RESEARCH REPORT

Young People’s Lived Experiences with Safety Net Programs

Insights from Young People and Youth-Serving Organizations

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Young People’s Lived Experiences with Safety Net Programs

As young people transition from adolescence to adulthood, access to food, housing, health care, and income can shape their life trajectories and whether they meet their full potential. For young people who cannot rely on sufficient employment income or family support to meet these basic needs, access to public safety net programs is often essential. A first phase of Urban Institute research examined key barriers and supports available for young people ages 14 to 24 seeking safety net programs, including housing assistance programs, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cash assistance (Adams, Hahn, and Coffey 2021). A key finding of that research was that creating a more accessible and supportive benefits system requires including the perspectives of young people to inform policy, practice, funding, and future research.

This report details the second phase of the research, which built on the initial research by talking with young people who face these challenges, as well as with people working at youth-serving organizations who seek to connect young people to safety net programming and other supports. Specifically, this phase focused on understanding young people’s perspectives, experiences, and challenges accessing and retaining safety net supports and engaging them in identifying solutions that build on their resilience, strengths, and creativity. Throughout the project we created space for young people and service providers to discuss these issues from their first-hand experiences.

As we described in depth in our brief on phase 1 of our research, significant inequities in access to resources and opportunities, particularly for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people, have contributed to far too many young people having insufficient access to the resources they need for a stable foundation as they move into adulthood. Despite the remarkable resourcefulness and resilience of many young people, decades of disinvestment and disparities in access to decent income, good education, good jobs, safe communities, and other key resources can affect them directly and shape whether their families have the resources to support them through this transition. Investing in young people in ways that help them thrive can have lasting effects as they transition to adulthood and share their talents with society.

This report outlines the major issues that young people and staff members working with them identified over the course of this project and key solutions they suggested to make current safety net programs more effective. Some of these issues and solutions confirmed our previous findings, while
others were newly highlighted. Before discussing the youth and staff perspectives on the key safety net challenges for young people and their suggested solutions, we describe the roles of structural racism in shaping the circumstances young people of color face and the ways that safety net programs do and do not address them.

This report lifts up the wisdom and understanding of young people who are accessing the safety net and the service providers who work with them. Our hope is that policymakers, funders, agency stakeholders, and advocates will use this report to understand what young people are experiencing and how system changes could better meet their needs.

Key Findings

Young people and staff members at youth-serving organizations identified the following challenges young people face in accessing safety net supports:

- Safety net policies and practices do not reflect young people's needs.
- It is hard for young people to know what benefits exist or how to access them.
- Application processes are complicated and difficult to manage.
- Safety net policies and processes do not recognize the developmental and life stage realities of young people, which creates the following challenges:
  - Navigating and following through with complex safety net policies can be challenging for young people.
  - Self-advocacy can be challenging in systems in which young people have little power.
  - Young people may lack legal authority or face other age-related constraints.
  - Punitive policies leave no room for mistakes.
  - Safety net policies can undermine the relationships young people need.

- Safety net programs do not sufficiently recognize mental health issues.

Young people and staff members prioritized the following actions for addressing the safety net challenges:

- Simplify access and support young people in navigating safety net processes.
  - Support navigators to work with young people.
» Coordinate access to a range of supports across multiple public agencies and community-based organizations.
» Minimize and streamline documentation and paperwork requirements.
» Assess and address barriers to access and retention of safety net benefits.

- **Empower and support young people in decisionmaking.**
- **Replace punitive approaches with support and minimized burden.**
  » Address gaps in mental health services.
  » Take a harm-reduction approach.
  » Reorient benefit agencies to focus on customer service and client needs.
- **Make fundamental structural changes to how we support young people.**

Box 1 describes our methodology for gathering information about how young people and staff members at youth-serving organizations experience safety net programs.

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**BOX 1**
**Phase 2 Methodology**

This participatory research project incorporated and prioritized the perspectives of young people who currently or previously accessed or were in need of accessing the safety net, and the community service providers that support them. We used an approach called Data Walksa to share findings from the first phase of our research (described above) and collaborate with young people and staff members to achieve a more thorough understanding of issues and solutions to better inform policy and practice.

To identify participants for phase 2 of our research, we chose four youth-serving organizations that were geographically diverse; were focused on diverse target populations (e.g., young people experiencing homelessness, with a history of foster care involvement, or involved in the criminal legal system); were experienced with connecting young people to our federal programs of focus; and had the capacity to partner on outreach. Many of the young people these organizations serve are people of color. We worked with these organizations to identify young people and staff members to participate in our virtual Data Walks.

- **We conducted five virtual Data Walks with groups of young people** who had accessed or were in need of housing, food, health care, and income support. Most of the 15 young people we spoke with had accessed federal housing assistance programs, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program, and/or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. These young people were connected to the four youth-serving organizations described above.
We conducted three virtual Data Walks with groups of staff members from two of the youth-serving organizations. We spoke with 21 staff members who worked with young people, including young people who were in foster care, unhoused or experiencing homelessness, and/or experiencing food insecurity.

The Data Walks consisted of Urban team members sharing our findings from phase 1 of our safety net project and asking young people and staff members at the youth-serving organizations for their feedback on what we got right, what we missed, and what solutions they needed most. We spent the vast majority of time during the Data Walks listening to young people and staff members and learning what their biggest concerns were, examples of issues they or their clients faced, and what they needed to make their or their clients’ lives easier and better.

