

# Connecticut's Unspoken Crisis: Elevating the Voices of Young People

Preliminary Brief

Housing

Healthcare

Child  
Welfare

Education

Criminal  
Justice



April 2024

# Acknowledgments

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# 1 About the Study

This qualitative research study investigated the experiences of disconnection among young people, aged 14–26, in Connecticut. The researchers interviewed individuals who were neither employed nor enrolled in school, aiming to explore the reasons behind their disconnection. Delving into the experiences of and reasons for disconnection, the study focused on examining and understanding the complex dynamics contributing to disconnection, including interactions with societal systems, such as education and criminal justice, and environmental and social influences, such as neighborhood dynamics and interpersonal relationships. We sought to learn about young people who had likely been disconnected from systems and supports for long periods and who had experienced barriers to reconnection, including deep distrust of social institutions and persistent experience with trauma.

This research study is part of a comprehensive series of studies focused on the experiences of young people that Dalio Education's Connecticut Opportunity Project (CTOP) commissioned. The other two focused on deeply understanding the demographic profile of young people experiencing disconnection from school and employment opportunities or who are at-risk of not graduating high school in Connecticut and a national scan of programs, practices, and policies that affect these youth. This study elevates the firsthand perspectives of young people through their own words and stories.

The study seeks to shed light on the role of various systems on youth disconnection. It emphasizes the need for a more systemic rather than an individualistic approach to address the challenges faced by young people who are not connected to school, work, and other prosocial supports. The approach, therefore, was to inquire not just about the youth's experience but also the context of the social systems that shape their experience.

For instance, our analysis shows how the interconnectedness of systems, such as the criminal justice and education systems, have lasting impacts on youth and contributes to significant barriers, such as limited access to resources; persistent and systemic racial injustices; and enduring traumas, impeding their ability to live thriving lives or simply reconnect with prosocial institutions. Disconnected youth are also confronted with heightened risks of homelessness, exposure to violence, and a lack of social capital. Despite the challenges many young people in the study faced, they also commonly had a sense of hopefulness and articulated personal goals and aspirations.

This report provides a glimpse into preliminary findings, offering insights into the multifaceted nature of youth disconnection in Connecticut. This is a snapshot of our ongoing research and data analysis. A more comprehensive analysis and discussion will be presented in a forthcoming full report, where we will explore more deeply the nuances of our findings and their implications for addressing the challenges faced by disconnected youth in Connecticut.



# 2 Using a Culturally Responsive and Trauma-informed Approach: Research Study Methodological Approach

## Study Participants

For this study, the research team interviewed 74 young people aged 14–26 who were not connected to school, work, and prosocial supports.

Interviews focused on young people who self-identified as residing in or being from Bridgeport, Danbury, Hartford, New Haven, Norwalk, Stamford, or Waterbury.

These are some of the largest cities in Connecticut with the most concentrated amounts of young people experiencing disconnection from school and employment opportunities (BCG 2023), therefore it was critical to learn about the first-hand perspectives of young people in these areas.



## Recruitment

The research team collaborated with Dalió Education’s Connecticut Opportunity Project team and their network of local nonprofit organizations and educational institutions to launch a robust recruitment effort. This included both virtual and in-person outreach in which leaders of nonprofit and educational entities shared informational materials about the study and helped connect the research team to youth who were interested in participating. The research team also partnered with local nonprofit organizations to hold informal informational discussions about the study at nonprofit organizations and conduct coordinated street outreach with their staff — when the research team provided same-day, in-person opportunities to participate in the interview. Additionally, recruitment methods included social media outreach and snowball sampling in which young people who participated in the study shared information about the interview with other young people or brought other youth in and introduced them to the research team.

The study outreach flyer indicated that the study provided an opportunity for young people to share their stories. Outreach materials also noted that young people would be compensated \$50 for their participation and these materials provided the study selection criteria, which was that participants must: 1) be aged 14–26; 2) not be in school or working at the time of the interview; and 3) live in or be from Bridgeport, Danbury, Hartford, New Haven, Norwalk, Stamford, or Waterbury. The outreach flyer also included a barcode to scan to learn more about the study or indicate interest, and a phone number that young people could call or text.

Ultimately, more than 90 individuals responded to recruitment outreach efforts.

As young people expressed interest in participation, the research team talked with study participants in-person or via phone to ensure that they met eligibility requirements. Eligible participants were then invited to participate in the interview discussion.

# Data Collection

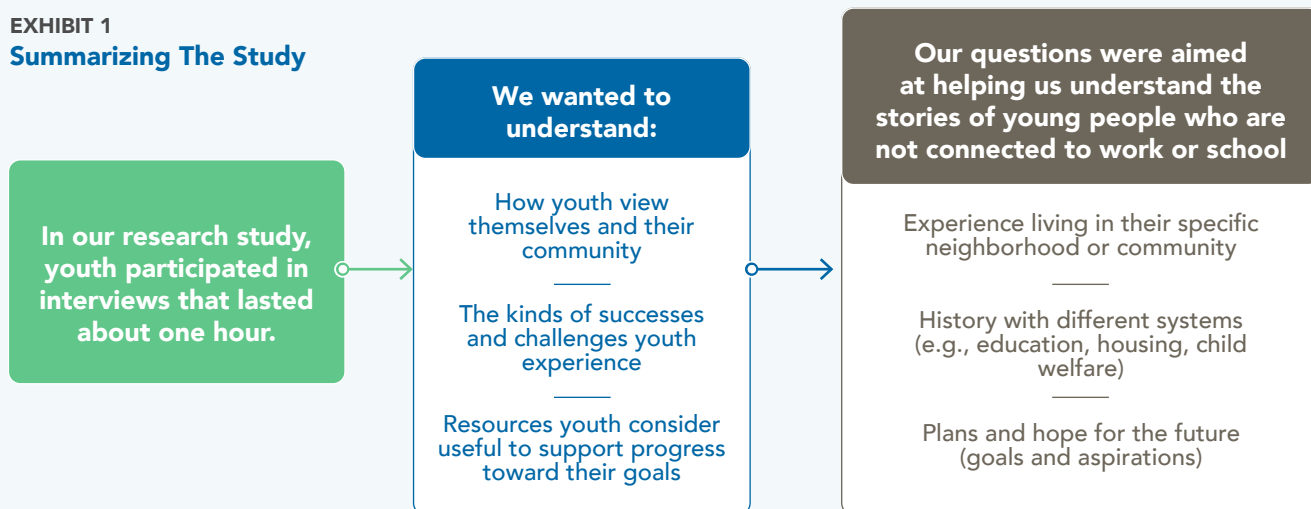
The research team conducted semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes, with variations between 30 and 120 minutes to accommodate individual experiences and responses.

There were in-person and virtual interview options; most participants chose in-person. Participants were also given the option of a male or female researcher due to the sensitivity of the conversation. Community Science conducted these interviews with study participants between August 2023 and January 2024.

The interview protocol had 13 focused questions on themes of disconnection and systems interaction (see Exhibit 1 for an overview of research study questions). Interview questions focused on shedding light on the following overarching research questions:

- 1. Relational Context:**  
What are the settings and contexts in which disconnected young people live, work (informally), and play?
- 2. Role of Systems:**  
What is the role of different systems (past, present, and future) in the lives of disconnected young people — specifically the education, juvenile and criminal justice, child welfare, housing, and health systems?
- 3. Goals and Aspirations:**  
What are the goals and aspirations of youth who are not connected to school, work, or other social supports?

## EXHIBIT 1 Summarizing The Study



The research team used open-ended questions supplemented by organic probing inquiries to ensure comprehensive, rich data collection (Maxwell 2005). This approach allowed for flexibility and depth, ensuring a thorough exploration of participants' experiences (Merriam 2009). Participants were encouraged to elaborate and were given the option to provide additional information post-interview.

For participants under 18 years old, we obtained their written assent and their parent or legal guardian's consent before beginning the interview; for all

participants who were 18 years old and older, we also obtained their written consent. The research team secured a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health to provide heightened protection for any sensitive information that participants disclosed. Throughout the process, the research team also reminded young people that the interview was voluntary, they could skip any questions, and they could stop at any time and still receive the \$50 incentive.

Interview settings prioritized participant safety, comfort, and familiarity, with in-person and virtual options available (the latter only for participants 18 years old and older). In-person interviews were conducted in private spaces within familiar locations, such as community-based organizations and public libraries. The research team provided snacks and sensory items (e.g., stress balls and fidget spinners). We also took precautions to ensure that participants felt supported following the interview, given the sensitivity of the topics discussed. For example, community-based organizations where we facilitated the interviews had staff available to connect with participants who requested or agreed to supports.

