

# IN “ THEIR OWN WORDS”

*Young People Describe  
the Impact of COVID-19*

Published Fall 2020

The **Road Map Project** is a collective impact initiative that began in 2010 to improve student achievement from cradle through college in seven King County, Washington school districts: Auburn, Federal Way, Highline, Kent, Renton, (South) Seattle, and Tukwila. Through multisector and community collaboration, we aim to increase equitable policies and practices in education systems to eliminate the opportunity and achievement gaps and for 70 percent of our students to earn a college degree or career credential by 2030.

## ABOUT THE PARTNERS



**Reconnect to Opportunity** is a team of young adult peer connectors within the King County Department of Community and Human Services that link young people ages 16 to 24 with education, employment, and post-secondary training opportunities in King County, WA. Reconnect to Opportunity provided young leaders and analytic support to this project.

[reopp.org](http://reopp.org)    [f @re2opp](https://www.facebook.com/re2opp)    [@reopp](https://www.instagram.com/reopp)



**Soar** elevates community voice by ensuring King County children, youth, and families are actively engaged in policies and decisions that impact their lives. Soar helped recruit and support young leaders to participate in this project.

[soarkc.org](http://soarkc.org)    [f @SoarKingCounty](https://www.facebook.com/SoarKingCounty)



The **Community Center for Education Results** was created to mobilize and staff the Road Map Project. CCER provides data, research, communications, programs, logistical and other support in service to the project.

[roadmapproject.org/about-ccer](http://roadmapproject.org/about-ccer)    [f @RoadMapProject](https://www.facebook.com/RoadMapProject)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This survey was designed *for* and *by* youth. It focused on questions young people wanted to ask their peers. Thank you to the following young leaders from Soar and Reconnect to Opportunity who helped lead this project:

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*In their Own Words: Young People Describe the Impact of COVID-19. Seattle, WA: Community Center for Education Results.*

As our region and nation began experiencing COVID-19, young people's voices were missing from local education discussions. In particular, the voices of opportunity youth, or young people whose connections to school and work were weak prior to the pandemic, and other marginalized youth were often missing as districts and other entities began reaching out to families.

In May 2020, three Road Map Project partners, Community Center for Education Results, King County's Reconnect to Opportunity team and Soar collaborated with 22 young people from South King County to develop and distribute the Opportunity Youth Impacts of COVID-19 Survey. The goal of the project was to document the lived experiences, needs and strengths of opportunity youth during the pandemic so that those working to respond, support and rebuild are doing so with direct input from young people.

The survey was designed for and by youth. Youth developed the questions, helped analyze the data, and are now working to respond to the results. The survey focused on questions youth wanted to ask their peers. And in response, in their words, the 215 young people who responded remind us of the interconnectedness of health, education and employment; call for integrated services over siloed approaches; and share their visions for how school can be different in the future. Transitioning to adulthood in a time of crisis, our youth are resilient and forward thinking.

More than anything, young people want us to focus on **solutions**. That is why this report leads with recommendations for what programs and schools can do to be responsive to what youth are saying. After the recommendations, the report explores **six themes** that emerged from the survey responses, focused on key areas of need and resilience. Where possible, we connect those themes back to these recommendations.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS SHOULD:

- 1 Remember that communities of color are disproportionately impacted by two pandemics: COVID-19 and systemic racism, and that racial trauma and anti-Blackness are real.
- 2 Prioritize financial security and basic needs so youth and families can navigate the economic impacts of the pandemic.
- 3 Prioritize public health and safety to slow the spread of the virus and ensure that learning environments protect youth and staff health and safety.
- 4 Create opportunities for young people to contribute their expertise and skills and be actively involved in pandemic response, at the program, school, college, district and community levels.
- 5 Connect youth and their families to accessible mental health resources, supports and services and actively work to undo the stigma surrounding mental health.
- 6 Make virtual spaces and tools available and accessible for youth to connect with one another about their experiences, ideas, stories, coping strategies and more.
- 7 Use social media to engage with young people, disseminate physical and mental health information, and provide relevant resources & support.
- 8 Prioritize deepening connections and trust among staff and youth, as relationships and social and emotional wellbeing are key to learning.
- 9 Learn from experimentation with remote schooling to build increased flexibility and individualized support into the education system during and beyond this public health crisis.
- 10 Find ways to acknowledge important milestones and future aspirations while prioritizing health and safety. Validate new learning happening in areas like resilience, creativity, reflection, organization and technology.