* Data walks are an interactive way for community stakeholders, including residents, researchers, program administrators, local government officials, and service providers, to engage in dialogue around research findings about their community. During a Data Walk, program participants and service providers jointly review data presentations, interpret what the data mean, and collaborate to use their individual expertise to improve policies, programs, and other factors of change. For more information, see Brittany Murray, Elsa Falkenburger, and Priya Saxena, Data Walks: An Innovative Way to Share Data with Communities (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2015), https://www.urban.org/research/publication/data-walks-innovative-way-share-data-communities.

Setting the Context: Understanding the Multiple Roles of Structural Racism

Structural racism sets the context for the challenges that young people, and particularly young people of color, experience as they deal with the safety net in three ways. First, structural racism has shaped the basic design and assumptions that undergird safety net programs, which in turn shape the experiences of young people as they seek assistance. Second, it plays a large part in shaping the challenges and opportunities that young people of color face. And third, the extent to which safety net programs are, or are not, designed to address the constraints that young people face as a result of structural racism shapes the effectiveness of safety net programs in serving them. Each of these issues is discussed below.

Structural Racism Shapes the Constraints Young People Face and Their Need for Support

As described in the summary brief resulting from phase 1 of our research (Adams, Hahn, and Coffey 2021), the opportunities and constraints that young people of color face are shaped by their employment and education opportunities, which largely have been shaped by structural inequities in
the labor market and education systems. In addition, the role of structural racism in shaping racialized policing, mass incarceration, and racial inequities in the child welfare system has also resulted in young people of color being more likely to face additional constraints and challenges. As a result, they are more likely to face greater barriers to economic success, as well as more likely to have experiences with the justice system and child welfare system, which can create additional barriers. All of these inequities underscore the role of structural racism in directly contributing to the barriers to economic stability that young people of color face, and therefore to their need to seek various safety net supports.

Racism Shapes the Structure of Safety Net Programs

Many safety net programs were designed to align with racist narratives about the causes of poverty and reinforce racial inequities. Many programs initially excluded people of color from receiving benefits (Floyd et al. 2021). Though overt racial discrimination is no longer permitted in program policies, the legacy of the sexist and racist narratives is present today in the emphasis on preventing dependency and fraud and moving people off of benefits instead of effectively providing support to all who need it.

Throughout our eight Data Walks, young people and staff members described what they perceived as ways that safety net programs were designed to make it hard to get help. Young people framed these challenges as either being purposeful or intentional efforts to put up barriers to access the support they need to survive. One young person told us that to them it felt like safety net policies were intentionally created to cause harm instead of help.

The staff members we talked with contextualized these young people's concerns about purposeful attempts by safety net programs to exclude people from receiving benefits as being rooted in the safety net’s history of excluding people of color and its heavy focus on rooting out fraud. Staff members discussed how structural racism shows up in the programs and barriers young people face while trying to access benefits.

- One staff member said, “The roots of the programs and policies have such clear connections and roots in structural and historic racism, and the policies are structured around really racialized assumptions...Every time folks have interactions with the agencies...it’s assumed that you’re going to fit into some certain box...Everything is assuming that people are lying, committing fraud, or lazy, and the programs really are structured around...how can we make sure, you know, no one's committing fraud, and so we'd rather kick people out or deny people to avoid that potential rather than be really inclusive.”
Another staff member related attempts to avoid fraud to housing access, saying, “Our housing authority is under the assumption that everyone’s committing fraud...especially around adding and removing household members from subsidized households. This comes up with youth frequently and the sort of overly onerous requirements of documenting when someone is leaving the household or adding to the household and the lack of recognition that a lot of these situations are fluid for young people.”

Safety Net Programs Often Do Not Address Inequities Caused by Structural Racism

Finally, given the role that structural racism has played in causing the significant challenges faced by people of color and the racist and exclusionary origins of safety net programming, it might be expected that safety net programs would focus on ensuring that supports were provided in a way that recognizes the inequities structural racism causes. However, as described below, there are multiple ways that safety net programs fail to address or recognize the challenges or inequities that structural racism can cause. For example, the programs are not designed to recognize the effects of structural racism in the unequal access people have to stable housing, stable employment with consistent work hours, paid time off or the ability to miss a day of work, the internet, and reliable transportation. Without consistent access to these resources, people not only have a more difficult time making ends meet but, ironically, also have more logistical difficulty accessing public benefits to fill the gap.

Youth and Staff Perspectives: Key Safety Net Challenges for Young People

Accessing safety net programs is challenging for people of all ages (box 2), but young people face additional issues and barriers specific to their age and developmental stage. Corroborating what we heard in phase 1 of our research, the overarching message we heard from young people and staff members during our phase 2 Data Walks is that the safety net programs were not designed to support young people. Both groups highlighted the following five issues:

1. Safety net programs do not reflect young people’s needs.
2. It is hard for young people to know what benefits exist or how to access them.
3. Application processes are complicated and difficult to manage.
4. Programs and processes do not recognize the developmental and life stage realities of young people.

5. Safety net programs do not sufficiently recognize mental health issues.

Safety Net Programs Do Not Reflect Young People’s Needs

Staff members in all the Data Walks agreed that safety net program policies and practices do not consider the specific circumstances and needs of young people. As a result, processes that are difficult for anyone to navigate are even harder for young people.

- One staff member said that safety net programs are “adult focused...[and value] one-size-fits-all programs that weren’t designed with youth in mind.” This person emphasized that the adult system is not suited for young people and there are no accommodations available for young people trying to access benefits.

