

A TABLE WE SHARE

OUR HOPES FOR 2035

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KEY TERMS

“Carolina Across 100” (CX100) is a 5-year pan-university effort to partner with communities in each of North Carolina’s 100 counties, charged by UNC Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz, coordinated by ncIMPACT Initiative, and led by the Carolina Engagement Council. The project is meant to embody UNC’s mission to “enhance the quality of life for all people in the State.” The project’s primary goals are to build and support cross-sector collaborations in communities and address challenges created or exacerbated by COVID-19.

“Our State, Our Work” (OSOW) is the first program of Carolina Across 100. It aims to connect Opportunity Youth to living-wage employment and educational opportunities. Opportunity Youth – Young people aged 16-24 who are not working or in school. Sometimes referred to as “disconnected youth.”

Community collaboratives – the community teams that applied to OSOW and participated in an 18-month capacity-building program.

Educational attainment – Refers to the highest level of education an individual has completed.

Mental health – Relates to a state of mental well-being that allows people to cope with the stresses of life, learn and work well, and contribute to their surrounding community.

Well-being – the state of being healthy, happy, and comfortable.

Living wage – The minimum income necessary for workers to meet their basic needs.



The Carolina Across 100 “Our State, Our Work” teams set an ambitious goal of reaching 6,400 Opportunity Youth by 2025. What will the state look like if this goal is met in 10 years? How will this reconnection to school and work affect not only Opportunity Youth but also their families and communities? What will be the state-wide impacts of sustained progress due to the hard work of teams using the collective impact process?

Background

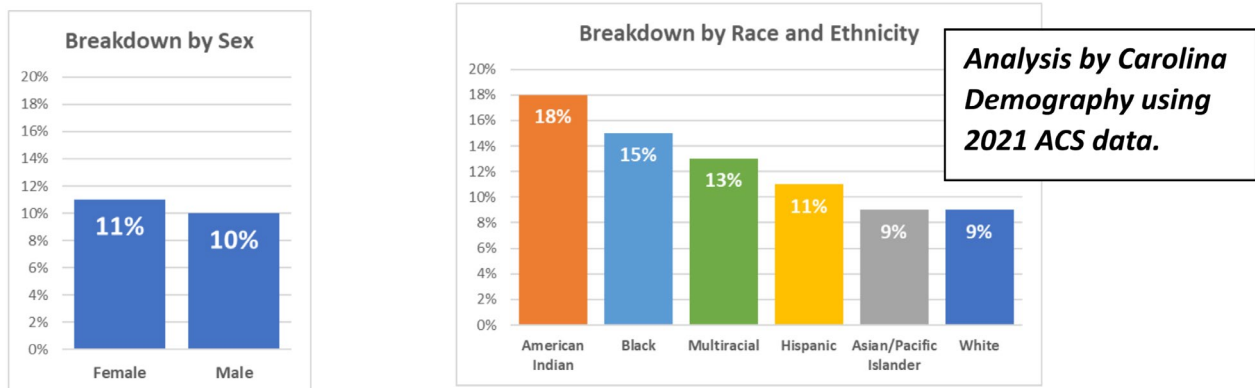
Who are “Opportunity Youth?” 16–24-year-olds who are not in school and are also not working. These individuals are also sometimes referred to as “disconnected youth.” They are more likely than their peers to be in poverty, disabled, married, and/or have children, living apart from both parents, living in institutionalized group quarters, homeless, and/or uninsured. They are more likely to face difficulties meeting their basic needs, such as food, housing, and healthcare. Many Opportunity Youth also struggle with a lack of access to reliable internet, safe and affordable transportation, and high-quality, affordable childcare. For these reasons and others, these young people are unable to remain in school and/or employed.

“Our State, Our Work” (OSOW) was chosen as the first program of “Carolina Across 100” to prioritize the North Carolina Opportunity Youth population. This age group faced a dual challenge during the pandemic: employment and educational disruption.

1. National data revealed that the unemployment rate for individuals aged 16 to 24 surged to 24.4%, as they were more likely to hold jobs in the service industry that faced immediate closure ([source](#)).
2. Additionally, the shift to online learning posed significant challenges, especially for those lacking essential technological tools and emotional support ([source](#)).

By focusing on Opportunity Youth, OSOW aims to support local, cross-sector collaboratives across the state working to mitigate the barriers and challenges that Opportunity Youth are disproportionately likely to face as they age if they remain disconnected from school and work. These challenges include chronic unemployment, poverty, mental health disorders, criminal behaviors, incarceration, poor health, and early mortality ([source](#)).