# THEME ONE

## COVID-19 IMPACTS ALL AREAS OF LIFE

COVID-19 is affecting the lives of young people in many different ways, with the most negative impacts around employment, education, relationships and mental health.

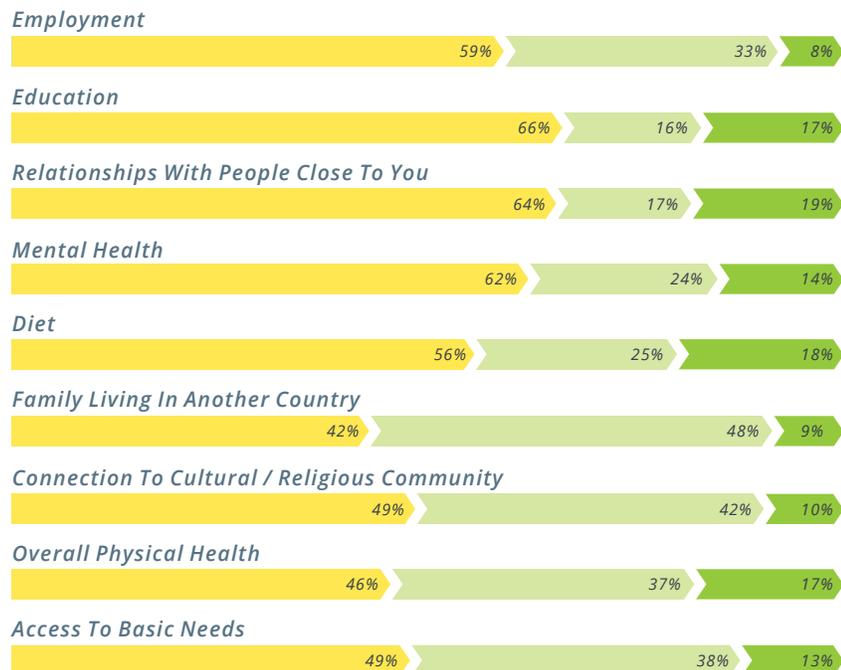
“ I’M LOOKING FORWARD TO HUMAN INTERACTION, TO SEEING MY FRIENDS AND GOING OUTSIDE...”

A unique aspect of the COVID-19 crisis is how holistic its effects are and how many different aspects of daily life have been altered. Many youth reported detrimental effects of the pandemic, especially the areas of employment, education and mental health, but also several other areas such as diet and physical health.

Youth did point to some silver linings, and many shared their hopes for what schools could do differently post pandemic to more holistically support students.

### How has COVID-19 affected these aspects of your life?

- Negatively
- Neutral (no effect)
- Positively



Source: 2020 Opportunity Youth Impacts of COVID-19 Survey (N = 215)



**LOSS OF ALMOST ALL RELATIONSHIPS AND CONNECTION...HAS AFFECTED MY GOAL TO IMPROVE MY MENTAL HEALTH**

...THAT ALONG WITH A LACK OF PHYSICAL INTERACTION IN THE CLASSROOM HAS LED ME TO SEVERELY PROCRASTINATE."



FINANCIAL STABILITY HAS BEEN AN ISSUE AT HOME.

**SO I HAD TO CHANGE MY FUTURE PLANS FOR COLLEGE."**



I WISH THAT I HAD A TUTOR TO HELP ME WITH MY SCHOOLWORK BECAUSE

**IT'S HARDER TO LEARN USING DISTANCE LEARNING AND THE TOOLS ARE VERY LIMITED."**

## **RELATED RECOMMENDATIONS** for addressing Theme One

- 1** Remember that communities of color are disproportionately impacted by two pandemics: COVID-19 and systemic racism, and that racial trauma and anti-Blackness are real.
- 2** Prioritize financial security and basic needs so youth and families can navigate the economic impacts of the pandemic.
- 4** Create opportunities for young people to contribute their expertise and skills and be actively involved in pandemic response, at the program, school, college, district and community levels.
- 5** Connect youth and their families to accessible mental health resources, supports and services and actively work to undo the stigma surrounding mental health.