- A staff member in a different Data Walk said that agencies and benefit programs are “not seeing the whole person...They’re not focused on what that individual youth’s goals are or what it means for them to be stable and thriving.” Safety net programs tend to focus on specific needs without considering a person’s full range of strengths, assets, and needs, which means that young people are not being fully supported.

- Another staff member gave an example of how local offices administering federal safety net programs are not designed to accommodate young people: “We don’t have staff in these agencies who are specifically focused on youth...They don’t have specialized knowledge and skills to really work with [young people] and share what the options are and have the relationships needed to help.”

It Is Hard for Young People to Know What Benefits Exist or How to Access Them

In our phase 1 research, experts described the challenges that young people could face in trying to determine their eligibility for safety net supports. This problem was also highlighted during our Data Walks, when young people shared that they did not know the kinds of benefits and assistance that were available or what they were supposed to be looking for.

- A young person told us that “finding resources is the hardest part. It isn’t really something that’s easily done.”
Another young person said, “It seems like most of the people around my age need help the most, more than the generation before us...don’t really get the assistance or don’t know how to get the assistance that we’ve been trying to.”

A staff member told us that young people have trouble accessing benefits because they “lack [the] knowledge of knowing how to get to whatever the resources are and...what steps to take to get them.”

Many of the young people we spoke with had tried unsuccessfully to access housing for themselves and ended up living in shelters or being unhoused. They did not know what housing assistance was available in their area or who to ask to find out.

One young person told us that when they visit friends who do not have housing, friends tell them that they “don’t know where else to go...and they don’t know how to get [food]...so they can’t even eat because they didn’t have...any access or information to use to apply.” This young person had slowly gathered information about food, shelter, and other resources available throughout their city and shared what they learned with their friends as well as with service providers they encountered. They said service providers often knew only of the services their own organizations provided and did not know about other benefits or services.

Application Processes Are Complicated and Difficult to Manage

In the first phase of our project, we also heard about the challenges young people could face with rigid and complex eligibility processes in safety net programs. This finding was strongly corroborated in phase 2 as we listened to young people talk about their experiences. Specifically, even when young people managed to identify a benefit they needed, we heard over and over again how difficult it was to actually apply for and start receiving that benefit. The challenges they described centered around the following issues, each of which is described below:

- confusing and complex applications
- rigid and difficult documentation requirements
- logistical challenges to accessing safety net supports
- little support in helping young people navigate the complexities
CONFUSING AND COMPLEX APPLICATIONS

Understanding how to apply for benefits can be complicated and challenging for young people. Corroborating findings from phase 1, we heard from both staff members and young people that safety net application policies and practices are huge barriers to getting services. One staff member said, “A lot of youth fall through [the cracks] because the system assumes so much substantive knowledge about everything. You need to know what you are eligible for before you walk in the door.”

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—Staff member of youth-serving organization

A common theme we heard was that young people have difficulty understanding what they are being asked for in the application paperwork and required documentation. Time after time young people told us that paperwork was “confusing,” “hard to understand,” “not explained,” or not available in their language.

- One young person told us that the “paperwork and some of the questions on applications are very, very confusing...You just want to get benefits...You want to make sure you are eligible for these benefits, but you don’t even know what the questions mean.”
- One young person told us that their “mom doesn’t speak English, so a lot of the time I don’t have help a lot with the...application process. And I myself didn’t know what I was doing.”
- Another young person told us that the application “wording itself can be very confusing; it’s like, ‘what exactly are you asking?’...Not everyone will understand, whatever language that they’re trying to speak. I speak English very well, but even I have trouble understanding what they are saying.”

RIGID AND DIFFICULT DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS

One of the barriers we most frequently heard about from staff members is the amount and difficulty of paperwork and required documentation to apply and qualify for benefits. Their comments corroborated one of the challenges identified in phase 1 of our research—namely, the difficulty young people
frequently encounter in securing the required documentation for the application process. These requirements can be particularly challenging for young people who may no longer have contact with their families, are experiencing homelessness, or have other life situations that preclude easy access to documents such as birth certificates or Social Security cards.

- One staff member explained that the process to apply for benefits is burdensome because “paperwork requires other documents like tax returns and birth certificates...If they’re experiencing some level of homelessness or housing instability, they’re not going to have a birth certificate, Social Security card, and bank statement.”

- Another staff member explained the effort it might require for young people to access the documents they need to apply for benefits: “Documentation is difficult to access while balancing a 9 to 5 job. They can’t always take a break to go sit at the Social Security office to get a Social Security card. And then they’d have to wait to get a copy of the birth certificate depending on where they’re born...The system is just hurdle after hurdle after hurdle. Even once they do get all their documents, they still have to fill out the application and might not qualify for assistance. The battle doesn’t end.”

- Another barrier our Data Walks’ participants reported is that not having recognized, admissible ID prevents young people from getting housing and a job. One staff member told us that not having "that piece of paper, that certification, ID...can be the thing that puts huge roadblocks in place for a young person. It can prevent them from moving towards anything, it just stalls everything and...it should not be that way."

If they’re experiencing some level of homelessness or housing instability, they’re not going to have a birth certificate, Social Security card, and bank statement.
—Staff member of youth-serving organization

LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES TO ACCESSING SAFETY NET SUPPORTS

As in phase 1, the young people and staff members in the Data Walks described how logistical barriers can make it difficult for young people to access services. These logistical barriers include lack of transportation; limited or unstable internet access; and inadequate technology, such as access to phones or computers to complete online benefit applications or eligibility interviews.
A staff member told us that phone and email access becomes a serious issue when trying to access benefits because "you can have a phone appointment set up [with an agency]...but if you don't have a phone that can be a difficult situation. You have to have those supports or know where to go. You have to have an email and you have to be able to get to your email."