In 2023, there were 141,823 Opportunity Youth in North Carolina. This means that roughly 11% of 16-24-year-olds were neither in school nor working (a 1% decrease from 2019-2022). However, this disconnection was not experienced equally.



Working to reconnect North Carolina Opportunity Youth to work and school is a matter of equity. Because youth in minoritized racial and ethnic groups in North Carolina do not experience systemic barriers equally, unequal rates of disconnection from school and work result.

Statewide, a goal of 9% by 2030 has been set to bring North Carolina’s Opportunity Youth rate equal to that of Virginia, the southern state with the lowest rate of youth disconnection ([source](#)). OSOW community teams achieving their goal of reaching 6,400 Opportunity Youth by 2025 promises positive impacts not only for these young people but also for their families and communities, contributing to the goal of a thriving state in terms of health, economics, and resident well-being.

The Purpose of This Report

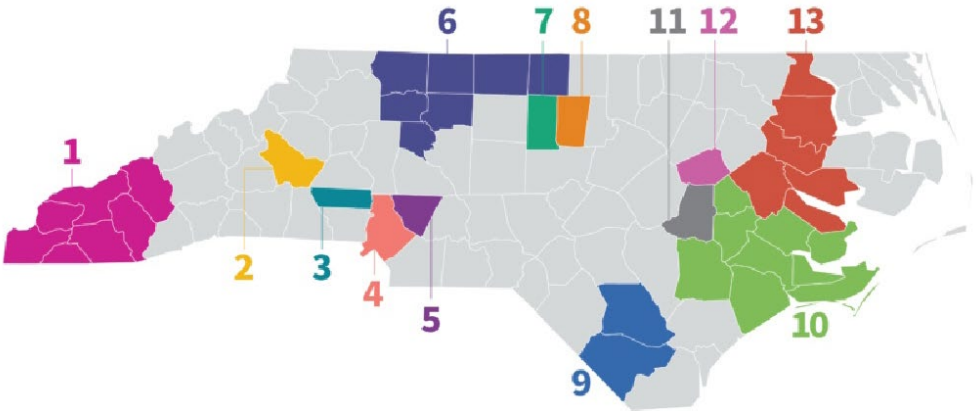
Demonstrate the importance of re-engaging Opportunity Youth in work and school – this population is important for the overall health and economy of the state. It is important to re-engage this population not just for Opportunity Youth but for all of us.

Celebrate the work of the OSOW cohort – in no small part, this report is a celebration of the accomplishments of the 13 teams that engaged in concentrated, deep work for 18 months with nclIMPACT. Through their participation, we have learned so much about the roles of various sectors in this work, the systemic barriers that must be addressed for youth to thrive, and how to best include, empower, reach, and re-engage Opportunity Youth.

Multiply the positive community outcomes – We encourage you to share these materials. If this work excites you and these outcomes inspire you, please talk to your local leaders about adopting programming that will work to connect with and re-engage Opportunity Youth.

The Teams

The 13 community collaboratives from across North Carolina were diverse in their geography, demography of their region, leadership, and previous work and programming.



Across the teams, there was a shared commitment to cross-sector collaboration. We know that representatives from across the business, non-profit, and education sectors must work together to address the systemic barriers facing young people. However, throughout this project, we have also found fruitful partnerships in many other places, including the hospitality sector, healthcare, and the arts – all of which offer opportunities for young people to gain employment, develop professionally, and achieve their goals.



Brandi Bragg
Team 13



“Young people need to know that there are people across the state who want to help them realize their goals.”

Expected Impact

We know that the benefits of reconnecting to school and work extend far beyond earning a paycheck or credential.

Better Health and Overall Wellness

Education is a powerful determinant of health, bridging the gap to better health outcomes and overall wellness. The health gap between highly educated and less educated individuals has been widening. Even a high school education yields substantial health benefits, with each additional year of schooling enhancing well-being ([source](#)). The reasons are varied. Education influences cognitive and noncognitive skills, impacting health behaviors and health care utilization, and also fosters broader social support networks, positively affecting overall health ([source](#)).

Lower education attainment levels can lead to increased exposure to stressors, contributing to chronic stress and other negative health consequences ([source](#)). On the other hand, individuals with high levels of education can address their healthcare needs more promptly, reducing the risk of delaying essential services ([source](#)). Further, 16-18-year-old youth who were disconnected from school and work for as little as six months are three times as likely as their connected peers to develop mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety ([source](#)).