# THEME TWO

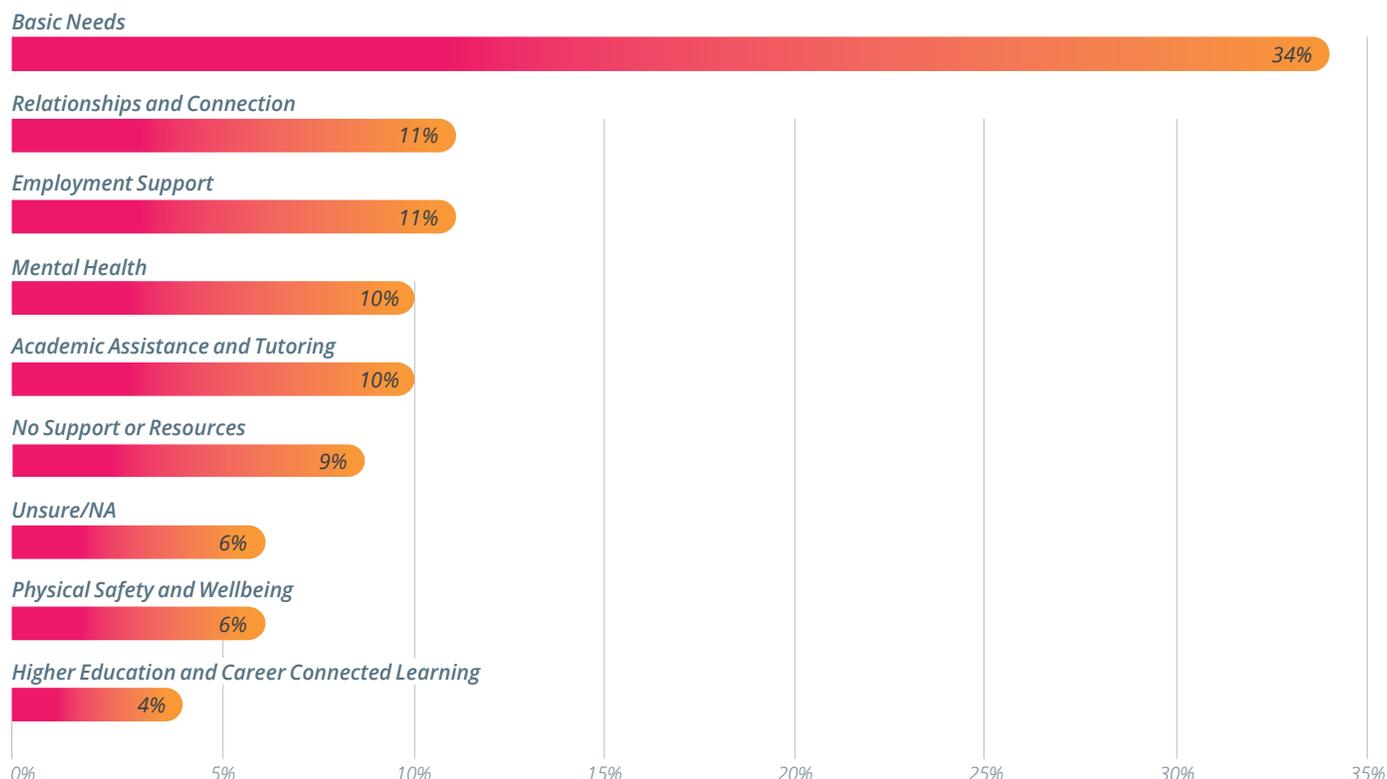
## MANY STRUGGLE TO MEET BASIC NEEDS

*Youth and families are experiencing acute financial hardship and many struggle to meet basic needs.*

We learned that nearly half (48%) of youth reported that the pandemic had **negatively affected** their access to basic needs, and when asked what resources or support they **needed**, responses underscored the life or death nature of this crisis for many families. Top resource needs identified included help with bills, housing security, food, transportation, wifi access and employment support.

Youth are very aware of the toll the virus is taking on their communities and they want to contribute and help their families manage the financial hardship. They also spoke to the long-term impacts of current financial insecurity on their education and career goals.

### What resources or support do you wish you had right now?



Source: 2020 Opportunity Youth Impacts of COVID-19 Survey (N = 215)



MY DAD GOT LAID OFF BECAUSE HE COULDN'T GO TO WORK BECAUSE I WAS SICK AND IN THE HOSPITAL...AND NOW UNEMPLOYMENT IS TAKING FOREVER TO PAY US...

**WE DON'T EVEN KNOW HOW WE'RE GOING TO HAVE MEALS FOR THE REST OF THE MONTH."**



I WISH I HAD TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS SO THAT I COULD

**GET A JOB TO SUPPORT MY FAMILY A BIT AT LEAST."**



**...BECAUSE I HAVE BEEN UNEMPLOYED DURING THE PANDEMIC, I MAY NOT BE ABLE TO GO TO SCHOOL.**

I USED UP MY SAVINGS AND NOW I DON'T HAVE ANYTHING TO RELY ON."