At the end of the interview discussion, study participants completed a brief online demographic survey. The survey included nine questions about participants' backgrounds, focused on the following:

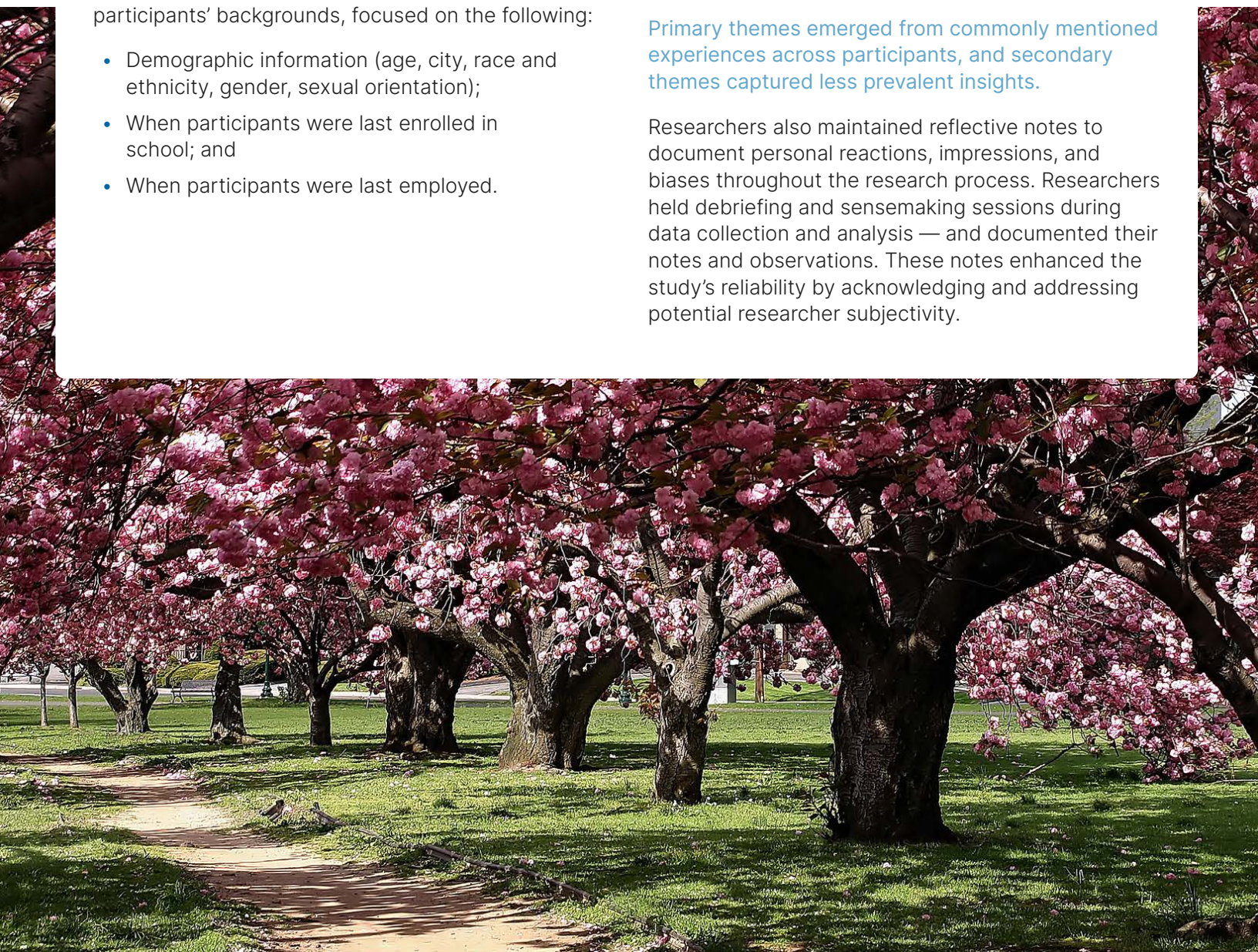
- Demographic information (age, city, race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation);
- When participants were last enrolled in school; and
- When participants were last employed.

## Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Community Science used an iterative coding, categorizing, and theme development process. We first read the entire dataset of transcripts. We divided the dataset into smaller, meaningful segments and labeled each with a code. Afterward, themes were identified through collective discussions among the research team, followed by selecting representative quotes. We used ATLAS.ti, a qualitative analysis software, to facilitate data organization and coding. Analytical triangulation was used to ensure rigor and validity in data interpretation, with primary and secondary themes identified based on frequency and significance across participant responses.

**Primary themes emerged from commonly mentioned experiences across participants, and secondary themes captured less prevalent insights.**

Researchers also maintained reflective notes to document personal reactions, impressions, and biases throughout the research process. Researchers held debriefing and sensemaking sessions during data collection and analysis — and documented their notes and observations. These notes enhanced the study's reliability by acknowledging and addressing potential researcher subjectivity.



# 3 From Insight to Action: Community Advisory Group's Role in Weaving Lived Experiences into the Research Process

To center the local voices of young people in Connecticut in the research study development, data sensemaking, and findings reporting, Community Science convened a Community Advisory Group (CAG) in partnership with Dalio Education's Connecticut Opportunity Project. The CAG was

composed of 13 members. This included nine youth and young adults aged 14–32, with an additional four professionals from various sectors — ensuring an intergenerational group and a dynamic exchange of ideas and perspectives (see Exhibit 2 for an overview of the CAG composition).

## EXHIBIT 2 Community Advisory Group Composition

**13**

**MEMBERS**

The CAG membership consisted of 13 members, 9 youth and young adults and 4 professionals from various sectors

**14-32**

**YEARS OLD**

Youth and young adults ranged from 14 to 32 years old

**6**

**WOMEN**

**7**

**MEN**

There were 6 women and 7 men, with a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds

**4**

**PROFESSIONAL MEMBERS**

The 4 professional members worked with and in support of young people through various organizations:

- Compass Youth Collaborative
- Our Piece of the Pie
- PT Partners
- William Casper Graustein Memorial Fund

## CAG Member Recruitment

Adult members were initially identified through CTOP's extensive network of youth-serving organizations and related sectors, leveraging these connections to ensure a deep understanding of community needs. CTOP and their grantee partners facilitated recruiting youth and young adults across Connecticut cities, including Stamford, Hartford, New Haven, Norwalk, and Bridgeport. At the center of the CAG creation was our commitment to uplifting the experiences of young people in the state who have faced challenges connecting to school, employment, and other social supports.

## CAG Activities and Payment

Members of the CAG met monthly through a combination of in-person and virtual engagements. Each meeting included community-building activities, a reminder of group norms and agreements, capacity building and learning topics, feedback discussions, and a wrap-up and a look forward to the upcoming meeting. As acknowledgment of the contributions of the CAG members, we paid each member up to \$1,500, to compensate them for their time and help cover other costs associated with attending in-person meetings, such as transportation expenses.



# Engagement with CAG Members

To facilitate the engagement of CAG members, two core components of the CAG work have been: capacity building and relationship building.

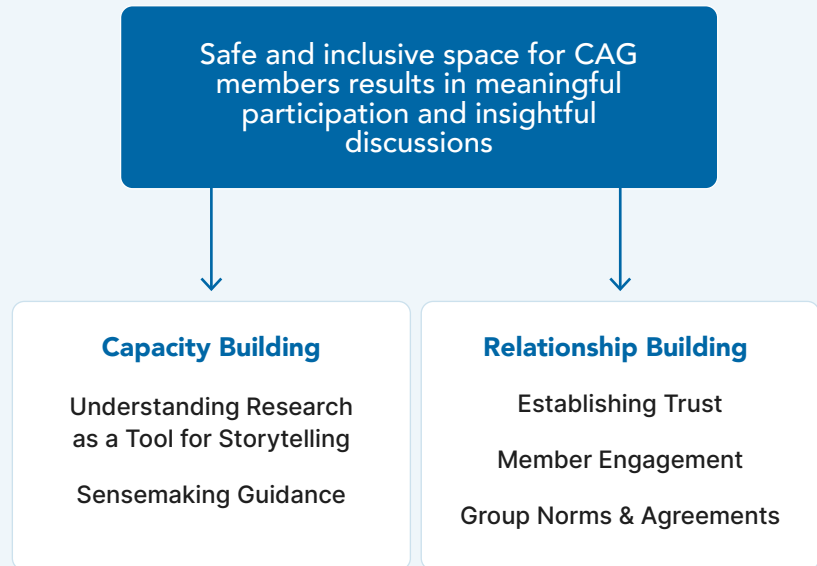
Throughout the CAG meetings, there have been various capacity building opportunities to build young people's understanding of research as a tool for storytelling and changemaking.

For instance, we facilitated trainings on what research is, how data can be collected through qualitative and quantitative approaches, and roles of youth-adult partnerships in informing research.

Additionally, we tended to the importance of relationship and community building — to create a safe space where young people and caring adults felt comfortable sharing their experiences and feedback. We did this by continuously making time to get to know each other (e.g., ice breakers, games, small group discussions). We also collectively established group norms and agreements about how we work together in in-person and virtual spaces. Lastly, the Community Science team created channels for communicating with members one-to-one and as a group — through a phone line dedicated to CAG communications. On this phone line, CAG members regularly communicated with Community Science researchers, in particular youth members, regarding: meeting logistics (date, times, supporting transportation needs), well-being checks, and any support needs we might be able to help with.



