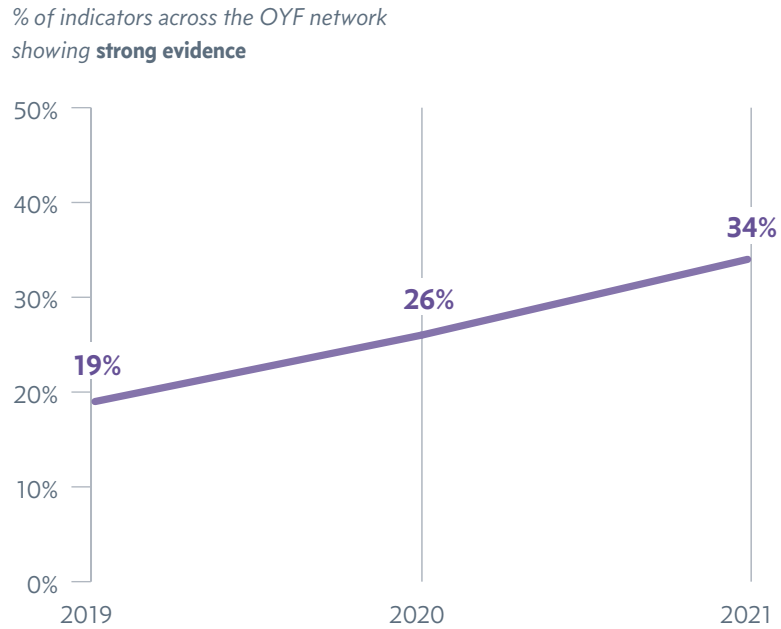
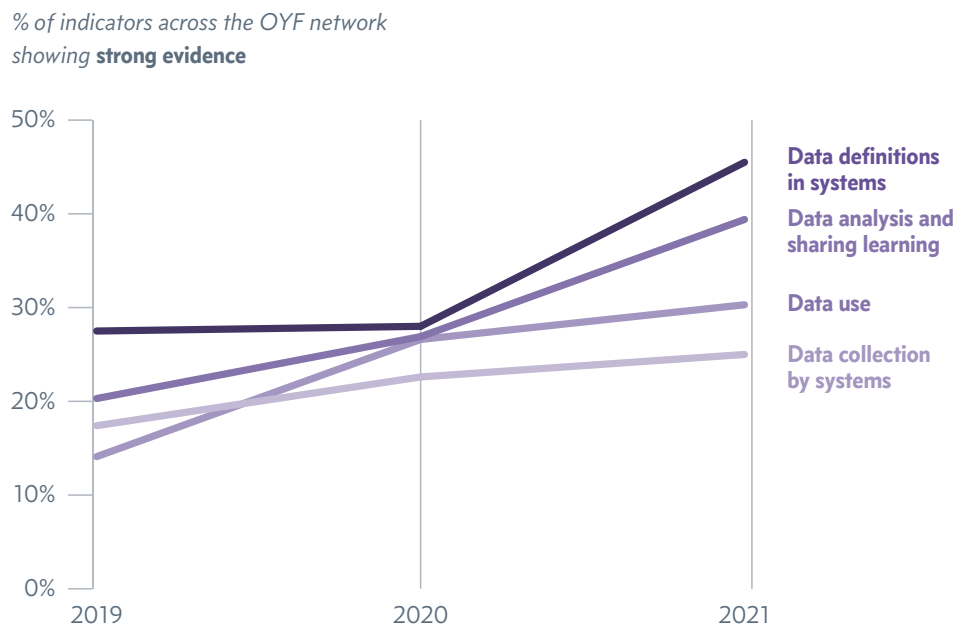


FIGURE 4  
Growth in specific areas of data use for systems change in OYF network, 2019-2021