## **RELATED RECOMMENDATIONS** for addressing Theme Two

- 1** Remember that communities of color are disproportionately impacted by two pandemics: COVID-19 and systemic racism, and that racial trauma and anti-Blackness are real.
- 2** Prioritize financial security and basic needs so youth and families can navigate the economic impacts of the pandemic.
- 4** Create opportunities for young people to contribute their expertise and skills and be actively involved in pandemic response, at the program, school, college, district and community levels.

# THEME THREE

## CENTERING STUDENT AND STAFF RELATIONSHIPS

*Strong, supportive and sustained relationships between staff and students are key to learning — especially remote learning.*



### MORE FOCUS ON INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING WOULD BE NICE.

I THINK THE PANDEMIC HAS BROUGHT TO LIGHT HOW MUCH OF SCHOOL IS WASTED FOR THE AMOUNT OF LEARNING DONE."

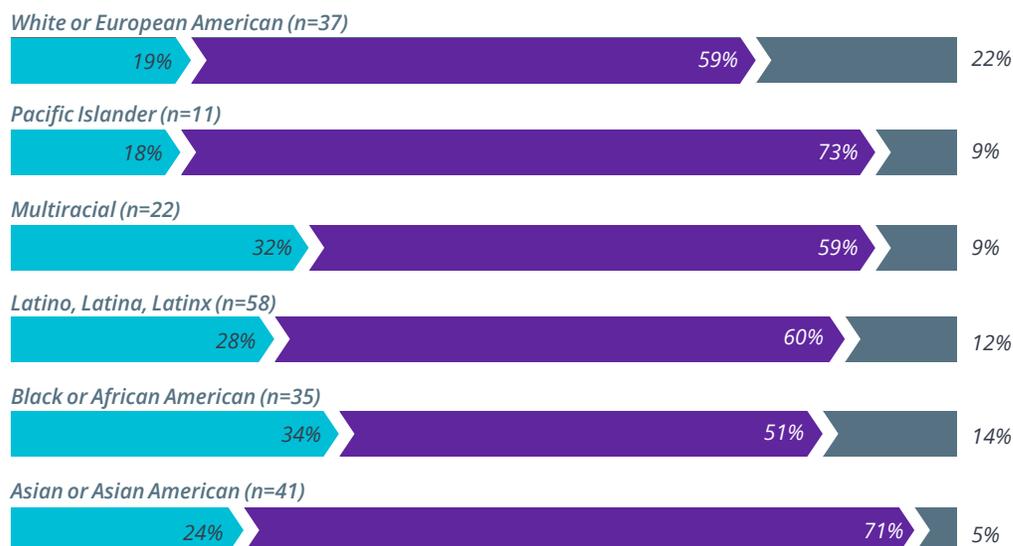
Two-thirds of young people surveyed said COVID-19 had negatively affected their education. For youth who were in school, the majority reported that staff in their schools were supportive during the pandemic, however many felt that remote learning was not useful. This varied by race, with Black students finding remote learning least useful. It also varied by school type, with youth in traditional high schools finding remote learning least useful, compared with those in reengagement or alternative schools or colleges. As would be expected, young people who said staff in their schools were supportive found remote learning more useful than their peers who had less supportive school staff.

In terms of their aspirations, youth desire schooling that is built on deeper connection and understanding, including online learning opportunities that are engaging and more relational. Flexibility and the opportunity to access individualized academic support matter a lot to young people. Youth also spoke to familiar themes from prior studies, pointing to the need for more staff of color and more relevant curriculum.

**If you have been participating in online learning during the pandemic, how useful has that experience been?**

By Race/Ethnicity

- Not useful
- Useful
- N/A—I am not participating in online learning



Results for Native American, Alaska Native or Indigenous were suppressed to protect student privacy (N<10)  
Source: 2020 Opportunity Youth Impacts of COVID-19 Survey (N = 215)



"I DON'T FEEL LIKE THE SCHOOLS ARE CONSIDERING OUR PERSONAL WELL-BEING SOMETIMES.

**I HOPE THAT IN THE FUTURE, SCHOOLS ARE MORE FLEXIBLE AND EMPATHIC OF A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE..."**



**...THE SOCIAL INTERACTION WITH TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IS VERY IMPORTANT**

...STUDENTS AND TEACHERS NEED THE SOCIAL CONNECTION, FACE-TO-FACE AND INTERACTION. IT'S PART OF BEING A HUMAN BEING!! SOCIALIZE!!"