## EXHIBIT 3 CAG Capacity and Relationship Building



Throughout the study, CAG members participated in five key phases over ten monthly meetings:

### 1. Introduction and Project Kickoff:

Session 1 helped build mutual understanding and respect among CAG members and the Community Science and Connecticut Opportunity Project teams. We carefully designed these sessions to establish a foundation of trust, emphasizing creating a safe and welcoming environment. This initial phase was instrumental in acknowledging each community member's unique perspectives and lived experiences as valuable resources for the study. We also built on the adult members' knowledge in youth engagement and specialized communication skills, emphasizing our joint commitment to ensuring that young participants felt heard and valued.

This approach set the tone for a genuinely inclusive and collaborative research process.

### 2. Foundation Building for Collaboration:

In Session 2, we meticulously established groundwork enabling CAG members to use their lived experiences in informing the research study. We ensured their comprehensive participation and engagement by acquainting them with the principles of research studies and qualitative methodologies. This strategic initiative was pivotal in equipping them with the necessary competencies for meaningful contribution, enhancing the study's depth and relevance. Emphasizing qualitative approaches facilitated a profound exploration of the intricate narratives of youth distanced from educational, occupational, and societal supports, prioritizing personal experiences over quantitative data. This methodological rigor underscores our commitment to a nuanced understanding and intervention for disconnected youth, aligning research efforts with the complexities of their lived realities.



### 3. Deepening Understanding of Research and Recruitment:

Session 3 centered on CAG members' active involvement in refining the recruitment strategy, providing essential feedback on the recruitment flyer, and offering suggestions to enhance outreach efforts. By framing qualitative data collection as a form of storytelling, Community Science encouraged members to embrace their roles as storytellers.

This approach emphasized the significance of narratives in the research process, allowing CAG members to contribute deeply to understanding the experiences of disconnected youth. Their input on recruitment materials was crucial in ensuring that the outreach was effective and resonated with the target demographic, further enriching the project with a diverse range of participant stories and experiences.

<sup>1</sup>At the time of publication of this report, the final stages of CAG engagement are continuing to unfold.



#### **4. Preliminary Debrief and Sensemaking:**

During sessions 4 through 7, CAG members and researchers collaboratively reviewed and interpreted preliminary data. These meetings highlighted the iterative nature of qualitative research, characterized by ongoing refinement and deepening of insights. These discussions focused on validating and contextualizing the study findings within the broader tapestry of community experiences.

This approach ensured that the research remained grounded in the realities of those it sought to understand and support.

#### **5. Final Stage — Findings Reporting and Dissemination:<sup>1</sup>**

In the final sessions, 8, 9, and 10, the focus shifted to disseminating findings and formulating policy and program recommendations. The concluding sessions are dedicated to developing strategies for effectively communicating the research findings to a diverse audience, including policymakers, community organizations, and impacted youth. This phase is crucial for ensuring that the insights gained through the study resonate with and are accessible to stakeholders, enhancing the potential for real-world impact. The active involvement of the CAG in this process is vital, as it ensures that the dissemination and application of research findings are informed by the voices of those most closely connected to the experiences of disconnected youth.

This final phase is a testament to the project's overarching goal: to translate collaborative research into practical, community-driven solutions that reconnect young individuals with the support and opportunities they need to thrive.

# 4 Contextualizing Young People's Experience

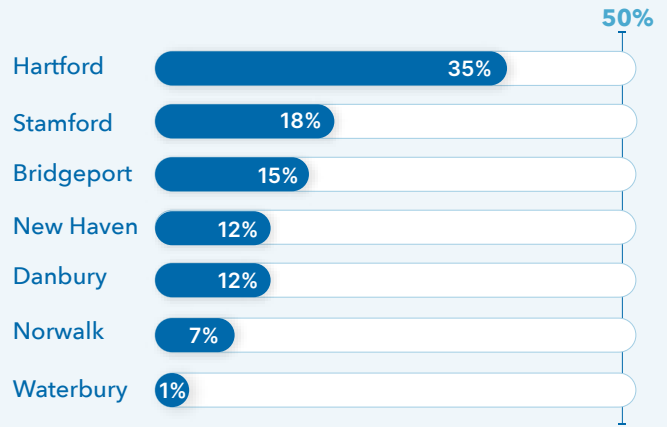
As noted, Community Science conducted 74 interviews with young people aged 14–26 who were not connected to school, work, or other prosocial supports. Understanding how geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic factors intersect with young people's experiences of disconnection is important. The aim of administering a brief demographic survey following the interviews was to shed light on how young people's demographic profile may have shaped their lived experiences.

## Demographic Profile of Study Participants

The research team conducted descriptive statistical analyses of the overall sample data set and sorted the participants by city, race and ethnicity, age, gender, and highest educational attainment. See Exhibit 4 for the distribution across the seven cities. Due to the variations in the sample, racial and ethnic categories were condensed and categorized (see Exhibit 5). Exhibits 6-8 show participant demographics by age, gender, and educational attainment, respectively.

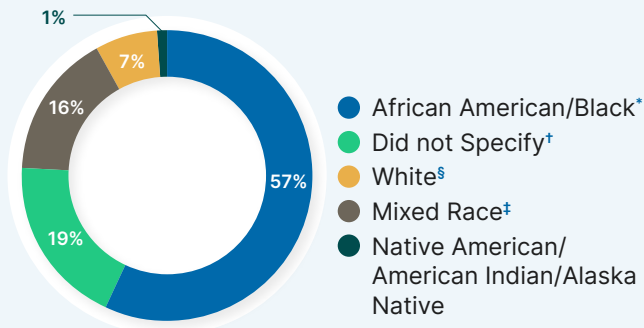
**EXHIBIT 4**  
**Interview Participant Total by City (n = 74)**

Most participants lived in or were from Hartford, with substantive participation of at least nine or more participants from Stamford, Bridgeport, New Haven, and Danbury.

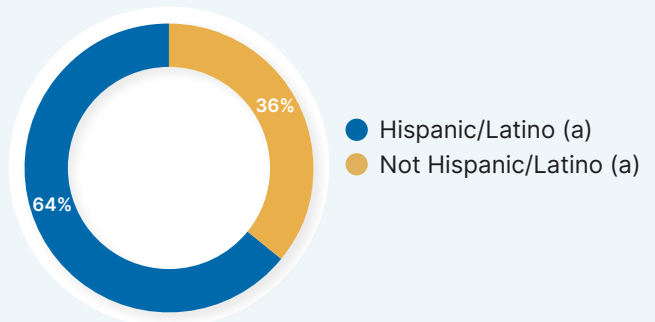


The majority of participants identified as African American, belonging to the African diaspora, or Latino(a)/Hispanic. This aligns with findings from the recent BCG (2023) and MDRC (2024) studies that indicated that Black and Brown youth are more likely to experience disconnection.

**EXHIBIT 5A**  
**Race of Interview Participants (n = 74)**



**EXHIBIT 5B**  
**Ethnicity of Interview Participants (n = 74)**



\* African American/Black includes participants who identified as African American, Haitian, and Jamaican.

† Did not Specify includes participants who did not specify their race and those from the Brazilian and other Latin American diasporas.

‡ Mixed Race includes participants who identified with two or more races.

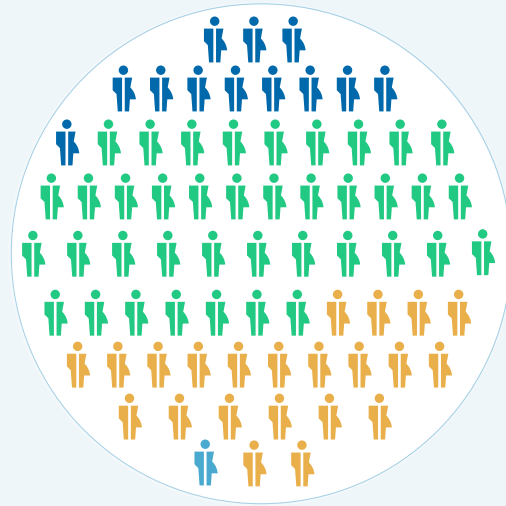
§ White includes White Americans and other self-identified participants but does not include Latino/Hispanic participants.

**EXHIBIT 6**

**Participant Age by Cohort (n = 74)**

There is representation from youth aged 14–26. Most participants belonged to the late adolescence age group (18–21 years old).