Better Mental Health Outcomes

The disparities between Opportunity Youth and their peers are stark in both physical and mental health. Connecting young people to employment can significantly improve their mental health. Unemployment increases the risk of being uninsured, housing insecure, and food insecure ([source](#)). Job insecurity and under-employment can harm mental health, leading to depressive symptoms, anxiety, and the use of psychotropic medications; unpredictable work hours exacerbate these risks ([source](#)). Full-time workers experience lower rates of depression compared to part-time workers and those who are unemployed ([source](#)) ([source](#)). Full-time workers also report less distress, more social support, and healthier coping strategies ([source](#)). When young people have higher expectations for themselves, they tend to experience better mental health in their early adulthood ([source](#)). This positive effect is seen in individuals across different economic backgrounds, highlighting the universal benefits of supporting Opportunity Youth in achieving their goals and finding meaningful work ([source](#)).

Better Employment and Projected Wealth Levels

Educational attainment is strongly related to income and wealth. Those with more educational attainment tend to earn more money and make smarter financial decisions, as financial education teaches youth to avoid costly decisions and high-interest loans ([source](#)). Research shows that students who get a financial education make better financial choices; therefore, connecting Opportunity Youth to education boosts their job prospects and future wealth ([source](#)).

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found that in 2022, people with a high school diploma earned over 25% more per week than those without one ([source](#)). The median weekly earnings for someone with less than a high school diploma was \$682, while those with a high school diploma earned \$853 weekly ([source](#)). The more education Opportunity Youth have, the risk of unemployment will be significantly lowered, as those who drop out of high school face two to three times higher unemployment rates than degree holders ([source](#)).



As a thought exercise: In 2022, there were over 13,000 Opportunity Youth in Mecklenburg County. The county's homeownership rate in 2022 was 56.4% ([source](#)). There are a plethora of factors other than employment that affect homeownership rates. However, how might increased youth connection to school and work affect the county's average earnings, increase homeownership, and stability for Opportunity Youth and their families, leading to a positive feedback loop of personal and community growth and development?

Molly
Age 22



"I have no idea where I would be without the program. They have been a true blessing to me; this program motivates me to both do and be my best self. They have helped to transform my life. I don't think I could be where I am today had it not been for this program walking alongside me."

Orange County Participant
Age 18

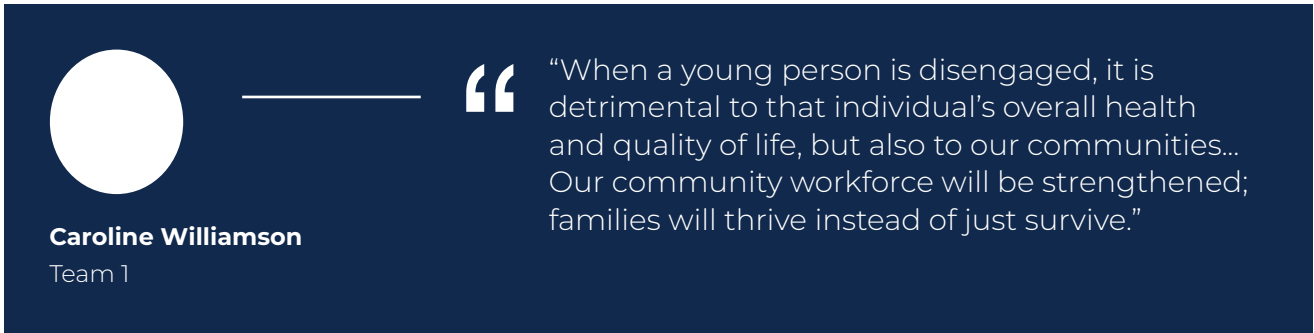


"Young people aren't always 100% sure about what they want to do for their future or career... start by giving them different options so that they are more open to those options and can choose from them. Maybe some of these options can change their future."

Family and Community Impact

By Opportunity Youth re-connecting to school and work, they increase their earning potential. This positively impacts not only the youth themselves but also:

The Families They May Raise



A dark blue rectangular box containing a white circular profile picture placeholder on the left. To the right of the circle is a white horizontal line and a white double quote icon. Further right is a white quote in a serif font. Below the circle, the name 'Caroline Williamson' and 'Team 1' are written in white sans-serif font.

Caroline Williamson
Team 1

“When a young person is disengaged, it is detrimental to that individual’s overall health and quality of life, but also to our communities... Our community workforce will be strengthened; families will thrive instead of just survive.”

Connecting Opportunity Youth to education and employment has long-term benefits for them and the families they may one day raise.