**I HOPE TO SEE MORE DIVERSITY. MORE TEACHERS OF COLOR THAT REFUGEE/ IMMIGRANT STUDENTS CAN RELATE TO."**

## **RELATED RECOMMENDATIONS** for addressing Theme Three

- 1** Remember that communities of color are disproportionately impacted by two pandemics: COVID-19 and systemic racism, and that racial trauma and anti-Blackness are real.
- 4** Create opportunities for young people to contribute their expertise and skills and be actively involved in pandemic response, at the program, school, college, district and community levels.
- 8** Prioritize deepening connections and trust among staff and youth, as relationships and social and emotional wellbeing are key to learning.
- 9** Learn from experimentation with remote schooling to build increased flexibility and individualized support into the education system during and beyond this public health crisis.

# THEME FOUR

## MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS ARE VITAL

*Our schools lack integrated mental health supports, an essential component of learning, especially now.*

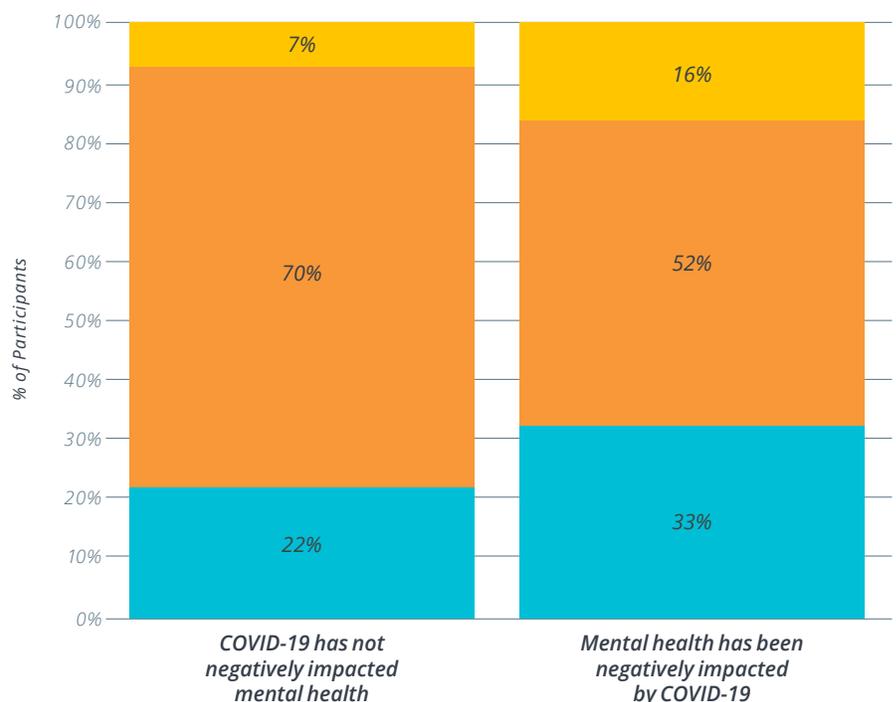
Youth are experiencing stress, anxiety, uncertainty and isolation. They are resourceful in finding ways to connect with friends and social groups, but also need access to formal mental health services to cope with the complexities of this time. In terms of managing their own stress, young people are trying to be proactive. Their top strategies include watching tv/streaming, connecting with friends, playing video games, physical exercise and learning new things.

Young people's wellbeing is directly related to their ability to benefit from education. Young people who report that their mental health has been negatively impacted by COVID-19 (62%) found online learning less useful than those who did not report negative mental health impacts.

***If you have been participating in online learning during the pandemic, how useful has that experience been?***

*By Mental Health Impact*

- N/A-I am not participating in online learning
- Online Useful
- Online Not Useful



Source: 2020 Opportunity Youth Impacts of COVID-19 Survey (N = 215)



...SOME ADULTS MIGHT THINK THAT 'WE HAVE NOTHING ELSE TO DO' ALL DAY BUT **THIS PANDEMIC IS TAKING A SERIOUS TOLL ON OUR MENTAL HEALTH.** I CAN COMPLETE THE SCHOOL WORK FINE, BUT I DON'T FEEL LIKE THE SCHOOLS ARE CONSIDERING OUR PERSONAL WELL-BEINGS SOMETIMES."



I WISH I HAD SCHOOL RIGHT NOW AND THE BENEFIT OF HUMAN INTERACTION.

**SCHOOL IS A SAFE SPACE FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE AND NOW WE DON'T GET THAT OPPORTUNITY TO GET AWAY EVERYDAY.**

I MISS HAVING PEOPLE TO TALK TO AND SUPPORT FROM PEERS IF NEEDED."