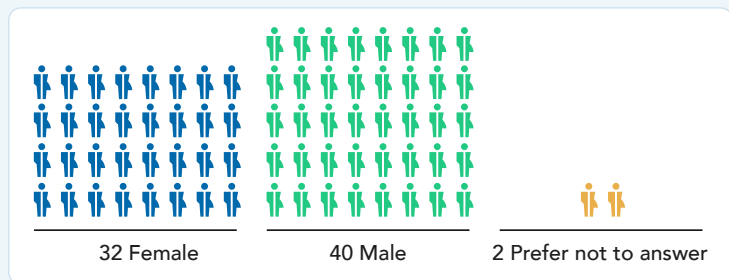
- 12** 14–17 years old (Early/Mid Adolescence)
- 39** 18–21 years old (Late Adolescence)
- 22** 22–26 years old (Early Adulthood)
- 1** Missing



**EXHIBIT 7**

**Participant Gender Identities (n = 74)**

Both men and women participated, with more men participation. This also aligns with BCG (2023) and MDRC (2024) reporting, indicating that young men are more likely than women to experience disconnection nationally and within Connecticut.

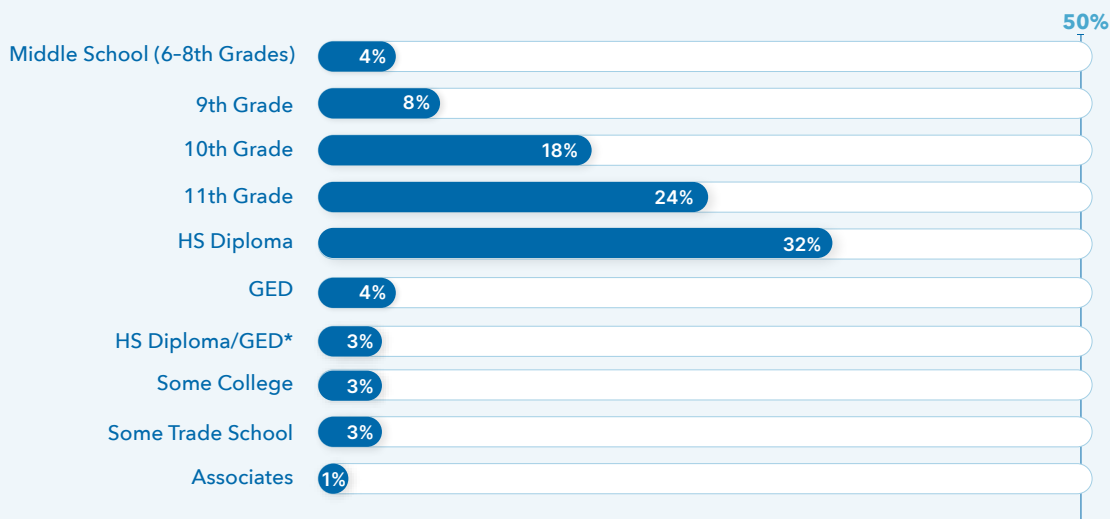


The form offered a range of gender identity options, including genderqueer/ gender non-conforming, intersex, transgender male/transgender man, transgender, and transgender female/transgender woman.

**EXHIBIT 8**

**Highest Educational Attainment (n = 74)**

Half of the participants had a high school diploma or GED. 54% disconnected from school at some point between middle school and tenth grade. The remaining few left school during college, community college, or trade school.



\*The participants did not specify whether they received a general education diploma or a high school diploma

# 5 The Web of Systems Impacting Young People

To foster environments where young people can thrive, delving into the intricate web of systems they interact with daily is imperative. These systems — education, criminal justice, child welfare, healthcare, and housing — play pivotal roles in shaping their experiences, opportunities, and outcomes. Before we discuss young people’s experiences with these interconnected systems, however, we must first define them. This section aims to provide an overview of each, highlighting the workings of the systems, the organizations commonly involved in them, and the systems’ collective impact on young people’s ability to survive and thrive in Connecticut.

## The Dual Faces of the Education System

The education system is a beacon of hope, offering knowledge and opportunities that can pave the way to a brighter future.

For some young people, schools become sanctuaries of learning and growth, where supportive teachers and inclusive curricula foster a sense of belonging and ambition.

Schools also allow young people to access nutritious meals for free or at a reduced price and offer access to digital services and technology that foster learning and development. Educational programs tailored to diverse learning needs can empower students, enabling them to envision and work toward their aspirations. At the same time, this system can also act as a barrier, particularly when it fails to address the unique challenges faced by young people who are not connected to school, work, and other prosocial institutions. A lack of culturally relevant teaching, support for those with learning differences, and understanding of the socioeconomic factors affecting attendance and performance can lead to further risk of disconnection. Thus, while education promises advancement, the education system requires a holistic approach that better uplifts culturally relevant teaching and more effectively supports the learning differences of young people.

## The Criminal Justice System: A Pathway or a Roadblock

The criminal justice system’s role in the lives of young people is marked by its potential to either rehabilitate or further marginalize. Community policing initiatives and juvenile diversion programs exemplify its capacity to be supportive, offering guidance and alternatives to incarceration that focus on rehabilitation and reintegration into society. Conversely, its systemic biases and punitive measures can also serve as significant obstacles.

Disproportionate surveillance and sentencing not only disrupt lives but also perpetuate cycles of disenfranchisement, making it exceedingly difficult for young people to envision a future beyond their immediate circumstances. Furthermore, returning citizens face many barriers such as gaining access to assistance supports to help meet basic needs, including assistance with housing, healthcare, and food, as well as policies that place restrictions on employment opportunities (MDRC 2024).

Ultimately, balancing justice with compassion and support is essential for transforming this system from a roadblock into a pathway toward positive change.

## Child Welfare: A Spectrum of Support and Instability

The child welfare system embodies the spectrum of being supportive and contributing to instability, with its capacity to either safeguard well-being or contribute to further disconnection. On one hand, effective interventions and foster care arrangements can provide the stability and care necessary for young people to heal and thrive.

Programs focused on family reunification and support work to maintain critical connections that foster a sense of identity and belonging.

On the other hand, the experiences of many young individuals within this system are characterized by frequent relocations, the trauma of separation, and a lack of preparation for independent living. These challenges underscore the importance of a child welfare system prioritizing long-term well-being and the development of stable, supportive relationships.

# Healthcare: Bridging Gaps in Well-being

Accessible, affordable, and culturally responsive healthcare, including mental health services, is fundamental to the well-being and resilience of young people who are not connected to school, work, and other prosocial institutions.

When healthcare systems are responsive to the needs of young people, providing comprehensive services that address both physical and mental health, they become invaluable assets that support overall youth development and empowerment.

Yet, the reality for many is a landscape marked by barriers, such as unaffordable costs, limited access to services, and stigma surrounding mental health. Overcoming these obstacles requires a concerted effort to ensure that healthcare acts as a pillar for well-being rather than a gap that further isolates and disconnects young individuals.

# Housing: The Foundation of Stability and Opportunity

Stable housing is the cornerstone upon which young people can build their futures. Initiatives that provide affordable, safe, and supportive living environments

enable young people who are not connected to school, work, and other prosocial institutions to focus on their education, seek employment, and engage with their communities, laying the groundwork for a life of independence and achievement.

However, homelessness and housing insecurity challenges reveal the critical need for systemic reforms. A stable home can facilitate the efforts of young people to reconnect with work, school, and society. Addressing these issues around housing instability is paramount for housing to fulfill its role as a foundation of support rather than a source of instability.

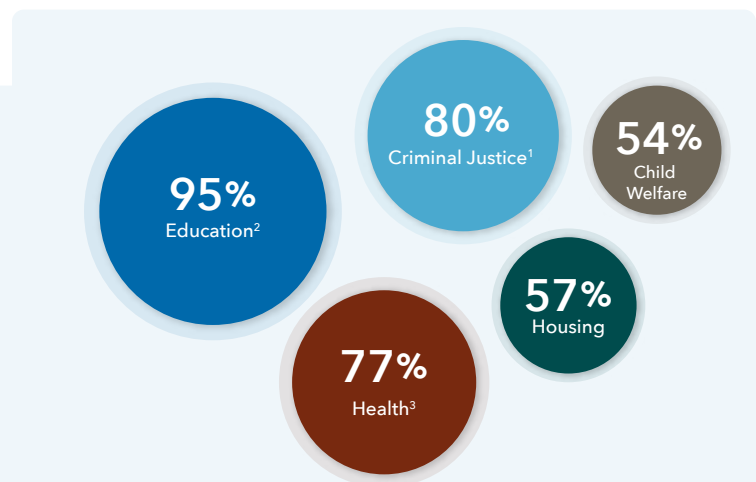
# Systems Engagement Among Research Study Participants

To shed light on the experiences of participants engaging with these systems, Exhibits 9 and 10 provide an overview of those who reflected on their experiences interacting with specific systems and the number of systems participants typically engaged with. The research team coded interviews for direct or indirect engagement occurrences to understand youth interactions with various systems (child welfare, criminal justice, education, health, and housing).

## EXHIBIT 9 Percentage of System Interactions (n=74)

This table illustrates the total number of interview participants who discussed engagement with each system. Education is the system that most participants discussed, followed by criminal justice, which includes direct involvement, such as arrests or interactions, and extends to situations where participants cooperated with law enforcement or acted as witnesses, including cases involving their loved ones. Participants had a choice of which system(s) to reflect on during interview discussions.