A second staff member told us that "transportation and mobility" were a constant worry: "I think a lot of opportunities are missed because youth either don't know how to navigate transportation systems, public transport doesn't exist, or they don't know how to get that type of support. They can't make it out to a job interview or make it out to an employer consistently because of lack of transportation."

These challenges are corroborated by research, which clearly shows that communities of color face greater transportation and internet barriers than do white communities (Austin 2017). We also observed these challenges firsthand in our Data Walks, as a number of the young people we spoke with had challenges with their internet access on their phones, causing them to drop from the call before rejoining. One young person joined the Data Walk from work because that was the only place they had internet access.

LITTLE SUPPORT IN HELPING YOUNG PEOPLE NAVIGATE THE COMPLEXITIES

One of the overarching themes from our conversations with young people and staff members was that safety net programs do not provide supports to help young people navigate the complexities of the policies and application requirements. Youth-serving staff members described how the safety net is made up of a fragmented set of supports addressing different needs and having different eligibility rules and application processes. Even within the administration of a single benefit program, individual staff members may focus on a single aspect of the process.

Most of the young people who talked with us said they did not have any adults or service providers who could help them understand benefits or how to access them, which sometimes resulted in their failing to get the benefits for which they were eligible.

- One young person told us they went to a benefit agency’s Twitter account to understand more about receiving that benefit because “they’re more active on Twitter than in the office.”
- Another young person told us they called all the local community-based organizations in their area to see what information or help they could give them.
- Another young person said that whenever they had to go to a program office to access services, there were never “enough employees to kind of handle the influx of people...[It] causes such a
backlog and crazy amount of wait time. There’s just not enough people to support the recipients [to] get benefits.” They went on to say that when they went to the office for help, “They were so overwhelmed. They weren’t really able to help anybody.”

- Young people also discussed the lack of support in completing paperwork or other processes for accessing benefits. One young person said that when “you ask for clarification you have to wait so long on the phone to ask someone for help and sometimes never get it.”

**Programs and Processes Do Not Recognize the Developmental and Life Stage Realities of Young People**

A key finding in phase 1 of our research was that safety net programs are not designed in ways that recognize the developmental and life stage of young people transitioning to adulthood. This challenge was also apparent in our conversations with the young people and the staff of youth-serving organizations. They highlighted the following disconnects between the skills and developmental stage of young people and the expectations of the safety net programs:

- Navigating and following through with complex safety net processes can be challenging for young people.
- Self-advocacy can be challenging in systems in which young people have little power.
- Young people may lack legal authority or face other age-related constraints.
- Punitive policies leave no room for mistakes.
- Safety net policies can undermine the relationships young people need.

**Navigating and Following Through with Complex Safety Net Processes Can Be Challenging for Young People**

Staff members we spoke with explained how navigating safety net programs requires a level of perseverance and attention to detail that is especially challenging to young people, a reality familiar to parents who have watched their child transition to adulthood. Unfortunately, the process of getting safety net benefits involves multiple steps, such as attending appointments, providing documentation, filling out forms, meeting deadlines, and generally having to follow through on many details. Managing all these steps is challenging for adults as well, yet young people are even less equipped to deal with and remember every detail of applications and what they must do to obtain and keep their benefits.
One staff member told us that “in many cases our young adults are still developing, and that can include developing cognitive skills and other skills needed to survive in the adult world. It’s just one more barrier to accessing needed services before they throw in the towel.” This comment aligns with brain science showing that adolescents and young adults are still developing the executive functioning and emotional regulation skills needed for these challenging tasks.6

The challenges created by this developmental reality are exacerbated by the extra logistical challenges that young people can face in trying to access benefits, as described above. And they are further affected if young people are under stress or have experienced trauma—which is common for many of these young people—as both stress and trauma can challenge executive functioning, which shapes planning and goal-directed behavior (Shields, Sazma, and Yonelinas 2016).7

SELF-ADVOCACY CAN BE CHALLENGING IN SYSTEMS IN WHICH YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE LITTLE POWER

Staff members and young people explained that navigating complex bureaucratic processes often requires self-advocacy that many young people find difficult. In our society, adults are the decisionmakers, hold power that young people do not, and do not always give young people the space and time to express their needs. Within this power structure, it can be hard for young people to pursue what they need or to stand up for themselves as they try to access benefits, which can lead to their not applying for or receiving benefits and feeling unsafe or taken advantage of.

One staff member told us that young people often fall through the cracks when trying to access benefits because “the system...assumes you have a skill set to advocate for yourself. [For] a lot of the youth we work with, it’s their first time they’re applying for benefits, and they don’t know how to behave or what to ask for.”

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—Staff member at youth-serving organization
YOUNG PEOPLE MAY LACK LEGAL AUTHORITY OR FACE OTHER AGE-RELATED CONSTRAINTS

Young people and staff members frequently described ways in which, even when young people can advocate for themselves and take on adult responsibilities early, their age can still be a barrier to accessing the supports they need. For example, one staff member serving young people experiencing homelessness and separated from their families told us he is limited in what supports he can provide to people younger than 18 without their parental consent. In addition, several young people and staff members told us that to access housing young people are often required to have a cosigner, even when they are working and earning enough income to pay rent, yet do not have a family member who can or is willing to serve as their cosigner.