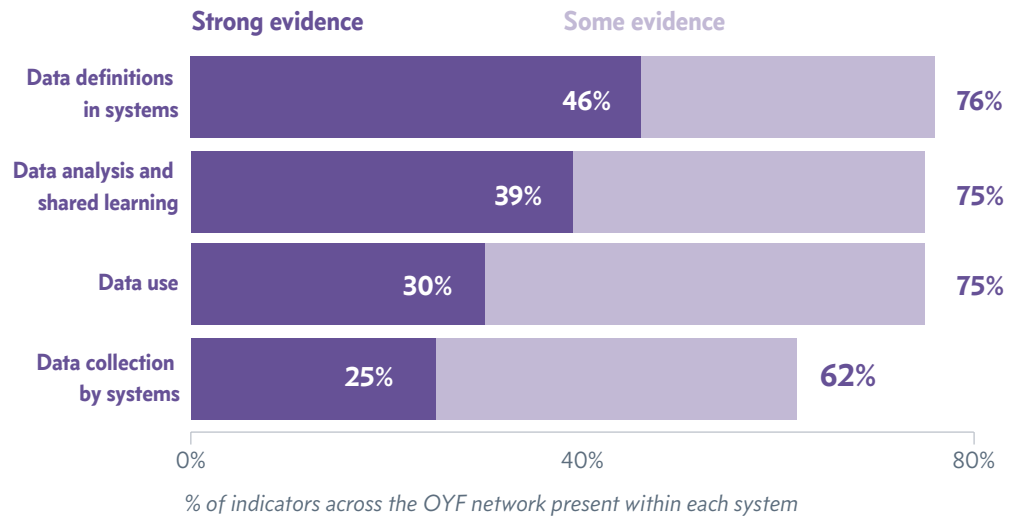


In addition, **in 2021 data and learning as a systems change was ranked relatively high** — over one-third of the data use for systems change indicators (34%) were rated by collaboratives as strongly in place in their communities. Having common data definitions and tools and sharing and using data within and across local systems to improve programs, inform systems-wide strategies, and drive policy is one dimension of systems change.

To produce accurate data that can be shared and used, shared understandings and common definitions of key terms and markers of progress among stakeholders and partners within and across local systems are critical. Collaboratives reported strong evidence of almost half (46%) of the indicators of common *data definitions in systems* on the self-assessment (Figure 5). For example:

- 58% of collaboratives reported strong evidence that common OY data indicators were tracked *within* key systems, with 36% of collaboratives reporting common indicators across *different* systems.
- 42% of collaboratives reported strong evidence of common definitions of OY indicators across systems.

FIGURE 5  
**Strengths in data definitions, data analysis and shared learning in 2021**



In other words, partners within systems, and even across different systems, were collecting data and measuring progress – such as enrolling or completing postsecondary education or obtaining a job – in the same way. This is important because it allows for data to be aggregated or looked at for more than one program, organization, or system, which **makes the data much more useful for understanding progress and making strategic decisions about areas or populations to focus on at a systems level.**



In fact, *data analysis* and *sharing learning* was the other type of data systems change that was rated relatively high by collaboratives (39% of indicators strongly evident in communities; Figure 5). Almost half of collaboratives (45%) reported strong evidence of *partners within the same local systems sharing data to assess and improve programs and services* for opportunity youth; the percentage dropped to 24% reporting that partners from *different* systems shared data. Sharing data is critical to understanding needs and progress and developing strategies that are aligned within a system, and ideally, across systems. This is how data can facilitate systems change.

Several collaboratives have coordinated and developed common definitions among cross-sector partners or the broader youth ecosystem in order to share and learn from data through **common data systems**. These systems help standardize data across multiple partners, producing more accurate data or information about young people, programs and services, and progress. The information can then be leveraged to help make decisions, align, and target services across local systems, develop connected strategies, case-make, and share progress.

A few collaboratives described data systems which focused on coordinating information within one local system, such as the workforce system or K-12 education system and shared how the collaboratives use these data.