- <sup>1</sup> Interactions include indirect and direct involvement in the criminal justice system (e.g., visitations, witness testimony, arrests, court appearance).
- <sup>2</sup> Interactions include academic or non-academic engagements with secondary and post-secondary educational institutions.
- <sup>3</sup> Interactions includes indirect and direct engagement with the healthcare and insurance systems inclusive all dimensions of well-being (i.e., physical, mental, and emotional).



## EXHIBIT 10 Central Tendency of Systems Interaction

Participants generally interacted or engaged with 4 systems.



# 6 Understanding Young People's Experiences: The Interconnectedness of Systems and How They Collectively Support and Deter Thriving

This research study sought to understand how experiences with these systems have shaped the lives of young people — particularly those aged 14–26 who were not connected to school, work, and other prosocial supports. Here, we discuss preliminary insights based on the analysis of youth interview data.

## Key Preliminary Insights

### Early Exposure to the Criminal Justice System Through the School System

**The education system played a pivotal role in youth's interactions with the criminal justice system. For many participants, their first connection to criminal justice started in school or was the reason for leaving school.**

Participants consistently underscored the numerous ways in which the education system has inadvertently propelled students into the criminal justice system. Although some were hesitant to

directly discuss their experiences with the criminal justice system, the narratives shared frequently highlighted the interconnection between school-based interactions and encounters with law enforcement.

#### **School disciplinary matters were often escalated to juvenile offenses.**

In examining these narratives, a recurring theme emerged: participants revealed an unfortunate pattern wherein school disciplinary matters were often escalated to involve law enforcement agencies and the criminal justice system. Notably, individuals identifying as African American reported facing harsher consequences, echoing the literature on racial disparities in discipline (Lewis et al., 2010).

For instance, a young Black man recalled being referred to the criminal justice system at the young age of nine, after accidentally “poking” a teacher with a pencil during an altercation with a (White) student:

***“I had got in a fight and I had to use the pencil...I ended up [accidentally] poking the teacher because like she was trying to stop the fight and got in the way. And they arrested me for poking her with a pencil. I was only nine. I was in fourth grade... They brought me to [a] juvenile [detention center].”***

› 26-year-old African American young man from Stamford





A young White woman also recalled her school introducing her to the criminal justice system after she kicked a school crossing guard as a reaction to the guard making her uncomfortable:

***“They called me down to the office and said... ‘You kicked this lady?’ The school pressed charges on me because she worked for them.”***

*> 23-year-old White young woman from Hartford*

Unfortunately, instances such as these speak to widely documented issues with the school-to-prison pipeline. Studies have repeatedly documented disparities in disciplinary actions, showing that Black students are disproportionately subjected to harsher punishments compared to their White counterparts for similar school-based infractions (Skiba et al., 2011). Such discriminatory practices and unequal treatment within educational settings contribute to the overcriminalization of Black youth, laying the groundwork for their entanglement with the criminal justice system at an early age.

Not all referrals to law enforcement were the result of violent interactions; for some, their referral to the criminal justice system stemmed from simple attendance issues. One example illustrates this trajectory: a 26-year-old Black man from Stamford was sent to a juvenile detention center for truancy. Such narratives underscore the role of the education system as a precursor to involvement in the carceral system, setting the stage for a cycle of interactions with various parts of the criminal justice system from childhood to adulthood.

## **Missed Opportunities Within the Education System that Contribute to Youth Disconnection**

**When youth disconnect from school, their interactions with other systems soon follow; this is a critical opportunity and moment for support.**

Disconnection from school, whether due to academic struggles, familial challenges, or other systemic inequalities, often had ramifications that extended far beyond the education system. For some youth, it set the stage for broader disconnection from societal institutions and marked the onset of a troubling cascade of engagement with other systems.

Participants commonly underscored the pivotal role of the education system in initiating their disconnection and introducing them to other systems. When youth disconnect from school, their interaction with other systems soon followed. Findings from

“Connecticut’s Unspoken Crisis: Getting Young People Back on Track” (BCG, 2023) corroborate this reality, revealing the prevalence of major barriers that hinder reconnection to school once disconnection occurs.

**Moreover, youth who are disconnected from school are more likely to encounter interactions with other systems, exacerbating their marginalization and vulnerability (BCG, 2023). Thus, disconnection from education often precipitates involvement with systems, such as the criminal justice system, homelessness services, and child welfare agencies.**

For many youth, the journey toward disconnection often began with a negative experience within the education system, which varied from negative peer interactions to negative staff–student relationships to issues of intellectual and academic rigor, such as not feeling challenged enough or not receiving the academic support needed to succeed. Limited access to quality education, exacerbated by other disparities, such as navigating complex family dynamics, left many youth grappling with whether school was for them or worth their time.

**The experiences of disconnection are further nuanced by cultural, racial, and linguistic differences, as evidenced by the accounts of immigrant participants.** For many of these youth, their cultural, racial, and linguistic identities complicated efforts to build connections and effectively navigate the education system. The lack of transitional resources and services often led to social isolation, academic regression, and behavioral conflicts. These narratives highlight the dire need for more culturally, racially, and linguistically responsive interventions, especially in communities with high immigrant populations, such as Danbury.

## Education as the Great Connector: Connecting Youth to Support Services

**Although the education system serves as a primary site of disconnection, it also harbors opportunities for empowerment, connectivity, and reconnection.**

Despite the education system triggering disconnection for many youth, it also served as a point of connection for others. Our research revealed that for some, it was the great connector — connecting youth to vital social services and support networks. In addition, some who had disconnected from school expressed a desire to reconnect to minimize other system engagement and positively alter their life paths.

**Systemic inefficiencies and resource limitations impede the education system’s potential to equalize opportunities for all students.**

Although education offers vital hubs for accessing and connecting to services and cultivating meaningful connections with caring adults, the efficacy of these resources and support services are often inadequate due to a lack of resources — this has led to missed opportunities for intervention. Our findings underscore the critical missed opportunities for the education system to act as an intervention point for addressing disconnection. Thus, this cascading effect highlights the urgent need for proper resourcing and targeted interventions within educational settings to prevent and address

disconnection at its onset. These instances of missed opportunities amplified the youth’s risk of future disconnection and entanglement with systems.

**Many youth continue to view the education system as a critical point of connection to additional support and a brighter future.**

Despite the challenges and limitations highlighted, many youth still viewed the education system as a pivotal point of connection to vital social systems, a brighter future, and resources, services, and support networks crucial for navigating the challenges of adulthood. Whether through teachers, paraprofessionals, school counselors, or social workers, the education system offers holistic interventions that address academic needs and social and emotional well-being.



## Major Challenges with Housing Instability

**Formal housing supports are difficult to access and slow moving; therefore, housing instability was a major barrier to connectedness to school, work, and other supports.** When young people did not have stable and supportive housing, it was hard for them to focus on achieving other aspirations, and they often had to turn to family and friends for help. Stable housing has well-documented impacts on outcomes for youth, including physical and mental health, school attendance, and academic performance (Brennan & Galvez, 2017; Brennan, Reed, & Sturtevant, 2014; Hernández & Swope, 2019). Therefore, when housing systems break down or youth are denied a safe and stable home, the impacts are far-reaching. The evidence from our study supports this conclusion. Participants commonly reported facing these challenges with housing — and broader housing challenges are reflected in Connecticut’s long-standing battles with affordable housing access.

The formal housing support system is failing youth. Young people attempting to access formal housing support reported experiences with high barriers to entry, long wait lists, and slow-moving bureaucracy. Our interviews revealed struggles youth face in accessing support, which led to issues such as