One young person asked us several times throughout the Data Walk, “How does it work if a young adult is trying to get an apartment but they don’t have a cosigner?...I’ve been trying to get an apartment for a year but I haven’t been able to get one.” This young person had been living in a shelter while trying to find housing that did not require a cosigner.

PUNITIVE POLICIES LEAVE NO ROOM FOR MISTAKES

Punitive policies, common in safety net programs, can be particularly problematic for young people, who are in a developmental stage of life—adolescence and young adulthood—that appropriately involves exploring and testing their environments. Yet safety net programs are often characterized by a strict focus on compliance, and punitive actions are taken when clients are perceived to have made a mistake. Our conversations with staff members and young people, however, suggest that these punitive actions can be counterproductive.

Several staff members and young people explained how processes and requirements for accessing safety net programs allow little, if any, room for error, which can be stressful and frightening to young people. To qualify for benefits, an applicant must fill out an application completely and accurately, even if they’re 18 years old and filling it out for the first time. Many of the young people who spoke with us shared the sentiment that the programs were punishing them for making mistakes.

- One young person told us, “If you fill paperwork out wrong then you’re going to be denied and have to wait like what three months, six months to be able to reapply or to even get a case agent again...It should be more supportive.”

- Another young person went further, talking about their fear surrounding accessing benefits and making mistakes on paperwork or applications: “I feel like a lot of these benefits or even
paperwork is not explained to the full extent. You’re just told if you lie you can go to jail…but some of these questions I haven’t seen before and I need someone to explain this to me.”

Safety net programs are not only unforgiving of paperwork errors, but also personal missteps. As we noted above and in our phase 1 brief, the developmental stage of adolescence and young adulthood naturally and importantly involves exploratory behaviors and risk taking. In supportive environments these behaviors can lead to growth, but in less supportive environments they can lead to legal system involvement and other adverse outcomes. One staff member told us about young people who are denied needed services because of mistakes, such as using illegal substances as a coping mechanism. They said, “I just see that being a snowball effect for kids that had housing, or another service, then...relapsed, and quickly all of those people who are really proud and ready to help that person are...telling them to get out, and then they end up off of the right track instead of being helped.”

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I don’t want to go to jail if I apply to some of these programs...What if I put something wrong on the document and I don’t realize it’s wrong?
—Young person applying for benefits

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SAFETY NET POLICIES CAN UNDERMINE THE RELATIONSHIPS THAT YOUNG PEOPLE NEED

Another issue that our conversations corroborated from the phase 1 project was the role of the safety net policies in undermining key relationships that young people need. Specifically, staff members we spoke with underscored that young people need support from others as they build personal resilience and transition into adulthood, but safety net program policies can prevent them from building and maintaining trusting relationships with family (biological or chosen) and friends. They described how policies in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, housing assistance programs, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families prohibit sharing resources with other people, which can prevent the type of community that can help people survive and thrive.

- One staff member explained, “A lot of the policies and approaches to implementing the safety net work against relationships in a youth’s life, either with their peers and chosen family who they might want to live with or let live with them. In [the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] it could be the relationship between a parent or guardian and the youth who they’re separated from. In [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families] it could be a relationship with
the other parent of a child working against subsidized housing...There’s so many ways that these programs work against or interrupt the natural, positive ways that youth maintain relationships or build relationships, and those relationships are such a strength and part of resiliency.”

- Another staff member told us, “The structure of the safety net actually harms what stable supports or the potential for stable supports [young people] have, and...can put people at odds with people who could support them...You have to kick them out of your house, you can’t share food with them...those sorts of things.”

- In addition, shelter policies can literally separate families. As one staff member explained, “Many of the shelters in...[my] city...prohibit teenage boys...from staying in family shelters...So a family with a teenage boy has to decide, we don’t go in the shelter, or we leave him homeless.”

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—Staff member at youth-serving organization

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Safety Net Programs Do Not Sufficiently Recognize Mental Health Issues

The mental health needs of young people, and the failure of the safety net to recognize or address these needs, emerged as a significant area of concern for both young people and the staff members who served them. Our conversations with both groups suggested not only that young people are unable to access the mental health resources they need to heal, but also that the safety net’s rules, challenges, and restrictions cause stress and anxiety and may, in some cases, exacerbate underlying mental health disorders.

This failure is of particular importance because often young people who are receiving or in need of public benefits have experienced trauma and need mental health supports to heal. Young people who need to access the safety net may have experienced being kicked out of their family home, the death or incarceration of family members, poverty, being unhoused, and/or sexual trauma. One young person
explained how experience with programs that are supposed to provide support can, in practice, involve trauma: "Most kids I’ve run into...they’re thrown into the adult world, but instead of them being ready, they’re healing from what they had to go through in foster care.”

In addition, we heard that not having resources alone can cause mental health distress and that navigating the complex process of seeking support for basic needs further contributes to this distress.

- One staff member said, “It’s an incredible mental toll to track everything and have the stamina to continue applying for services and continue to wait to see if you qualify for services you need to survive and on a day-to-day basis still go to work and be safe...There’s a lot that they’re doing all at once, and it’s just a significant mental toll that can lead to burnout.”

- Another staff member noted that the general mental health needs of young people are not considered, pointing out that when young people are seeking safety net supports there is no one “who’s focused on just general wellness. There’s no one who’s making sure, ‘Are you safe? What do you need? Are you okay? Do you have anyone where you can go to, do you need to talk to?’”

- For young people experiencing mental health issues, the challenge of finding a mental health resource adds to the burden. One staff member told us that there is a huge shortage of “mental health services for...youth in particular. It’s hard for young people to find options that take Medicaid or whatever program they might be using [for health insurance] so they don’t have a lot of options, even when they can find [a mental health practitioner]...all those places have such huge waitlists that it takes them a while to get the services they need.”