Young people remaining disconnected from school and work negatively impacts their ability to provide stable housing for their children ([source](#)). Children who have experienced homelessness often encounter difficulties in school, including classroom behavior and engagement issues, even when their academic performance is on par with their peers, and these children are more likely to face social engagement problems ([source](#)). Unpredictable work schedules, especially for low-wage single mothers in the service sector, negatively affect their work-life balance and can create challenges in arranging childcare ([source](#)). This work-life conflict is particularly challenging for single mothers, with Black and Hispanic mothers being disproportionately affected, potentially exacerbating existing racial inequalities ([source](#)).

By supporting Opportunity Youth in their education and employment endeavors, they can be better equipped to build stronger, more stable family foundations for the future.

Speaking to the impact of breaking out of generational cycles of poverty, OSOW team members shared:



A dark blue rounded square containing the name 'Lora McLott' and 'Team 2' in white sans-serif font.

Lora McLott,
Team 2

“I hope it will reduce generational poverty and increase the educational levels as well as the median earnings in Burke County.”



A dark blue rounded square containing the name 'Taylor Dodge' and 'Team 1' in white sans-serif font.

Taylor Dodge,
Team 1

“Furthermore, it has also been shown that children are more likely to meet or exceed the attainment of their parents, so creating opportunities for young people today will have a ripple effect for future generations and thereby disrupt potentially harmful cycles such as poverty,



A dark blue rounded square containing the name 'Lavonia Lewis' and 'Team 9' in white sans-serif font.

Lavonia Lewis,
Team 9

“The program will allow minority and disenfranchised youth to generate wealth for the 1st time and be able to provide for their families.”



A dark blue rounded square containing the name 'Bettina Akukwe' and 'Team 11' in white sans-serif font.

Bettina Akukwe,
Team 11

“In our various jobs, we have seen firsthand how receiving education and ultimately gaining meaningful employment can change the lives of our college students and whole families. Our Opportunity Youth will be able to support family members as well as themselves, and they will be role models to others.”

Their Communities

Opportunity Youths' communities will also benefit from their connection to education and employment opportunities. When the human capital of a community increases, it tends to lead to economic growth for that community ([source](#)). Likewise, when communities actively work to reduce barriers to job access, such as by increasing the number of educated residents and fighting against discrimination, they also tend to experience economic growth ([source](#)). Young people who are disconnected from school and work are also more likely to be recipients of Medicaid and public support programs ([source](#)). So, supporting youth in their education and employment journeys isn't just an investment in their future; it's an investment in the economic future of their communities as well.

Economic Impact

**Laurie
Weston,
Team 13**

"Employers have more and better-trained employees who are participating in the economy of the region, paying taxes, buying goods and services, and connecting with the community."

**Lora
Melott,
Team 2**

"[This program will] reduce poverty and thus reduce the load on local services provided by the county."

**Brandi
Bragg,
Team 13**

"Many youth, at least in our region, have little hope that they will be able to obtain sustainable employment in their own communities. Reaching the goal will reverse brain drain effects in local areas."

Community Investment

**Amy
Shuping,
Team 2**

"If we don't address the needs today, we may lose valuable members of those who will be in our future workforce."

**Bettina
Akukwe,
Team 7**

"First of all, our youth are our future. They will be the ones who will be in the workforce the longest and keep the economy going. We need to offer them a perspective of equal opportunities and hope to ensure they can participate for as long as possible. This should be part of our 'inter-generational contract.'"

**Dianne
LeBlanc,
Team 10**

"Those in this demographic represent North Carolina's future of our population and workforce. It is our obligation and responsibility to pour into their young lives to empower them so that that they are ready and willing to lead this great state into our future."

Replicating the OSOW Program and Suggestions for Future Work

Communities or organizations interested in replicating the OSOW program to reach their community's Opportunity Youth should consider the following:

Utilize the nclIMPACT Toolkit:

- nclIMPACT has recently released the first two chapters of a toolkit that takes communities through the early process of forming and strengthening cross-sector collaborative groups.
- If the findings of this report, the experience of OSOW team members, and the testimonies of young people inspire and motivate you to take action in your own community, this resource will guide you through the work of organizing locally, allowing you to have an impact more quickly.

Collect data directly from Opportunity Youth:

- Use surveys and focus group discussions with OY to gather their insights, feedback, and experiences regarding the program's effectiveness. Allow OY to express their needs, challenges, and suggestions for improvement.
- Capture youth's stories and experiences can provide valuable qualitative data on the program's impact on their lives.
- Allow OY to provide ongoing feedback on the services and support they receive. This real-time feedback can guide program adjustments. Important measures include feelings of safety, mental health status, access to mental health treatment, educational progress, employment status, and community engagement.