- The workforce system in **Detroit** is using a data management system that tracks all Detroit residents, 18 and over, who seek workforce development services. This will allow the collaborative to monitor the progress of older opportunity youth who seek support from local workforce programs.
- In **Buffalo**, the data team is building a data platform where eight youth employment partners will enter data, and the system will produce aggregate reports. The site lead notes “... [the] data project is ... for the very first time in the history of our community ... helping us look across the youth employment system so that we can look at the aggregate data of who are we serving, who aren't we reaching and how are we doing and how could we do better.”
- Through a partnership with a local postsecondary institution, **Jasper** is developing a database to track high school students across six school districts. The system will track college credits, career pathway participation, and courses needed to graduate, as well as being able to identify young people who are at risk for becoming opportunity youth.

**Promising Practice:**  
**Convening a Data Working Group to Inform Change**

Leads in **Missoula** described participating in a working group to support local systems change. The working group includes the school district's superintendent, principals, teachers, community leaders, and youth. Together, the working group reviews data, elevating opportunities for policy change, practice change, and professional development for teachers. Curriculum and district practices are reviewed through an equity lens and have resulted in the district funding comprehensive training for all educators on anti-racism, anti-bias, and trauma-informed practices.



Data systems can lead to creating “data dashboards” or reports of aggregated data in formats to increase ease of use (such as charts and other visuals). Drawing from their data system, the **Newark Opportunity Youth Network** created a data dashboard that allows the partners to look at, for example, the number of credentials obtained, number of high school diplomas, and the number of employers engaged across the collaborative. The dashboard enables partners to coordinate referrals and programming. These data also inform ongoing technical assistance by highlighting where progress is and is not occurring. The site leads noted that having these data to present to policymakers (e.g., the large number of youth served) helps them strategically advance their advocacy goals.

*“... we have kind of a monthly checkpoint that we’re able to then look at the data collectively to look at how that youth workforce ecosystem is doing and then also individually.”*

*“...being in a data collaborative and seeing not only youth-serving organizations, but even our public school system being very transparent about the data that they’re experiencing, the challenges and successes that they’re having engaging young people throughout the school year, has really, I think, shifted the culture around collaborative building, and specifically into data.”*

Data systems with common definitions and measures also lend themselves to group discussions of patterns and trends. For example, the **New Orleans Youth Alliance** is part of a data-sharing collaborative called Let’s Discuss Data. The group includes cross-system partners such as youth-serving nonprofit organizations and the New Orleans public school system. They use common measures to track trends around enrollment, outreach and recruitment, case management, and mental health services. In addition to data sharing, the group also acts as a community of practice, identifying challenges with data and sharing best practices for engaging young people.

Data systems can also be flexible, bringing on new partners or additional systems in order to be even more comprehensive of the local ecosystem impacting opportunity youth. The **Hartford Data Collaborative** (affiliated with HOYC) is expanding the shared data system and data dictionary they developed in previous years to include local “sister initiatives,” initiatives doing similar work locally or impacting the same young people. As more cradle-to-career initiatives in Hartford join this shared data system, there is the potential for an even greater understanding of the local ecosystem, as well as the potential for additional investment from funders. The expansion will also, however, lead to a greater need to align terminology and data collection procedures.

*“...as we have some sister initiatives developing in Hartford, they’ve all kind of piggybacked on this [data] system, so now we’re getting additional organizations who are on the cusp of sharing their data, and as they move into that data sharing, I think there’ll be even a greater diversity of input, feedback, and practice.”*

While using data to change systems is an area of growth, the ability to collect, use, and share data within and across systems varied by the type of collaborative. Collaboratives that were older, more experienced, and with better staffed and resourced backbones showed more evidence of data use for systems change. In addition, established urban collaboratives had greater data systems change than urban collaboratives new to the OYF network and rural and tribal collaboratives.<sup>20</sup> Resources and experience clearly matter in being able to do the challenging work of coordinating common data collection and sharing data in cross-sector partnerships and local ecosystems.