**Young People’s Priorities and Solutions**

Our phase 1 brief provides a range of actions for people interested in strengthening young people’s access to safety net supports, as well as extensive detail about various policy steps that could help address the challenges young people and staff members identified. We built on that work in phase 2 by asking young people and staff members what their priorities were for improving safety net benefits for young people. The people we spoke with outlined four key solutions they wanted to prioritize to make accessing and retaining safety net benefits easier for young people:

1. Simplify access and support young people in navigating safety net processes.
2. Empower and support young people in decisionmaking.
3. Replace punitive approaches with support and minimized burden.
4. Make fundamental structural changes to how we support young people.

Simplify Access and Support Young People in Navigating Safety Net Processes

We heard from young people and staff that both short- and long-term changes to the safety net are needed to remove access barriers for young people. There is a large body of work on the barriers people of all ages face in accessing the safety net and how to remove them (box 1). The young people and staff members in our Data Walks specified four solutions they believed would make it easier for young people to navigate safety net processes:

- Establish and fund navigators to work with young people both in community organizations and in safety net agencies.
- Coordinate access to a range of supports across multiple public agencies and community-based organizations.
- Minimize and streamline documentation and paperwork requirements.
- Assess and address barriers to access and retention of safety net benefits.

ESTABLISH AND FUND NAVIGATORS TO WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE BOTH IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS AND SAFETY NET AGENCIES

Our phase 1 brief highlighted the importance of ensuring young people have access to caring, supportive adults who can help them learn to navigate their complex circumstances. This issue was also a priority for both the young people and staff members we talked with, who highlighted the importance of navigators who can help empower young people to access benefits. Specifically, they suggested the following:

- **Navigators who understand young people's needs are important in community agencies.** This suggestion is relevant for youth-serving organizations as well as for benefits-access organizations that focus on supporting access to safety net benefits for a broader population. Ensuring that someone understands the unique challenges young people can face and can support and empower them to navigate the process is critical.

- **Safety net agencies should have a point of contact to support young people.** Local offices administering safety net programs can provide more support to young people by identifying
and training staff to be a point of contact for young people and youth-serving organizations. These staff members should understand the unique challenges and realities young people face.

» One young person said having a point of contact at the agency whom they could ask for help would be “really helpful instead of like having to shoot in the dark and just hope for the best” when they applied for benefits.

» Similarly, one staff member explained, “I want to be able to go to social services and I want there to be someone that is specifically working with youth…[I want] designated staff that I can go to, and I want them to love their job and care about the kids and be kind to them.”

- **Policymakers should fund navigators to support young people.** Staff members told us that policymakers can help young people get more support by funding both navigators at community-based organizations to provide young people with hands-on guidance and youth-specific navigators at benefit agencies.

**COORDINATE ACCESS TO A RANGE OF SUPPORTS ACROSS MULTIPLE PUBLIC AGENCIES AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS**

As noted above, the fragmentation and lack of coordination across safety net programs is one of the challenges facing young people. Staff members and young people talked about the importance of identifying strategies to make this reality less daunting and make programs more cohesive and accessible. Specific suggestions included the following:

- Youth-serving organizations can connect with other local organizations that offer different services to provide joint services or a network of resources. A young person suggested creating a “system or database of programs in the area that meets people’s needs.” An app or even pamphlets or flyers from each organization could explain where, what, and how each organization in the area serves young people. The young person told us that local organizations need to work “more cohesively, [because we have] such a hard time finding different resources for different things…Something [like a database] would be not even just beneficial, but necessary to helping people.”

- Program administrators and policymakers can approach integrating access to supports through legislation, regulation, and/or state or local policy changes. A staff member explained, “[If] you’re eligible for one program, you should automatically be eligible for other programs, especially if they require the same things. It is very redundant and can be difficult for young people to get another ride to the same building to apply for something else because they have a different appointment. Save them that trouble of signing up for each separate program.”

MINIMIZE AND STREAMLINE DOCUMENTATION AND PAPERWORK REQUIREMENTS

Policymakers and safety net program administrators can also work to minimize and streamline documentation and paperwork requirements, which, depending on the safety net program and the state, may require changes to legislation, regulation, and/or state or local policies. Again, our phase 1 brief and other research provide additional information on simplifying access to benefit programs. Some suggestions the young people mentioned in phase 2 included the following:

- As one young person summarized, “Streamline things, make it easier...and smoother for people to access this kind of system. Make it easier to show proof or don’t require it at all.”
- Several young people suggested simplifying the language used in applications so that more people can understand what they are being asked. One young person said, “They have to make the wording in the documentation a bit easier to understand for everyday people. We don’t have the time to sit there and overanalyze what they want.”

