



Seen and Heard: Race, COVID and What Philanthropy Can Do to Support Youth

**BLACK
LIVES
MATTER**

This paper is dedicated to the youth who spoke their truth. Your perspectives, experiences and voices are powerful. We see you, hear you, and believe you. Thanks for sharing and trusting us with your stories.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

In March of 2020, in an effort to ensure the safety of youth and communities in the face of the burgeoning global pandemic brought about by COVID19, schools across the state of Connecticut abruptly shut down. Youth and their caregivers were notified that school buildings would reopen when it was deemed safe, and that plans for “remote learning” would be forthcoming. While many immediately understood the pandemic as a global public health crisis of an unprecedented scope, the ensuing weeks, months and years have laid bare our country’s other long-harbored, oft-disregarded crisis - the deeply entrenched racial, economic and social inequities operating within and perpetuated by housing, healthcare, education, workforce, immigration, housing and criminal justice systems.

As foundations committed to youth voice and leadership, the Perrin Family Foundation, Leever Foundation, and the Ritter Family Foundation shared a deep concern about the astounding absence of young people’s voices in the discussion, discourse, and decision-making happening about them. Together, with additional support from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, we created an opportunity to surface, elevate, and amplify young people’s voices. Over the course of 2020, we heard from more than 500 young people who spoke not only of the impact of the pandemic, but of the murder of George Floyd, of new-found awareness of history, legacy, and presence of white supremacy, of rising up for racial justice, and of the precariousness of our democracy in the midst of the 2020 presidential election.

From the outset, this project sought not only to elevate young people’s voices, but to help advance critical conversations about the confluence of structural inequities on young people’s lives. While many young people shared their challenges and struggles, they also spoke about moments of joy, pride, determination, resistance, how they were taking care of themselves, and the hopes they have for more just communities. Their perspectives and insights often starkly illustrated this fundamental truth: youth of color are disproportionately affected by the structural inequity that is ubiquitous in our society.

Philanthropy, policy-makers and other decision-makers often reduce the complex dynamics at play in young people’s lives to one-dimensional facts and statistics, and the “solutions” to young people’s perceived needs or challenges are left in the hands of those who have not walked in their shoes. This paper is premised upon the belief that young people’s lived experiences make them experts in their own right. This paper compiles and shares young people’s candid reflections with the intention of creating a springboard for introspection,

LEFT: Tired, Kadija (she/her), 17, Waterbury

[This] is a painting I've created out of desperation and other emotions in regards to racial injustice. I've labeled it "Tired," finding this one word to be so fitting because it's exhausting to stay fearful and angry all the time....While I am tired, I do have hope. I must believe a change will occur and with my generation, I can expect positive shifts very soon.



accountability, and action from the philanthropic community. It calls others who exercise power and influence in the lives of young people to ask and listen - to hear and heed - what young people are saying. This report is a call to action to urge our sector to recognize young people's inherent power, better understand their multifaceted realities, commit to actionable steps that will target structural inequities, and prioritize young people's direct engagement and leadership in advancing systemic change.

What We Did: The Submission Opportunity

The call for submissions from young people was a compensated, non-competitive opportunity for Connecticut youth aged 12-24 to voice their personal experiences through essays, poems, visual art, and videos. The submission opportunity was offered twice in 2020, once in the spring and then again in the fall. The opportunity was shared through social media platforms, by educators, and through networks of community and grantee partners.

During each submission round, youth were invited to submit responses to one reflection prompt. While the prompts varied slightly across the two submission rounds, they fell into three broad categories:

1. Asking young people to describe their current experiences and realities, in particular how youth are being impacted in a way that others aren't talking about;
2. Asking young people to share their analysis about how race, class, and justice were showing up in the current moment; and
3. Asking young people to share their vision, suggestions, or ideas for change.

Submissions were accepted as long as funds were available, and over the two rounds of the project we distributed more than \$100,000 to more than 550 youth participants.