## Strong Internal Data Capacity

**Building a collaborative's internal capacity to collect and use data is strongly tied to their ability to collect and use data within and across systems** to guide systems-wide strategies and changes.<sup>8</sup> In 2021, over half of the data capacity indicators (52%) were considered strongly in place by collaboratives. **Data and learning was the highest scoring domain** among the four types of capacity, ahead of *leadership, planning, and convening power; raising awareness and strategic communications; and resources for the collaborative.*

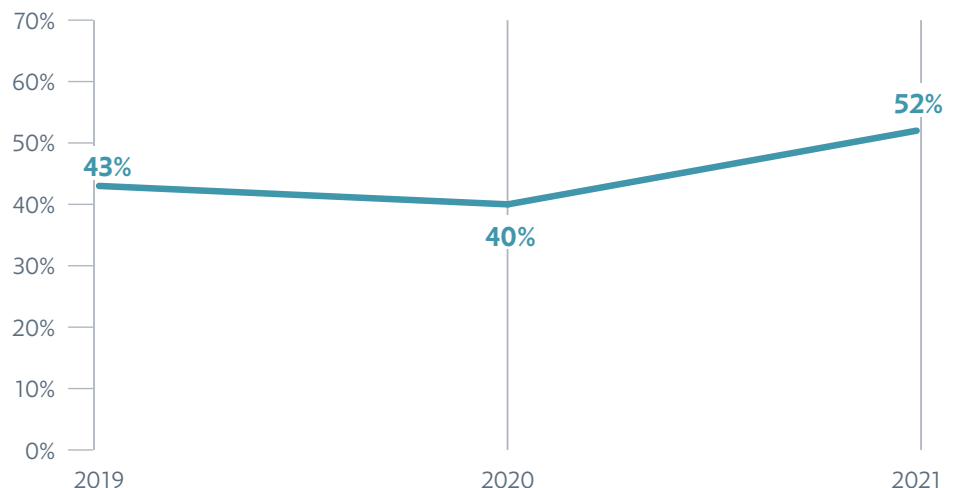
In prior years, *leadership, planning and convening power* was consistently the highest scoring internal capacity, reflecting the foundational nature of setting up structures for membership, workplans, and strategies. Now *data and learning*, with the highest score, is also clearly recognized as a foundational capacity for OYF collaboratives seeking to change systems and improve outcomes for opportunity youth.

While data capacity is strong across the OYF network, some collaboratives have built this capacity more extensively than others. As with using data for systems change, collaboratives with backbones that are older and have more experience also have greater data capacity.<sup>9</sup> Relatedly, established urban collaboratives have greater data capacity than newer urban collaboratives, rural collaboratives, and tribal collaboratives.<sup>10</sup> **Time, experience, and local context influence a collaborative's ability to build its capacity to collect, analyze, and use data** to advance collaborative OY strategies.

Overall, the **OYF network's data and learning capacity grew from 2020 to 2021** (40% to 52%, an increase of 12% points — see Figure 6)<sup>11</sup>, as did each specific type of data and learning capacity (changes from 2019 to 2020 were more mixed) (Figure 7). The largest growth was in *promoting learning* (increase of 20% points from 2020 to 2021) and *data analysis and interpretation* (increase of 16% points from 2020 to 2021), indicating that over the past year, more collaboratives in the OYF network took a learning orientation and bolstered their capacity to analyze and understand data to inform their OY strategies.