ASSESS AND ADDRESS BARRIERS TO ACCESS AND RETENTION OF SAFETY NET BENEFITS

As noted above, a variety of process barriers, such as accessing the agency, filling out paperwork, and producing documentation, can make it difficult for young people to get safety net benefits. Our phase 1 brief and a large body of other research have identified ways to simplify access and retention of safety net benefits (box 2). Some of the suggestions young people and staff members working with them made in our Data Walks include the following:

- Program administrators and policymakers can address unnecessary restrictions and requirements by assessing all aspects of their policies and processes, from the amount of documentation requested to program work requirements, and identifying areas in which to loosen restrictions or reduce requirements in law, regulation, policy, or practice. One staff member suggested eliminating “all the restrictions and strings attached and hoops you have to jump through to get benefits.”
- A young person raised the idea of asking young people to complete feedback surveys about the accessibility of the organization’s services. These surveys could ask how the organization is doing, what it is doing well, what barriers young people face when trying to access its services, how accessible its services are, and what needs to be improved. Organizations and agencies could use this information to change their services to better support the young people they intend to serve.
BOX 2
Access to the Safety Net Is Challenging for Everyone, but States Are Working on Improving Access

Though this report focuses on the specific needs of young people seeking safety net supports and the solutions geared toward meeting their needs, young people are not alone in having difficulty accessing safety net programs. A significant body of research has documented the challenges people face in getting and keeping help with food, health insurance, child care, and other supports to meet their basic needs and stabilize their employment. The requirements of program policies and processes can be confusing and time intensive, leaving some eligible individuals and families without key supports. Inefficient, outdated technology can also add to the burden for people seeking support and is costly to state and local social services agencies.

Some states have taken steps to improve access to and retention of supports by improving administrative efficiency and reducing the burden on both the programs and the people accessing them. Strategies include updating technology, developing innovative business processes, and streamlining and integrating service delivery across multiple programs. Further, research finds that social service agencies and offices can help people access supports by using fast, efficient processes; offering a range of options for how to apply, including online; interacting with clients respectfully; and providing clear information on how to apply for and maintain supports.

When people are able to access the supports they need, research shows they have more stability in their lives, which also helps them in their roles as workers and parents. By recognizing and respecting the needs and experiences of clients of all ages, safety net programs can continue making program improvements that help people access the supports that make a positive difference in their lives.

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Empower and Support Young People in Decisionmaking

One recurring theme in the suggestions of the young people and staff members in youth-serving organizations we spoke with is the importance of taking steps to actively empower and engage with young people at multiple levels. Both groups had concrete suggestions on this front, many of which are relevant to the role of the navigators described above:

- **Focus on empowering young people when helping them access services.** The young people we spoke with felt that the best support they could receive in applying for benefits is service
providers teaching them how to navigate the processes and fill out applications, rather than doing it all for them.

» One young person told us, “We need someone to guide us so we can learn and grow at the same time. Instead of having a mentor that does everything for us, or just having to do things alone and blindly, we need to have guidance and be empowered to make decisions.”

» Staff members working with young people made a similar point, highlighting the importance of supporting young people in making decisions about their own lives by educating them on their options and giving them the final say on what to do. A staff member at a youth-serving organization gave the following example: “We spend a lot of time educating [young people] about their options. We talk [with them] about what could happen in the near term and the longer term, if they choose this option. [We] try to help them figure out all the things that they need to know [to make a choice], but the ultimate decision is theirs. We don’t [just ask them], ‘what do you want to do?’ without that counseling first.”

**Instead of having a mentor that does everything for us, or just having to do things alone and blindly, we need to have guidance and be empowered to make decisions.**
—Young person

- **Individuals working with young people should respect them.** Young people said that service providers and navigators working with young people should be empathic and genuinely care about their growth.

  » One young person said, “It doesn’t help for somebody to make you feel smaller or make you feel stupid or like you could have or should have done things differently...[I want to work with] somebody who could help and actually care about the person more than what led them to be in the situation that we’re in.”

  » Another young person said that they wanted adults to treat them with more respect: “Just because someone needs help doesn’t mean they should be treated like a child.”

- **Include young people in the decisionmaking process at the organizational and policy levels.** Young people and staff members told us that to change the safety net to better support young
people, young people need to be included in the decisionmaking process at the organizational and policy levels. Young people told us that the systems would work more effectively to meet their needs if adults would give them the opportunity to express their perspectives and needs and listen to them, rather than giving them what adults think they need.

This approach had tangible results at one of the youth-serving organizations in our study. A young person told us that this community organization held a weekly meeting during which young people “were asked about what struggles they were currently facing and what they would like to see the program do.” The organization had been using its allotted funds to give out food before starting these meetings, but by asking what the young people needed, staff members learned that most of them had worked out their food needs. However, although they had support in writing job applications and building their résumés, they could not get jobs because they lacked interview clothes. When the organization gave young people the power to make decisions about where organizational funds would go, they held an event giving out clothing appropriate for interviews. The young person we spoke to said that after wearing the clothes to interviews he had received three job offers.

- **Treat young people as collaborators with important perspectives.** Young people also talked about the importance of being seen as respected partners. Several described their vision of adults and young people who “can collaborate together in creating policy and designing services.” One young person pointed out that young people “don’t necessarily always want [adults] to just shift power [to us completely]. We want to share power.” Another young person agreed, saying, “There are different stakeholders that have valuable things to contribute…I still want, and I still need something from [adults]…If they do it with me, that gives me what I need to grow and build something great.”

However, many of the young people we spoke with had experiences in which this kind of respectful collaboration did not occur. One young person, for example, told us that they had the opportunity to address local legislators about the issues that unhoused young people were facing in their city. They told us that even though they told the representatives about all the issues that young people were facing, the legislators did not listen or care. No adult asked them questions, and there was no follow-up, help, or change. This story illustrated how, even when young people do advocate for themselves, the advocacy may be ineffective because adults may be unwilling to hear them.
There are different stakeholders that have valuable things to contribute...I still want, and I still need something from [adults]...If they do it with me, that gives me what I need to grow and build something great.
—Young person

Replace Punitive Approaches with Support and Minimized Burden

As noted above, safety net programs are often designed to be punitive and compliance oriented. Several young people suggested alternative approaches in our conversations. Their suggestions included the following:

- Address gaps in mental health services.
- Take a harm-reduction approach.
- Reorient benefit agencies to focus on customer service and client needs.