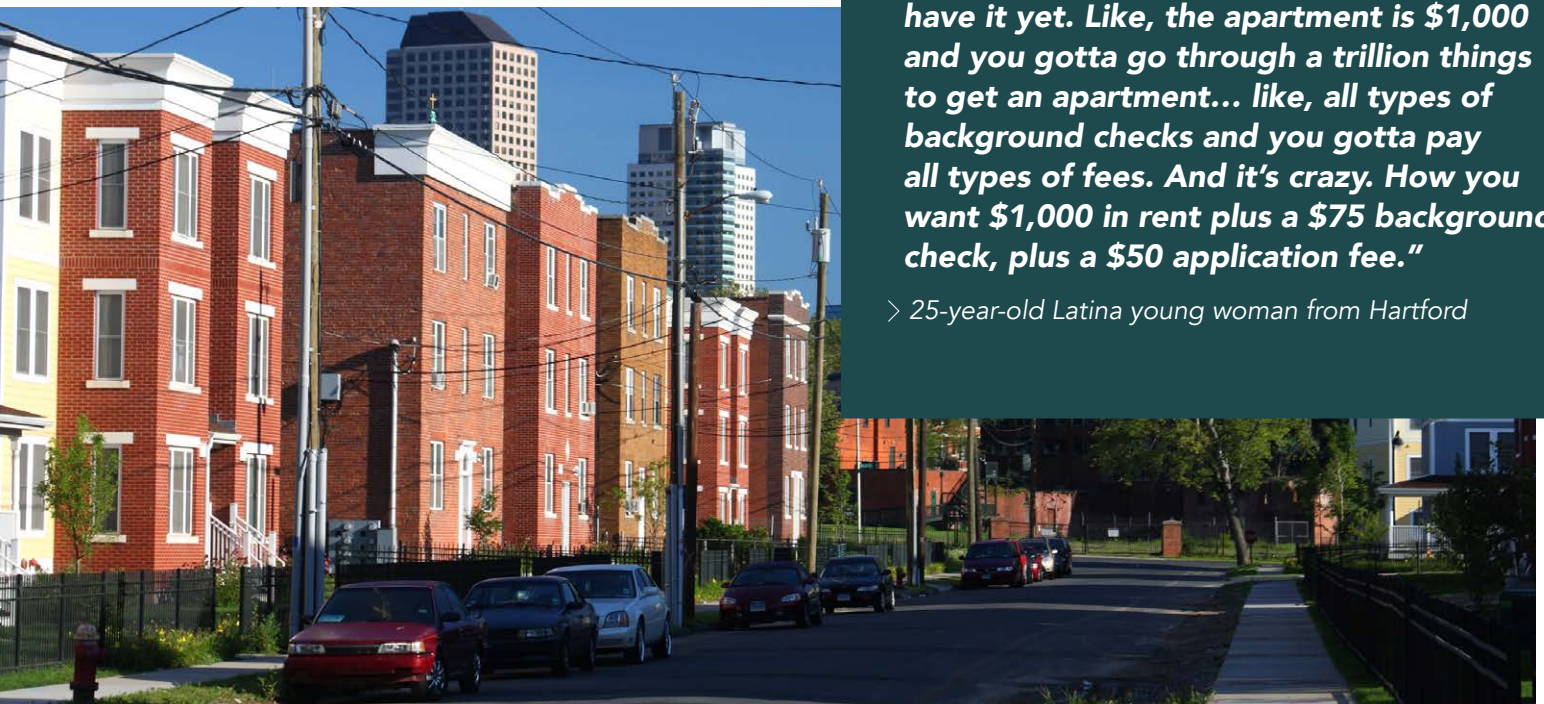
frequent moves, reliance on informal housing support, and long-standing housing instability or homelessness.

**Housing instability forced youth to sacrifice in other areas of their lives.** The failures of the formal housing support system forced them to seek other means of survival. Often, this required relying on an extended network. At times, this reliance showed the value of community in youth’s lives, as a network of family, friends, and loved ones stepped up. In other moments, youth strained their relationships. Even when friends and family were supportive and willing to provide housing, youth reported worrying about burdening their network, particularly when these supporters had children of their own to care for. Other youth reported living in housing where they had to deal with abusive or unsafe conditions. Some faced continued instability or homelessness out of fear that they would impose on their network.

Ultimately, when youth lost access to stable housing, it became incredibly difficult to regain their footing. Many youth we interviewed were still aiming to secure affordable housing. They shared how hard it was to stabilize themselves when they could not secure affordable housing. For instance, a young woman interviewee said:

***“I went through hell [to find an apartment]. Like hell. And I still don’t even have it yet. Like, the apartment is \$1,000 and you gotta go through a trillion things to get an apartment... like, all types of background checks and you gotta pay all types of fees. And it’s crazy. How you want \$1,000 in rent plus a \$75 background check, plus a \$50 application fee.”***

> 25-year-old Latina young woman from Hartford



## Young People's Mechanisms to Cope with Trauma and Violence

**Participants used a range of coping mechanisms to deal with their trauma.** Young people exposed to violence at an early age can develop coping mechanisms to deal with traumatic situations (Lahad, 2017). For example, when youth experience violence in the form of shootings, deaths, or physical or sexual abuse against themselves or to people close to them, they can become desensitized to similar acts of violence throughout their lives. Young adults who demonstrate desensitized behavior tend to have reduced physical (e.g., physiological arousal, anxiety, numbness, dissociation) or emotional (e.g., feelings of helplessness, inability to handle anger, lowered self-esteem) reactions to violence, diminished ability to connect with others, or behaviors similar to addiction (Recovery, 2023).

Interviewees appeared self-aware of how their past experiences impact their lives in their neighborhood and with their family. They reflected on adopting a model of this as the “new norm” or an “it is what it is” mentality. Participants also discussed that they felt that things were out of their control and that they could do nothing about it but feel helpless. For instance, a study participants stated:

***“I don’t know, like, I’m just shaped like this. It just made you realize, I guess like, violence, it’s just something that’s always... Sound like people just can’t escape it, like some point in your life you gonna encounter it, like your gonna have to either run or fly.”***

> 18-year-old African American young man from Norwalk



**Others appeared reluctant to discuss their experiences because they seemed to be operating at a level of fear for their own life or that of their friends or family.** This was often disguised as desensitization to violence or lack of fear about near-death encounters. When participants were asked to reflect on their experiences with violence in their

neighborhood or within their family, several reported that their exposure to neighborhood shootings, death, and abuse at a young age served as the basis for how they reacted physically and emotionally to violence in their everyday lives:

***“I’ve seen so much happen... To this day I could see that nothing will shock me because I seen so much happen. Like you, anybody could name it all... and like, I’ve really seen it with my eyes happen to people... It just made me not fear anything.”***

› 18-year-old African American young man from Norwalk

***“Like, I don’t know. I don’t really care for it... like, death is just death. So it was like, damn. I don’t even know them to feel bad for them.”***

› 21-year-old biracial young man from Hartford

***“They just start shooting, that’s what they do over here... I like living in Hartford. It’s all right for me. But then, because I’m so used to being in the streets, so it doesn’t bother me.”***

› 23-year-old African American young woman from Hartford

***“Growing up, I kind of like gravitated towards the violence more so because I seen that [in my past] and instead of me being scared, you know, I kind of got intrigued because it kind of became a normal of what’s happening every day.”***

› 19-year-old African American young man from Norwalk

**Some youth exposed to trauma developed positive coping skills with help from caring adults,** such as by talking to trusted adults, including principals, teachers, mental health providers, and parole officers; scheduling time for activities that bring joy (e.g., hanging out with peers, visiting family, participating in a hobby); and identifying support systems. Participants were asked to reflect on people who supported them through their experiences with education, housing, child welfare, or health

systems. Specifically, several participants reported positive experiences with school staff, such as the principal or teachers. These trusted adults were positive role models, and their communication offered a way to cope with some of the trauma. Similarly, some participants stated that they had a positive experience with their guidance counselor, who provided academic, social emotional, and mental health support:

***“I had a real anger problem. So as I got older, like eighth grade, I used to talk to the principal or go talk to the teachers... I only had a few teachers that really understood me.”***

› 23-year old Black young woman from Bridgeport

***“The staff at Our Piece of the Pie, I consider them my family because they’ve given me a lot of opportunities that helped me throughout my life.”***

› 21-year-old Latino young man from Hartford

**Generational trauma deeply impacted young people's experiences.** When asked about their childhood, participants commonly reflected on a parent's experience with the child welfare, criminal justice, and housing systems, and the way they are experiencing the same systems. Generational trauma describes abuse, trauma, or neglect that can be linked with physical, mental, and emotional health when these experiences are viewed negatively. For example, some participants reported that they were exposed to physical abuse in their home and were prone to violent behavior. Other participants noted that because they were exposed to violence in their neighborhood at a young age, they were used to it — which connects to the findings regarding feelings of desensitization.

Participants also described the unsuccessful attempts of their parents/caregivers to break the cycle trauma. For instance, while reflecting on her mother's attempts one participant said:

***"her mom used to hit her and so she understands. She tried to break the chain but she ended up marrying a man that's abusive so she ended up breaking it her own way, but it's sort of happened to us when she didn't want it to happen to her own kids."***

> 17-year-old White young woman from Waterbury

Similarly, participants described breaking up with abusive partners or not wanting to experience the same type of violence they had when they were younger.

***"Like, I had already grown up seeing all that before. I'm not gonna see that again. That's crazy... From when I was a child. It's just a whole bunch of trauma. But when you grow up you realize like that's not the person you wanna be or that's not the lifestyle you want to follow, you figure out how to fix and adjust yourself."***

> 18-year-old Latina young woman from New Haven

This perspective of not wanting to replicate cycles of violence and generational trauma was also discussed in the context of young people expressing their goals and aspirations for themselves, especially for those who were parents of young children.



## Issues for Older Youth Persisting Across the Life Course

**Problems and challenges youth experienced persisted because the systems have not adequately responded to them.** Reflections from participants revealed that many older youth (22–26 years old) reported consistently facing the same systems challenges and problems that they had experienced from a young age. Despite progressing into adulthood, participants often found themselves in a continuous cycle of repeated interactions with the same systems that have not helped to address their needs.

This finding is in line with BCG (2023), which shows that early challenges with employment and school trouble have long-term consequences and that once young people disconnect from high school, it has major implications for 1) employment, 2) wages and income, and 3) likelihood of returning to school and maintaining connections to school and work.