**I WISH I HAD SUPPORT WITH MY MENTAL HEALTH.**

MY FAMILY DOESN'T BELIEVE IN THAT, AND I CAN'T TALK TO MY FRIENDS ABOUT IT BECAUSE THEY ARE DEALING WITH THEIR OWN PROBLEMS.

## RELATED RECOMMENDATIONS *for addressing Theme Four*

- 1** Remember that communities of color are disproportionately impacted by two pandemics: COVID-19 and systemic racism, and that racial trauma and anti-Blackness are real.
- 4** Create opportunities for young people to contribute their expertise and skills and be actively involved in pandemic response, at the program, school, college, district and community levels.
- 5** Connect youth and their families to accessible mental health resources, supports and services and actively work to undo the stigma surrounding mental health.
- 6** Make virtual spaces and tools available and accessible for youth to connect with one another about their experiences, ideas, stories, coping strategies and more.
- 7** Use social media to engage with young people, disseminate physical and mental health information, and provide relevant resources & support.

# THEME FIVE

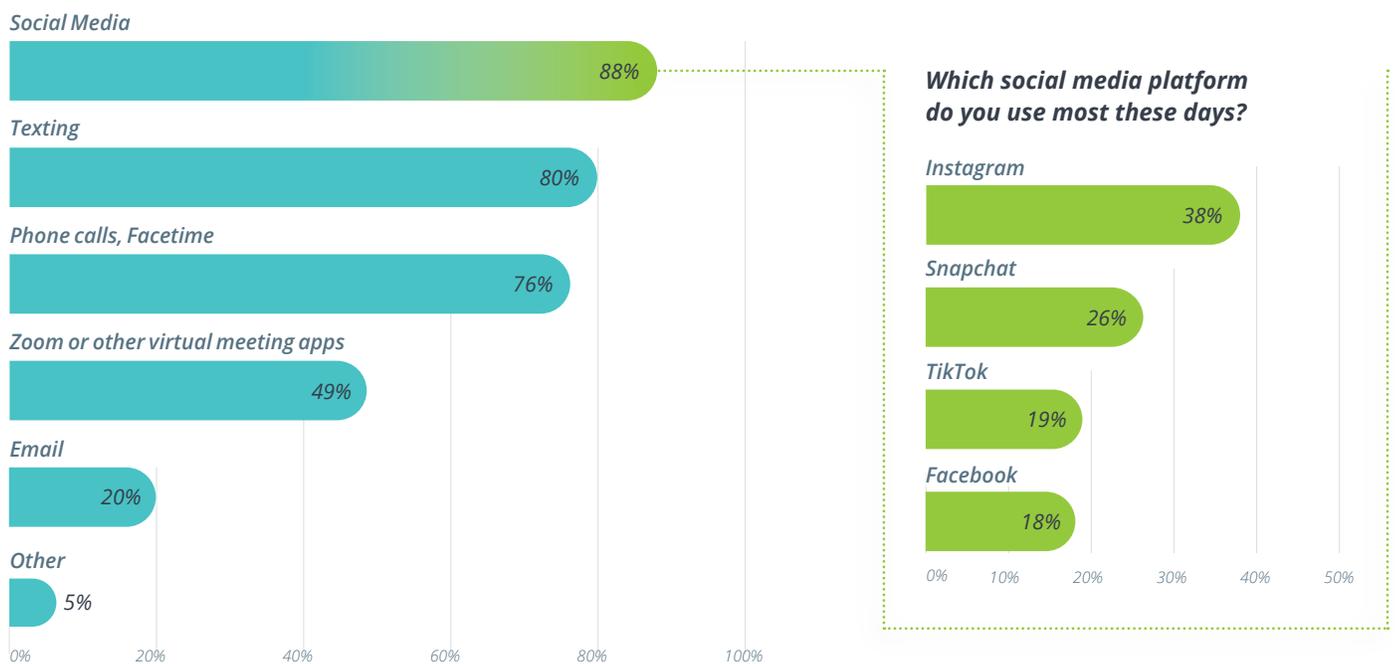
## FINDING CREATIVE WAYS TO CONNECT

*This is a time of deep social disconnection for young people, though they are creative about finding ways to engage.*

Young people overwhelmingly feel disconnected from their peers as a result of the need to physically distance during the pandemic. Nearly all youth, including those who did not report negative impacts on their mental health, say they feel isolated, miss their friends and desire more opportunities to connect. When asked what they most want to do when the pandemic lets up, the vast majority of young people said their top priority was spending time with friends and families.