**FIGURE 6**  
**Growth in collaborative data capacity in OYF network, 2019-2021**

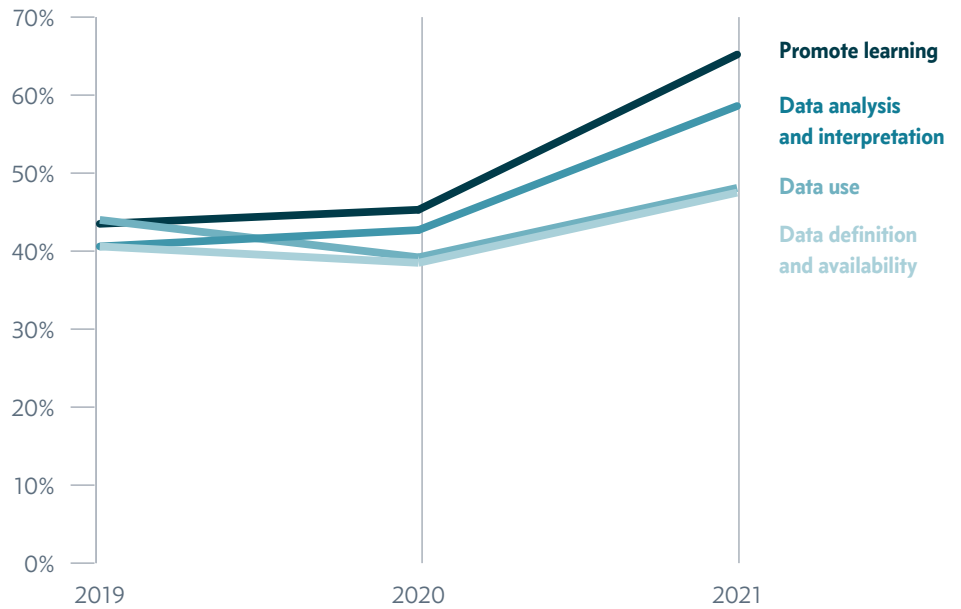
*% of indicators across the OYF network showing strong evidence*





**FIGURE 7**  
**Growth in specific areas of collaborative data capacity in OYF network, 2019-2021**

% of indicators across the OYF network showing strong evidence

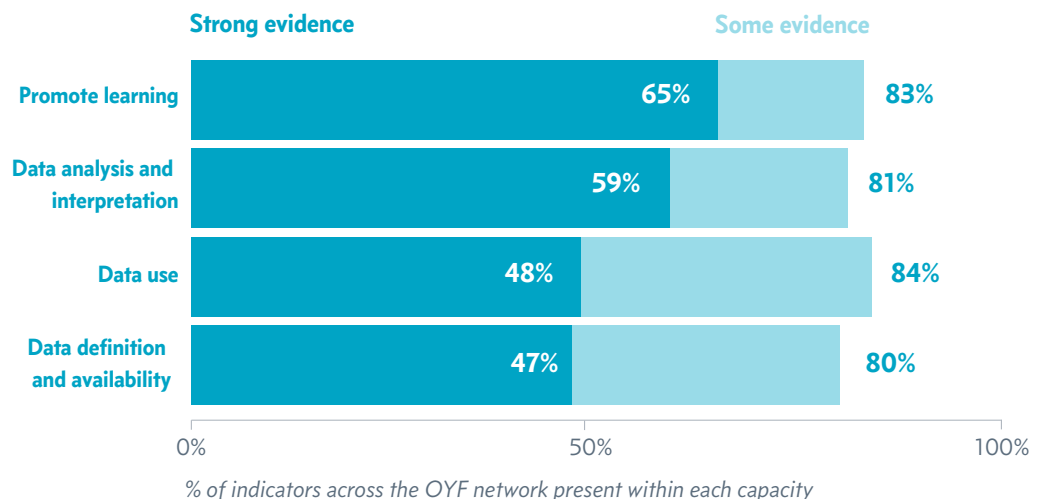


% of indicators across the OYF network

The OYF collaboratives' strengths in data capacity illustrate a strong learning orientation towards collecting, analyzing, and using data to inform their OY work. The strongest data capacity in 2021 was *promoting learning*, where 65 percent of the indicators were reported as strongly in place (Figure 8). For example, about three-quarters of collaboratives (73%) reported strong evidence that they convened learning opportunities for partners and stakeholders. A few of the collaboratives such as **New Orleans** and **Hopi** described data working groups or communities of practice, a structured space for building data capacity and for shared learning. In addition, 58 percent of collaboratives reported strong evidence that they *used a continuous improvement or other learning framework*. Looking at disaggregated data is also a common data and equity practice. Over half of collaboratives (55%) noted strong evidence that the collaborative and its partners *used disaggregated data to identify inequitable outcomes*.