Specifically, the study analysis showed that only 40% of young people who experienced disconnection one year after exiting high school were employed at age 22, even after excluding those who might not be working because they were pursuing a postsecondary degree.

Those with jobs also had median annual wages (~\$14,000) substantially below that needed for economic independence (\$25,000 for a single adult in Connecticut). Outcomes for the severely disconnected were even worse. For those who neither completed high school nor entered the workforce, only 31% were employed at age 22, and the median annual wage was just \$8,000.

**Despite these challenges that they shared, young people remained hopeful.** Even with the continuity of the challenges, youth, especially older youth, are resilient and expressed a sense of hopefulness and a desire to work toward key goals and aspirations, such as becoming more financially stable, further pursuing their education, seeking family reunification with their children, and helping others in their community.

<sup>3</sup> HUSKY Health offers healthcare coverage to eligible children, parents, relative caregivers, older adults, individuals with disabilities, adults without dependent children, and pregnant women. In Connecticut, it encompasses Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program and is administered by the Department of Social Services partnered with Access Health CT.

## Young People Have Access to Health Insurance to Meet Needs

One significant protective factor for youth was the accessibility of healthcare in Connecticut through HUSKY Health,<sup>3</sup> which provides free or low-cost public insurance. We found that, in practice, most youth know about HUSKY and have been able to access healthcare. A handful reported not being able to access HUSKY, and undocumented youth may have had some confusion about it. Connecticut recently expanded coverage of HUSKY to undocumented youth. This change occurred during our study, so some of the reported issues may be ameliorated by the expansion. As one participant stated,

*“When I got here [to the United States] with my family, we went to a hospital... And it was like kind of expensive to be honest, but after like two months we found out about the [HUSKY] insurance.”*

> 16-year-old Latino young man from Danbury

In general, youth reported being able to rely on HUSKY for health needs. However, insurance was only one factor of health. Among the youth we spoke to, trauma was pervasive. They exhibited a wide range of reactions to their experiences. Fear and loss, anger, desensitization, and resilience were consistent themes. Many of the youth either sought out behavioral or mental health services using HUSKY or were mandated to engage in these services through the court system or as a part of family reunification processes within the child welfare system. For some, therapy or anger management were effective means of coping with the symptoms of their trauma, but others noted distrust of or lack of cultural understanding from their mental healthcare providers. Nevertheless, youth displayed a hunger to process and tell their stories. Many shared that they found the interview process to be cathartic and found value in a space where they could tell their stories. Some expressed gratitude or healing from the process of having a person listen to their life story without judgment.

## Role of Family and Other Core Relationships

**Fractured family structures contributed to negative interactions with systems.** The youth we interviewed had a wide range of relationships in their home life. What our data make clear is that families and home life function as another system that has its own characteristics, rules, roles, communication patterns, and power structures above and beyond the individual (McGinnis & Wright, 2022; Smith et al., 2009). Fractures in familial relationships were often a catalyst for negative interactions with child welfare or the criminal justice system. For instance, interviewees

discussed instances in which they reported or were reported by a family member to the police or the Department of Children and Families.

**Youth turned to peers for support, and peers' influence varied.** Many roles the family is expected to play were absent or fractured for our interviewees. Families are often expected to provide structure for stable housing, care and support, and access to school. When home life did not offer these resources, youth had little connection to other systems of care. Some turned to peer networks for further support — and how much peer networks were a supportive influence varied. For these young people, peer groups became chosen family.





# 7 Looking into the Future: What Young People Hope for Themselves

Despite the challenges many young people faced, most shared aspirations and goals and were hopeful about their future. For many, employment and educational attainment is a means to getting what they ultimately value, such as financial security to allow them to care for themselves and their families.

## How Young People Define Success for Themselves

The definition of success for these youth was deeply personal and contextual, shaped by their individual experiences, aspirations, and values. Their definitions commonly reflected their resilience, resourcefulness, and determination to transcend the limitations imposed upon them by societal norms and structural inequalities. Youth's aspirations served as beacons of hope and motivation, guiding them through adversity and driving them toward a brighter future. This hopeful view is promising and critical to recognize, especially given that studies have shown that despite the extreme inequality of income and opportunity in the United States, feelings of well-being are a critical metric to predict future life outcomes (Graham, 2023).

## Goals and Aspirations: Getting Back on Track

Youth commonly defined success as “getting back on track.” For them, this meant many things regarding the goals and aspirations they hoped to work toward. Overall, the most common goals were 1) doing better for their children, 2) giving back to others, 3) becoming more financially stable, 4) furthering their education, 5) seeking support services, and 6) wanting to move to another place.

- **Doing Better for Their Children:** Participants, particularly mothers, discussed wanting to do better for their children's sake. For some, this was challenging because one or multiple children were part of the child welfare system and in foster care; family unification was also a core piece of their aspirations, but that can be hard because their children are in the system.
- **Giving Back to Others:** Participants discussed wanting to help others in need or in similar situations. For example, one interviewee talked about wanting to build a place where young girls could go and be safe and live when they do not have other places to go.
- **Becoming More Financially Stable:** Participants aspired to find a well-paying job to provide for themselves and families. They commonly saw financial stability as a means to securing basic needs, such as stable housing, food security, and access to healthcare. Some also discussed how it would allow them to get a car or rent an apartment. As noted in the next section, meeting basic needs was a common barrier for some in achieving their aspirations, so working toward that was part of their goals.
- **Furthering Their Education:** Participants talked about returning to school, whether a community college, university, or trade school. Others discussed going back to high school or getting a GED.
- **Seeking Support Services:** Young people sought to connect to or further connect to support services, such as youth-serving nonprofit agencies, support and therapy groups, and church or religious groups.
- **Wanting to Move to Another Place:** Young people spoke about moving to another place or having happy memories in an area they would like to return to. For some, the idea of “making it out” symbolized liberation from the negative cycles of the systemic traumas and violence they faced throughout their childhood and into their lives as teens and young adults. It commonly represented attaining a level of stability and security that allowed them to break free from the constraints of their circumstances and chart their own path toward a brighter future. For instance, some young people also reflected on how they have already recently moved to a different part of Connecticut, where people do not know them as much, and it is “better” because they are out of their previous environment and distant from the people they knew there. However, some also found that the same challenges persisted after moving.

## Supports for Achieving Successes

Young people commonly noted supports that could help them achieve their goals. One of the greatest sources of support that was repeatedly discussed was the network of youth-serving nonprofits in Connecticut. Many youth had at least one such connection, and some were receiving services such as mental health services, violence and crisis intervention programming, and housing access support. This connection was commonly made through a particular staff member at the organization. Youth-serving, nonprofit agency connections were especially critical when young people had a strong connection to a particular staff person who held them accountable and repeatedly reached out to them, even when the young person was not responsive — using a relentless outreach approach.

In addition to organizational connections, some youth also said that they had mentors and trusted peers and adults to turn to. This tended to include a close family member or friend, a specific teacher from a school they attended in the past, or an informal mentor in their community.

## Barriers to Achieving Successes

When asked about barriers to achieving their goals, young people commonly pointed to their caretaking responsibilities, such as caring for their children, siblings, or other family members. Mothers raised issues with the lack of access to trusted, affordable, and reliable childcare as a key challenge. Furthermore, some young people noted their focus on meeting basic needs — such as housing access and food security — as their main priority before they can focus on their future aspirations. Lastly, young people discussed issues with their relationships as barriers. This included relationships with peers who were a distraction, abusive or controlling romantic partners, unsupportive or abusive family members, and a general lack of connections to trusted adults and peers whom they could turn to for encouragement in times of need. Other barriers included past criminal records or current criminal activity, financial constraints, and language barriers.



# 8 Conclusions

## Pushing for Connection Over Disconnection: Opportunities to Build Connection

This preliminary report underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions and systemic reforms across the education, housing, health, criminal justice, and child welfare systems to address the complexities of youth disconnection. Although the education system emerges as a pivotal point of intervention, offering immense potential to reconnect youth to pathways of opportunity, other systems, such as housing, health, criminal justice, and child welfare, have been just as influential on youth disconnection. Next, we offer conclusions based on these preliminary insights; in the forthcoming report, we will provide more in-depth findings and share recommendations and implications.

### Education

The nexus between youth disconnection and the education system underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions and systemic reforms. By addressing the root causes of disconnection and amplifying opportunities for empowerment, we can unlock the potential of all young people to thrive academically, economically, and socially. Educators and policymakers must prioritize equity, inclusivity, and opportunity for all youth, ensuring that no one is left behind in their pursuit of a brighter future.

As highlighted throughout the study, as a primary point of disconnection, the education system has immense potential to be a turning point for many youth, offering significant potential as a connector and catalyst for change. However, to effectively reduce youth disconnection, systemic inequities, resource constraints, and the diverse cultural, racial, and linguistic aspects of the community must be addressed to bolster support networks within the education system, prioritize the needs of disconnected youth, and cultivate inclusive educational environments that foster belonging and empowerment for all students. Only through such holistic approaches can we dismantle the pathways of disconnection and pave the way for equitable opportunities and thriving youth experiences.