To stay connected with their peers, young people are active on social media, texting and calls, with Instagram and Snapchat being their go-to social media platforms.

### How are you staying connected?



Source: 2020 Opportunity Youth Impacts of COVID-19 Survey (N = 215)



**I WISH WE HAD ACCESS TO...A FREE ONLINE SPACE TO TALK ABOUT HOW WE'RE DOING DURING THESE TIMES."**



I AM A PERSON WHO LOVES HUGS WHEN I SEE PEOPLE, AND I DEFINITELY HAVE BEEN MISSING THAT BECAUSE OF QUARANTINE. I KNOW THAT IT IS FOR THE SAFETY OF ME AND OTHERS, BUT

**AFTER QUARANTINE, EVERYONE WILL BE GETTING A HUG."**



**[I LOOK FORWARD TO] BEING WITH FRIENDS,**

THEY KEEP ME UPLIFTED AND HAPPY AND REMIND ME TO HAVE FUN IN TIMES OF STRESS OR WORRY."

## **RELATED RECOMMENDATIONS** for addressing Theme Five

- 1** Remember that communities of color are disproportionately impacted by two pandemics: COVID-19 and systemic racism, and that racial trauma and anti-Blackness are real.
- 4** Create opportunities for young people to contribute their expertise and skills and be actively involved in pandemic response, at the program, school, college, district and community levels.
- 5** Connect youth and their families to accessible mental health resources, supports and services and actively work to undo the stigma surrounding mental health.
- 6** Make virtual spaces and tools available and accessible for youth to connect with one another about their experiences, ideas, stories, coping strategies and more.
- 7** Use social media to engage with young people, disseminate physical and mental health information, and provide relevant resources & support.

# THEME SIX

## ADAPTING TO SETBACKS

*Young people face uncertainty about the future and disappointment about missing key milestones, but understand and value health and safety.*

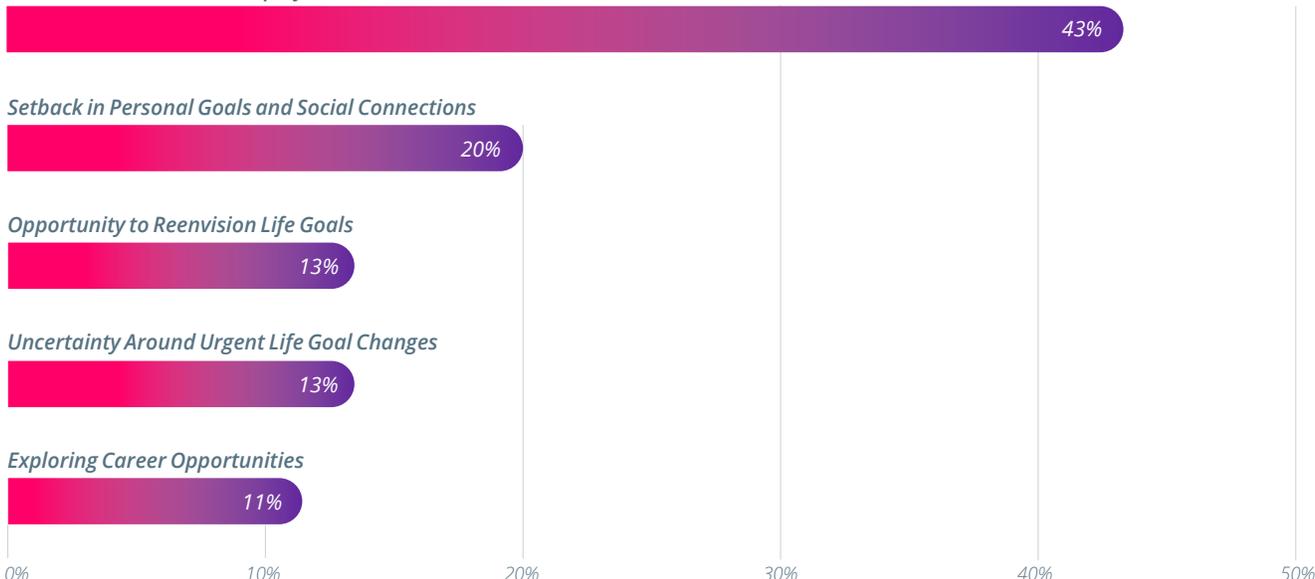
Emerging adulthood is a time of significant transition, deepening self-knowledge and increasing autonomy, yet many of the milestones that mark this transition have been cancelled or paused indefinitely. More than one-third of young people reported changes to their long-term goals due to the pandemic even in May, when the survey was administered. When asked to share how COVID-19 had changed their goals, youth cited being uncertain about the future and pointed to specific setbacks - often in education, employment or both.