Collaboratives also learned from analyzing, disaggregating, sharing, and reflecting on data. The capacity to *analyze and interpret data* was also strongly present in the collaboratives (59% of indicators were strongly evident; Figure 8). Sixty-one percent of collaboratives reported that they *shared, analyzed, and reflected on OY data to refine their work*. Significantly, 61 percent of collaboratives reported that they had the *staff they needed to analyze and use data*.

**FIGURE 8**  
**Capacity strengths in promoting learning and data analysis and interpretation in 2021**





A few of the collaboratives explicitly mentioned the **critical role of dedicated data personnel**, staff with expertise and comfort with data, who can help collaboratives collect and use data more effectively. In **New Orleans**, a dedicated staff person to focus on data management and training, and to facilitate a community of practice, has been very beneficial. *“...[H]aving a dedicated person to help support us through -- how do we build out our data collection system, what information are we trying to actually collect, how are we utilizing that data and looking at trends.”*

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### 52% of backbones had at least 0.5 FTEs dedicated to data for their OY efforts.

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In **Philadelphia**, the site lead described how dedicated staffing has resulted in more sophisticated and deeper analyses and learning from data. Rather than just looking at data that they were accountable for to funders, data staff are now looking at *“things much more deeply, like the connections between the demographics of the participants over the years and ... cross-matching with what their outcomes look like and who those providers are. Just asking those more kind of multi-layered questions.”* The collaborative is getting greater clarity on what their data means. For example, when youth are “dismissed” staff are digging into why — was it a successful dismissal? Are program staff defining it in the same way? This deeper analysis leads to more reliable and useful information.

In addition to staff, some collaboratives described how clear agreements between the backbone and partners increased their ability to collect and use data to improve systems for opportunity youth. The **Newark Opportunity Youth Network** and **Phoenix Opportunities for Youth** described the importance of clear expectations for data collection when partners join the collaboratives. Newark shares common definitions and metrics in partner MOUs and Phoenix outlines data responsibilities in partner agreements and during onboarding. **Greenville** also put into place data-sharing agreements which helped them better understand who was doing what and at what scale.

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### 69% of collaboratives reported having data-sharing agreements between collaborative partners and the backbone.

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## Integrating Youth Voice into Data Collection and Analysis

Youth voice and youth engagement, especially in implementing programs for opportunity youth, is a strong core value in the OYF network. However, while some collaboratives have demonstrated effective ways of *engaging youth with data*, these indicators tended to be rated lower on the self-assessment. For example, 27 percent of collaboratives reported strong evidence of *regularly and directly engaging young people in reviewing, reflecting on, and making sense of its data*. Thirty percent of collaboratives reported strong evidence that *youth led or were engaged in participatory research and/or data gathering efforts*. Involving youth in data efforts not only builds important skills in young people but is critical to fully understanding what the data mean, by drawing on young people’s lived experience and perspective.



A few communities shared their experience involving youth in their collaborative's data work or their plans for doing so.

- In **Santa Clara County**, young leaders reviewed data and quickly identified housing as a critical barrier related to other issues and data points. The site lead described this as *"...one of my pivotal moments in this work of why participatory action research is so important, that experience of actually living what the data is telling you gives that added layer of nuance."*
- The **Hartford Opportunity Youth Collaborative** described why they want to more frequently involve youth in looking at their data. In addition to engaging youth with data to build skills, they want to ensure that the data collected and how it is shared is relevant to youth. Their data consultant said *"... having [young people] help us create data that is important to them and speaks to them in terms of things they find are important and in providing data in ways that they can digest and feel like they can act on."* Data can also help guide youth by providing current information about the labor market and other opportunities that are most likely to lead to success.
- Through working with the California Opportunity Youth Network (COYN), **San Diego's Youth Opportunity Pathways Initiative** hired youth fellows to do local needs assessment work and is continuing to look for ways to employ participatory methods with young people to collect data and understand young people's perspectives.