### Housing

Housing instability and related challenges emerged as a significant barrier. Preliminary findings revealed a systemic failure in providing adequate and timely assistance to young people, resulting in housing instability that permeates various aspects of their lives. These challenges and effects ranged from grappling with frequent moves, to relying on informal housing arrangements (e.g., staying with friends, family members, or other locations), and even to experiencing homelessness. Unstable housing not only hinders their ability to pursue education and employment opportunities, but can also place strains on their relationships and impose burdens on support networks.

The stories shared by young people demonstrate the obstacles they encounter in navigating bureaucratic processes and affording basic housing expenses. These challenges faced by young people navigating Connecticut's housing landscape highlight systemic failures that necessitate urgent attention and comprehensive reforms. Therefore, beyond simply providing shelter, the deficiencies in formal housing support systems must be addressed by developing more stable and supportive housing for young people statewide, as stable housing serves as a cornerstone for overall success and resilience.



## Health

Highlighting the importance of accessible healthcare, particularly through programs such as HUSKY, health insurance has served as a significant protective factor for many young people, offering free or low-cost insurance and access to essential healthcare services. Although most young people we interviewed reported being able to rely on HUSKY for their health needs, a few encountered challenges, particularly undocumented youth. Despite recent expansions to provide coverage for undocumented young people, challenges remain.

Furthermore, the impact of trauma on the lives of young people and the importance of comprehensive mental health support services emerged. Many participants expressed a profound level of appreciation to the researchers for listening to them, noting that they found the interviews to be therapeutic.

These stories and experiences emphasize the importance of creating safe and supportive spaces where young people can voice their experiences without judgment and access culturally competent mental health services tailored to their needs. Therefore, by recognizing the importance of comprehensive mental health support services and prioritizing accessible and culturally responsive mental, physical, and emotional healthcare, we can help mitigate the long-term effects of trauma and support the holistic well-being of young people across Connecticut.

## Criminal Justice

The intricate web of the criminal justice system, and particularly its interconnectedness with other systems such as education, has been shown to have the potential to profoundly influence the life trajectories of young people. Disturbingly, a recurring pattern emerged wherein school-based disciplinary issues were often escalated to involve law enforcement, reflecting deeply entrenched racial biases and discriminatory practices, exacerbating the overcriminalization of Black youth from an early age.

Moreover, the study sheds light on the various pathways through which young people become ensnared in the criminal justice system, ranging from minor infractions to attendance issues.

Given not all referrals to law enforcement stem from violent interactions; these simple occurrences can lead to young people becoming entangled with the criminal justice system for noncriminal infractions.

Furthermore, the study sheds light on the multifaceted nature of the criminal justice system's role in young people's lives, illustrating its potential to either facilitate rehabilitation or perpetuate marginalization. While initiatives such as community policing and juvenile diversion programs offer avenues for rehabilitation and reintegration, systemic biases and punitive measures remain formidable barriers. Even more so, returning citizens face numerous barriers, including obstacles to accessing housing and employment, which hinder their successful reintegration into society.

Addressing these systemic biases, promoting equitable treatment, and prioritizing rehabilitation over punitive measures are essential for Connecticut to create and promote supportive pathways for young people to thrive and reconnect with prosocial institutions. Thus, in addition to the urgent need for comprehensive reforms within the criminal justice system, there is a critical need to scrutinize, reassess, and reform the ways in which other systems interact with and use the criminal justice system to mitigate its detrimental impacts on young peoples' trajectories.



## Child Welfare and Family Dynamics

Another critical area highlighted throughout the study was the often complex familial dynamics at play. When young people felt that their families failed to provide the necessary support and stability, some turned to alternative networks, such as chosen families or peer groups. Therefore, addressing the fractures within familial relationships and strengthening family systems is essential in mitigating the risk of interacting with systems and ensuring that young people have the support and resources they need to thrive. By investing in family-centered interventions, programs, and support services, Connecticut can promote healthier family dynamics and create more stable and supportive environments for young people, ultimately fostering positive outcomes and reducing their involvement with systems such as child welfare or criminal justice.

Despite these challenges, preliminary findings revealed the remarkable levels of resilience and determination that young people exhibited. As noted throughout this preliminary report, the findings highlight the multifaceted impacts of systems on various aspects of their well-being and ability to thrive. This preliminary analysis underscores the critical need and role of stable and supportive systems in their lives, from housing challenges, such as accessing formal housing support systems, which are often characterized by financial barriers to entry or long waitlists, to family dynamics, which have led young people to seek out support from other networks. Thus, by prioritizing and financially backing stable and supportive social support systems and networks, policymakers, and community advocates can facilitate pathways to success for young people, ensuring that they have the foundational stability necessary to pursue their aspirations and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

## Next Steps

This preliminary report underscores the pressing need for collaborative efforts, systemic reforms, and targeted interventions that prioritize education, employment, and holistic support to effectively address youth disconnection. The final report, slated for release in May 2024, will delve deeper into findings and recommendations regarding each system and its impact on youth disconnection.





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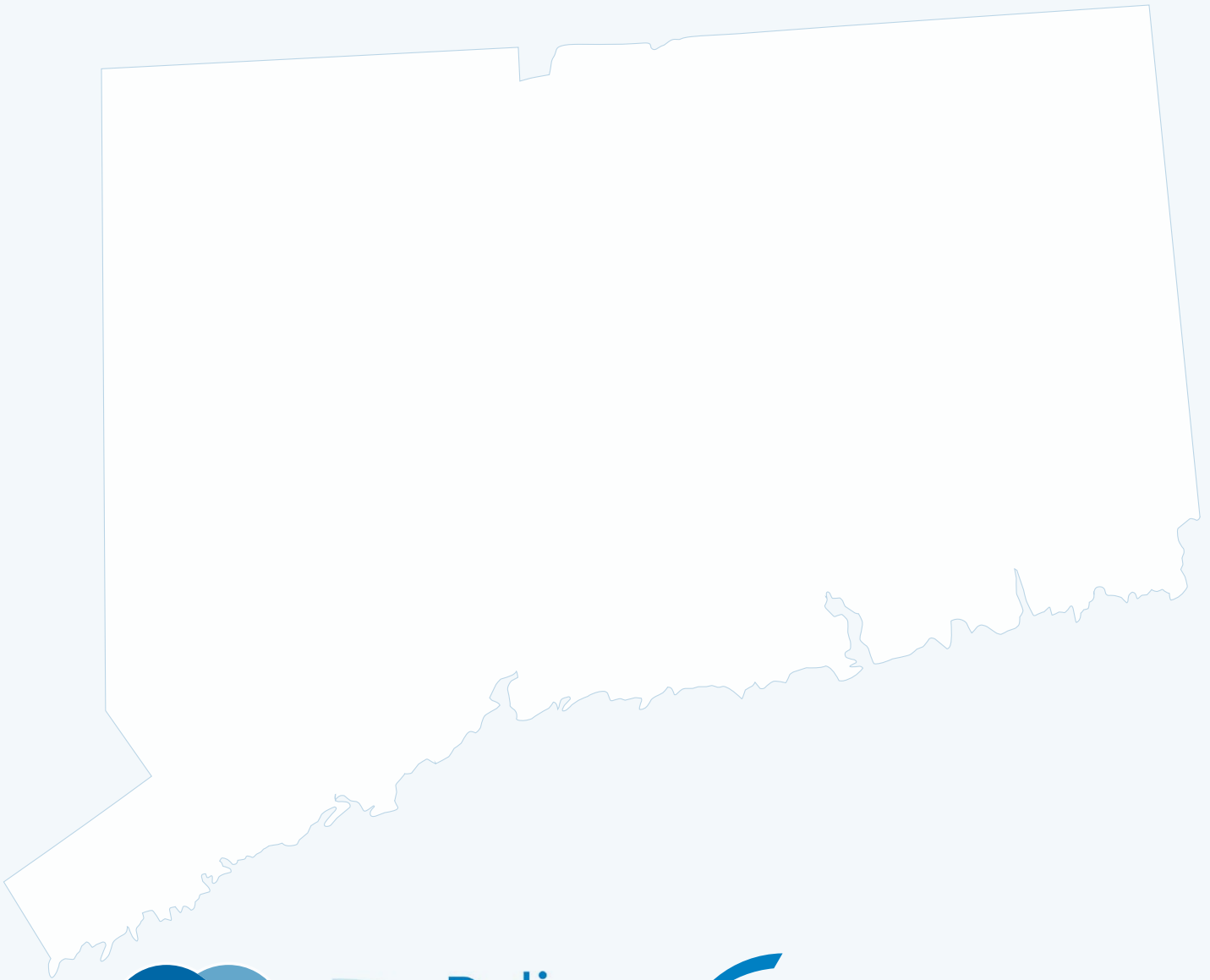
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