This paper lifts up and amplifies salient and recurring themes that emerged from young people's submissions. It is important to note that this project was initially undertaken to build a platform for young people's voices, not to conduct formal research on young people's experiences. The sheer volume of the responses received, and the patterns that emerged from the youth, motivated the creation and distribution of this paper for a broader audience. The demographic information contained in this paper was compiled from the identifying information youth provided in their submissions, and the themes highlighted in this paper are the result of a qualitative analysis undertaken by the staff team at the Perrin Family Foundation who read every submission.

We distributed more than \$100,000 to more than 550 youth participants.



Bringing Our Values Into the Project Design

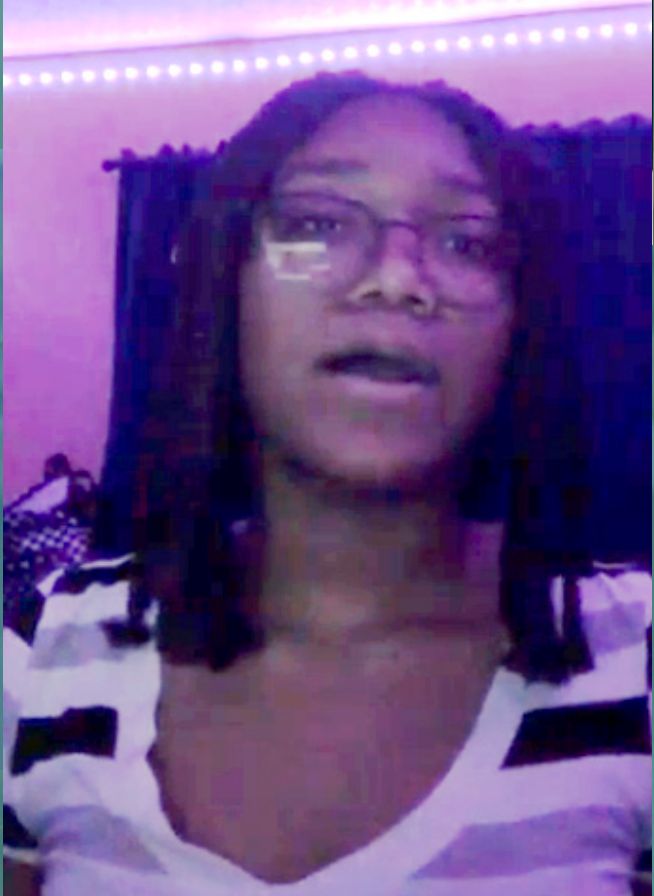
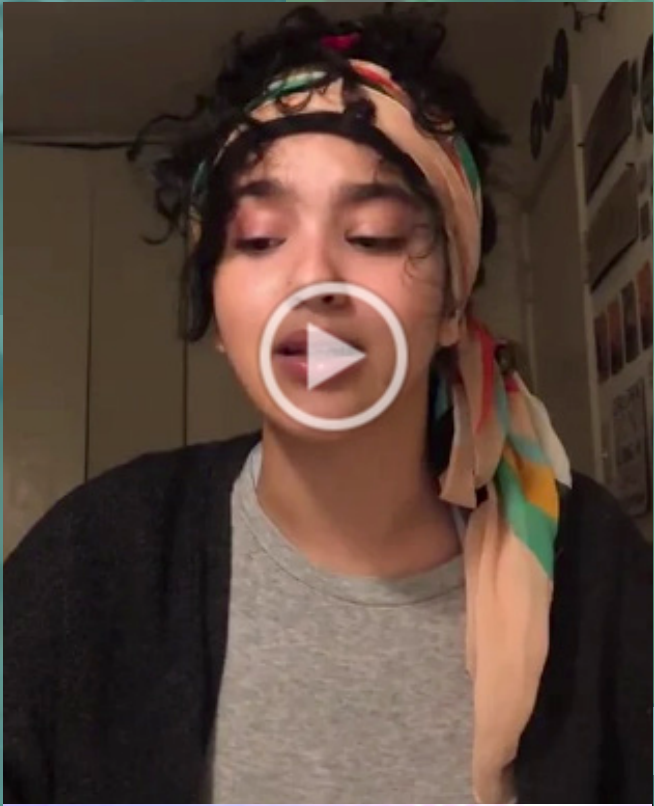
In philanthropy and in the nonprofit sector, there is an unstated expectation that young people must share their trauma – or their triumphs – as the “price of admission” for receiving support, be it an individual opportunity or a grant for an organization. This dynamic can contribute to an exploitative power imbalance which we aimed to mitigate in the design of this opportunity.