*"...it's also important for [young people] to understand [data] in a way they can engage with what some of the realities are. They can say they really want to start their own businesses and do freelance work and do all the things that youth today tend to think a lot about, when the reality is, that can be a really tough slog, and there are lots of openings and a lot of occupations that might serve them in the meantime, while they are doing this stuff. Finding a way to create a balanced picture for them while serving up the information they want is important."*

## Looking Ahead: Data Use

It is evident that FCS' investment in data-focused efforts is paying off as the OYF network has consistently improved over time in using data at the systems level to affect change and has shown improvements in collaborative capacity to collect and use data.

While there is much to be proud of, there is room to continue to improve network-wide consistency in collaborative-level data collection, analysis, and use. For example, while most collaboratives were able to provide an estimate of the number of youth they served through direct programming, fewer were able to provide demographic characteristics of those youth, and fewer still the outcomes they achieved (such as reconnection to education and/or the workplace). Just over half of collaboratives (55%) reported they *collected youth output and/or outcomes data from all or most of their partners*. These data are important for understanding who the OYF network is reaching and how direct services provided by collaboratives and their partners impact youth reconnection. Balancing these data needs with staff burden, multiple data systems, and data privacy concerns will continue to inform data improvement discussions and learning.



## About The Opportunity Youth Forum

The Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions (FCS) launched what is now called the Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) in 2012, on the recommendations from President Obama's White House Council on Community Solutions. Since then, FCS has mobilized a national movement: convening and supporting a network of communities dedicated to improving systems so all young people can connect to an education or career pathway.

Since its founding a decade ago, the OYF network has nearly doubled, to 39 communities across 22 states – each *“seeking to scale multiple reconnection pathways that achieve better outcomes in education and employment for opportunity youth.”* The network's approach is based on the understanding that systems today – including those supporting K-12 and postsecondary education, workforce, housing, child welfare, and justice systems – are fundamentally broken. They are not designed for today's young people – particularly young people of color and young people experiencing poverty – to access opportunities and thrive. Instead, these systems, influenced by outdated, uninformed, and racist public policies, public narratives, resource allocations, and organizational practices, create barriers for young people to reach their full potential. **To successfully engage and re-engage young people, systems of individuals, programs, organizations, policies, and resources must change.** And by investing in the development, learning, and support of **cross-sector, community-based collaboratives** to change these systems, youth outcomes — connection to education and workforce pathways — will improve.

### NOTES

- 1 <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/report/boosting-capacity-to-drive-equitable-systems-change/>
- 2 OYF sites that were new or significantly transitioning their work in 2021 did not participate in the assessment.
- 3 More information about the annual assessment is provided here: <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/oym-evaluation-and-assessment/>
- 4 See: <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/using-data-to-advance-equity/>
- 5 See: <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/data-for-impact/>
- 6 In addition, among sites that completed the self-assessment in both 2020 and 2021, 16 of 30 showed increases in data systems change. A more detailed description of the methodology is in the full evaluation report. <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/report/boosting-capacity-to-drive-equitable-systems-change/>
- 7 ANOVA,  $p < .10$  (backbone age),  $p < .05$  (peer group). T-test,  $p < .05$  (OY budget),  $p < .01$  (OY FTE)
- 8 Significant positive correlation between data capacity and data for systems change: 0.71,  $p < .01$
- 9 ANOVA,  $p < .05$
- 10 ANOVA,  $p < .01$
- 11 In addition, among sites that completed the self-assessment in both 2020 and 2021, 18 of 30 showed increases in data capacity.