Some youth did report feeling motivated to use newfound time and space to reflect on the future and explore possibilities. Despite the understandable disappointment and frustrations they face, young people also understand the dangers posed by the pandemic and are concerned for the safety of themselves, their families and their community.

### **How have your long-term goals changed since being impacted by the pandemic?**

*Out of 34% of students who responded that their long-term goals had changed because of the pandemic*

#### *Setback in Education or Employment*



Source: 2020 Opportunity Youth Impacts of COVID-19 Survey (N = 215)



I NO LONGER KNOW WHERE I WANT TO END UP AFTER HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE.

**I NO LONGER THINK THAT MY GOALS ARE VALID IF I CAN'T BE SURE THAT THEY COULD EVEN HAPPEN."**



**I'M NOT SURE IF I AM GOING TO GRADUATE.**

THAT REALLY HITS HOME FOR ME BECAUSE I LIKE HAVING A PLAN FOR MY FUTURE."



**[I LOOK FORWARD TO] FINISHING MY LAST GED**

TEST AND GETTING ANOTHER JOB SO I CAN MOVE OUT."



...I AM SCARED THAT IF CAMPUS OPENS UP I WILL HAVE TO GO BACK TO CONTINUE MY EDUCATION,

**BUT I DON'T WANT TO RISK ME OR MY FAMILY'S HEALTH."**



**THE PANDEMIC HAS MOTIVATED ME MORE THAN EVER TO PURSUE MY DREAM OF GOING TO MEDICAL SCHOOL."**

## RELATED RECOMMENDATIONS for addressing Theme Six

1

*Remember that communities of color are disproportionately impacted by two pandemics: COVID-19 and systemic racism, and that racial trauma and anti-Blackness are real.*

3

*Prioritize public health and safety to slow the spread of the virus and ensure that learning environments protect youth and staff health and safety.*

10

*Find ways to acknowledge important milestones and future aspirations while prioritizing health and safety. Validate new learning happening in areas like resilience, creativity, reflection, organization and technology.*

## SAMPLE AND METHODS

The Opportunity Youth Impacts of COVID-19 survey, developed by youth for youth, closed on May 31 and received 215 responses. The sample was 82% people of color (28% Latinx, 17% Black or African American, 20% Asian or Asian American, 11% Multiracial, 5% Pacific Islander, 1% Native American/Alaskan Native), and 63% identified as female. The majority of responses were from Tukwila, South Seattle, SeaTac, Federal Way, and Burien. Forty-two percent of respondents were enrolled in comprehensive high schools, and 23% were enrolled in college. The remaining 35% were enrolled in alternative or reengagement schools or were out of school.

The survey was administered through SurveyMonkey in English and Spanish. Many questions were open-ended so that young people could express their unique experiences in their own words. The findings summarized here are based on descriptive analyses of survey responses, including qualitative coding, as well as follow up conversations with young people as we shared the findings with different groups of stakeholders over the course of the summer and collectively made meaning of the results. The four open-ended questions were coded using a grounded theory approach with themes closely matching the wording used by young people. These themes were distilled and used to organize the collective voices of in this brief and inform proposed solutions.

*Source: 2020 Opportunity Youth Impacts of COVID-19 Survey (N = 215)*

## SUPPORTING CONTINUED YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Young leaders participated in survey development, data collection and data analysis, participating through zoom convenings at each stage of the process. Youth were paid for their participation and expertise during each stage of the project. Many of these youth remain actively involved as the findings are disseminated and acted upon by local stakeholders. Four youth who worked on the survey project recently began a paid internship with King County that will serve as a platform for them to share these findings broadly and create and test strategies that respond to issues raised in the survey. We look forward to working with them, the [King County Reengagement Provider Network](#), and other partners to chart the path forward and co-create solutions.

*For more information about the survey contact Nicole Yohalem at Community Center for Education Results: [nyohalem@cedresults.org](mailto:nyohalem@cedresults.org).*

*For more information about Reconnect to Opportunity or the ReOpp Youth Internship, contact Maria Guizar at King County: [maria.guizar@kingcounty.gov](mailto:maria.guizar@kingcounty.gov).*

*For more information about Soar's youth voice work, contact Devan Rogers at Soar: [devan@soarkc.org](mailto:devan@soarkc.org).*



*Graphic design for this report was done by Teysia Parks @ Studio T Designs, LLC.*