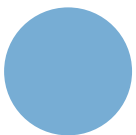
OSOW team members have said for themselves that this work has and will continue to make a difference locally:



Bettina Akukwe
Team 7



“With this initiative growing, we will have a better chance of reaching more Opportunity Youth. Our hope is that they will feel heard and seen. If you feel noticed and important, then you are more likely to participate and believe in the mission yourself.”



Lora Melott
Team 2



“Everyone deserves a chance to succeed and feel their own personal worth to increase their confidence and self-esteem.”

Advice from OSOW Teams:

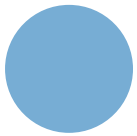


Heather Gray

Team 11



“Find organizations that are currently connecting with young people who have been impacted, [form] important networks.”



Dianne LeBlanc

Team 10



“Just do it!”

Role of Community-Based Organizations

Despite systemic barriers and interconnected challenges leading to youth disconnection, the work of local, community-based organizations is vital to their reconnection to school and work. Due to their knowledge of, and connection to, the community and individuals, these organizations are often best positioned to meaningfully connect with young people and build trusting relationships. These relationships are necessary to effectively communicate with young people about their goals, barriers, and needs, connecting them with the appropriate services and groups to support their re-engagement with school and work.

Role of Workforce Development Institutions

Workforce development institutions play a crucial role in ensuring the success of Opportunity Youth in their educational endeavors. They must address barriers to accessing services, offering wrap-around support to young adults in foster care and the juvenile justice systems ([source](#)). Community colleges can be vital for homeless youth seeking higher education, but barriers must be tackled. To improve outcomes for Opportunity Youth, including those facing homelessness, institutions must focus on building support networks and fostering positive school environments ([source](#)). Comprehensive interventions are essential to address the challenges and meet the educational needs of Opportunity Youth, ensuring they have a fair chance to succeed.

Role of Educational Institutions

To re-engage young people in their educational and professional journeys, the partnership of educational institutions is essential. These institutions must expand their focus beyond only students actively engaged in their classrooms to those who have left school. The longer young people remain disconnected from school, the more difficult it is for them to re-engage, with high school completion rates for formerly disconnected youth declining each year they remain out of school ([source](#)). Therefore, school-community partnerships are vital to identify young people who have disconnected from school, assess barriers that stand in the way of their educational goals, and support completion of their degrees.

Role of Employers

Employers are an essential part of the efforts to reduce the number and rate of Opportunity Youth in North Carolina. By understanding the challenges this population faces to stay connected to work and responding appropriately, employers can meet their needs of filling job openings and provide a chance for these young people to achieve their personal and professional goals. In partnership with NCGrowth, nclIMPACT conducted focus groups with employers, young people, and service providers across the state in each of the eight prosperity zones. During these focus groups, young people seeking work made it clear that in addition to “typical” benefits, they are seeking job opportunities that support their growth as an employee and individual, workplaces where they feel respected, and employers who are understanding, inclusive, and allow for flexibility ([source](#)). Employers can attract workers and meet their workforce needs by being responsive to the needs of Opportunity Youth seeking work.

Role of Government

The work of community-based organizations to identify and build relationships with young people, workforce development institutions to provide wrap-around services, educational institutions to re-engage young people, and employers to respond to the needs of Opportunity Youth all create a supportive system of engagement for young people. However, where inefficiencies and barriers to these groups effectively carrying out these activities exist, local governments can support them by providing institutional support. By creating effective local policies that allow for increased coordination between these groups, government organizations can support efforts to re-engage Opportunity Youth across the state.

No Matter Your Sector, Your Commitment Is Vital

The re-engagement of North Carolina Opportunity Youth stands to benefit us all. It will also take the work and dedication of us all. No matter the sector, all North Carolinians can play a role in creating sustainable pathways to re-engagement.

At the beginning of this project, we asked teams to capture the story of a young adult at high risk of becoming an Opportunity Youth. Across all OSOW teams that participated, young adults who had overcome barriers to achieving their personal and professional goals expressed that a mentor, teacher, or other advocate was crucial to their success. These individuals provided irreplaceable encouragement and personal connections to the youth and helped them navigate education, the workplace, and other systems. We can increase the number of success stories like these if you join us in becoming a navigator and advocate for young adults in your own community. These young people cannot be left behind any longer – we hope you will join us in this work.