ADDRESS GAPS IN MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

The mental health needs of young people were a concern for both young people and staff members in the Data Walks. One young person told us, “People need mental health care before they even can function as an adult...[There needs to be] a system that addresses the actual needs of its population.” Some of the suggestions that young people and staff members made to address the mental health needs included the following:

- Organizations and agencies should approach the needs of young people holistically, including mental health; work to reduce harm; and provide mental health resources.
- Policymakers could assist benefit agencies and local organizations by providing more funding for mental health services. Funds are needed to open more free or low-cost mental health facilities to serve young people.

TAKE A HARM-REDUCTION APPROACH

One of the challenges noted in our Data Walks is that current safety net policies are punitive. For example, young people who develop substance use behaviors as a way to self-medicate to deal with the
mental health and trauma challenges they face can be penalized by losing all of their benefits and supports. Rather than helping, this punitive response can push them deeper into a spiral of crisis.

As an alternative, staff members from youth-serving organizations suggested taking a harm-reduction approach. A harm-reduction approach is a practical set of strategies and ideas that lessens the negative social and/or physical consequences associated with several human behaviors. The most common application of harm reduction is in addressing substance use.

- One staff member told us that “the harm-reduction approach lets [young people] know, ‘You can come as you are and be safe here’...[and] that they can show up as they are and not feel like they’re going to be judged or get in trouble.”
- Instead of strict punishment or removal of benefits, a staff member told us that agencies and local organizations can have systems of “mutual accountability and relationship building. There are other strategies for providing motivation and accountability and support than termination of benefits.”

**REORIENT BENEFIT AGENCIES TO FOCUS ON CUSTOMER SERVICE AND CLIENT NEEDS**

Young people and staff members suggested that safety net programs move away from punitive approaches and instead focus on providing holistic support and trusting young people to know what they need. Some states and localities are rethinking their service delivery of safety net supports to be more supportive of clients and focus on customer service and reducing client burden (box 2). Several young people suggested this strategy in our conversations.

- One young person told us that “it’s hard enough to ask for help, because there’s a stigma that if you receive the services you’re doing something wrong in your life or like you’re losing...So making the system a little bit easier to navigate and supportive of people will be such a stress reliever for people who are asking for the services, because it’s already hard enough to go to these places.”
- Another young person told us that the overall mindset of assistance “needs to be changed. Everybody needs help, and the purpose of society is for people to move forward as individuals and together. The whole model that we have right now is stuck on punishing...It needs to be more so how can we help everyone prosper until we’re all comfortable. And if that was a mindset everybody had, these things will just naturally fall into where they need to be.”
Make Fundamental Structural Changes to How We Support Young People

As noted at the beginning of this report, safety net programs play multiple roles in maintaining the inequities and structural racism that have limited access to opportunity for many people of color. Although many of the solutions identified above could make things better for young people within the current structures, the young people we spoke with and the staff members who worked with them also made the case that genuine support to help them thrive as they transition to adulthood will require fundamental structural changes to the way society and government care for young people. Specifically, both staff members and young people suggested considering strategies of guaranteeing basic income, expanding program eligibility, and eliminating work requirements.9

- One staff member commented, “How can we improve the current system to be operating as best as it can? It was a racist system from birth so it’s still going to be so flawed, so the solution is that we really need to meet actual need. In the benefit world, it would be something that resembles guaranteed basic income.”

- Another suggestion made by staff members and young people was the importance of “focusing on support that would make it so that youth don’t have to hit rock bottom or get to whatever point they have to get to become eligible for these programs.”

- Another staff member said that although removing work requirements was a necessary immediate improvement, “the actual benefit system needs replacing...Complementary to having guaranteed basic income or direct cash transfers, there needs to be no work requirement to have health care, to have cash, or to eat.”

- Another staff member said the programs need to eliminate “all the restrictions and strings attached and hoops you have to jump through to get benefits.”

- One young person described guaranteed income, though they did not mention the term, as a necessary benefit: “If you fall below a certain income level you receive a monthly check, no strings attached. No agency needs to administer it, kind of like the stimulus checks, but better because people should get it even if they didn’t file taxes.”

Conclusion

Our conversations with young people and the staff members who work with them provided important insights into the challenges young people face accessing key safety net supports, as well as their suggestions for solutions that build on their resilience, strength, and creativity. As our country seeks to
identify ways to address the inequities caused by structural racism, and as our economy seeks to recover from the pandemic, it is essential that we ensure the safety net supports that can stabilize young people as they transition to adulthood are accessible, equitable, effective, and build on young people’s unique strengths and capacities. Listening to and acting on the insights of young people is key to achieving that goal.
Notes


4 For privacy reasons, we did not ask participants to share their gender identities. Throughout this report, we use the singular “they” pronoun to avoid gender assumptions for participants. Gendered pronouns are only used in cases where a participant volunteered their identity.


8 These types of solutions have already been implemented for some programs and in some states and localities. For example, many places offer single applications for multiple programs. In addition, states may choose to implement broad-based categorical eligibility policies in which households may be eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program because they receive certain other benefits, and some groups of people are categorically eligible for Medicaid either by federal mandate or state option. See, for example, “Broad-Based Categorical Eligibility (BBCE),” US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, accessed November 9 2021, https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/broad-based-categorical-eligibility.

References


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