On compensation: Participating youth were provided with a substantial stipend in order to recognize the value of their time and labor in creating their submissions. When the project launched in the spring of 2020, young people over the age of 16 were excluded from being counted as dependents in federal stimulus checks. Throughout the pandemic young people and families of undocumented status were wholly ineligible for relief benefits. The provision of stipends was also intended to respond to the financial strain we knew many youth and families were facing.

On competition: We did not want to replicate a problematic dynamic in philanthropy where those that communicate best or submit something the most polished, are deemed the most “worthy” of support. Every young person that made a submission aligned with the basic criteria received compensation. All participants received equal compensation; no submission was deemed more or less worthy. This practice created a standard of equity and inclusivity within the project, and reflected our collective belief that all young people’s voices and experiences are inherently valuable.

On methods of expression: It was important to honor multiple modes of youth expression, and not limit submissions to the written word. As a result, we received many short essays from young people, but we also received pencil sketches, photography, original art and graphic design submissions, videos and tik-toks, recordings of songs, poems, and raps.

On integrity in representation: Ensuring that young people have control over their own stories is of utmost importance. When young people submitted their pieces, they had an option to select whether their stories would be publicly shared, and all young people received a stipend regardless of whether they were willing to share their story. As we read the submissions, it was clear that young people were extremely candid and shared vulnerably. Before sharing any of the following stories publicly, participants were contacted again to re-confirm their consent. Some young people changed their minds, and no longer wanted to have their submissions shared, and others decided to do so anonymously. As such, the following is a compilation of both identified and anonymous stories.



Who We Heard From: A Snapshot

The submissions reflect a diverse group of young people, varied in age, race/ethnicity, and geography. While a comprehensive analysis of the demographic data within the qualitative themes is outside the scope of this paper, there are nonetheless notable patterns that are important to name:

- **More than two-thirds of the young people that submitted indicated they did not have an affiliation or participation with a youth-serving organization.** Participation in youth programs and organizations often plays a critical role in supporting young people to build community, tap into meaningful relationships with peers and adult allies, access social-emotional supports, express themselves, and build a sense of purpose and agency. The absence of that support system, in light of the intensity of the experiences young people shared, illuminates just how much youth have carried on their own. It also reflects broader systemic and structural gaps in meeting the holistic developmental needs of young people.
- **Submissions from youth of color often described experiencing economic or housing instability when they lived in cities, as well as a lack of educational resources and support.** They talked about being overworked and undervalued, and the fear and stress they are simultaneously navigating. Stories from white students living in more affluent towns expressed concerns about missing graduation, friends, and adjusting to complex family dynamics, all valid challenges in their own right, but in stark contrast to their city-dwelling peers.
- **A number of young people of color discussed concerns that related to larger systemic oppression (economic, housing, academic disadvantages, and instability) either in direct connection to their racial identities or as a particular facet of their lived experience.** While some white participants noted systemic concerns, these issues were more commonly identified as part of larger oppressive realities of other racial groups and not their own. More typically, however, white respondents opted to answer questions around their new lived realities, how they felt the world would change, or how they felt young people are being impacted overall.
- **Many young people ages 18 - 24 are experiencing challenges that are going unseen.** Whether they're new to the workforce, working while in school, first-generation college students, or all of the above, they are concurrently grappling with transitioning to independence, housing instability, and financial uncertainty. Graduating from high school and/or aging out of youth-serving programs brings inequitable systems that have been in the background of young people's lives into immediate view. For a number of young people who submitted, the pandemic coincided with a transition to young adulthood that revealed systemic failures in a new way.



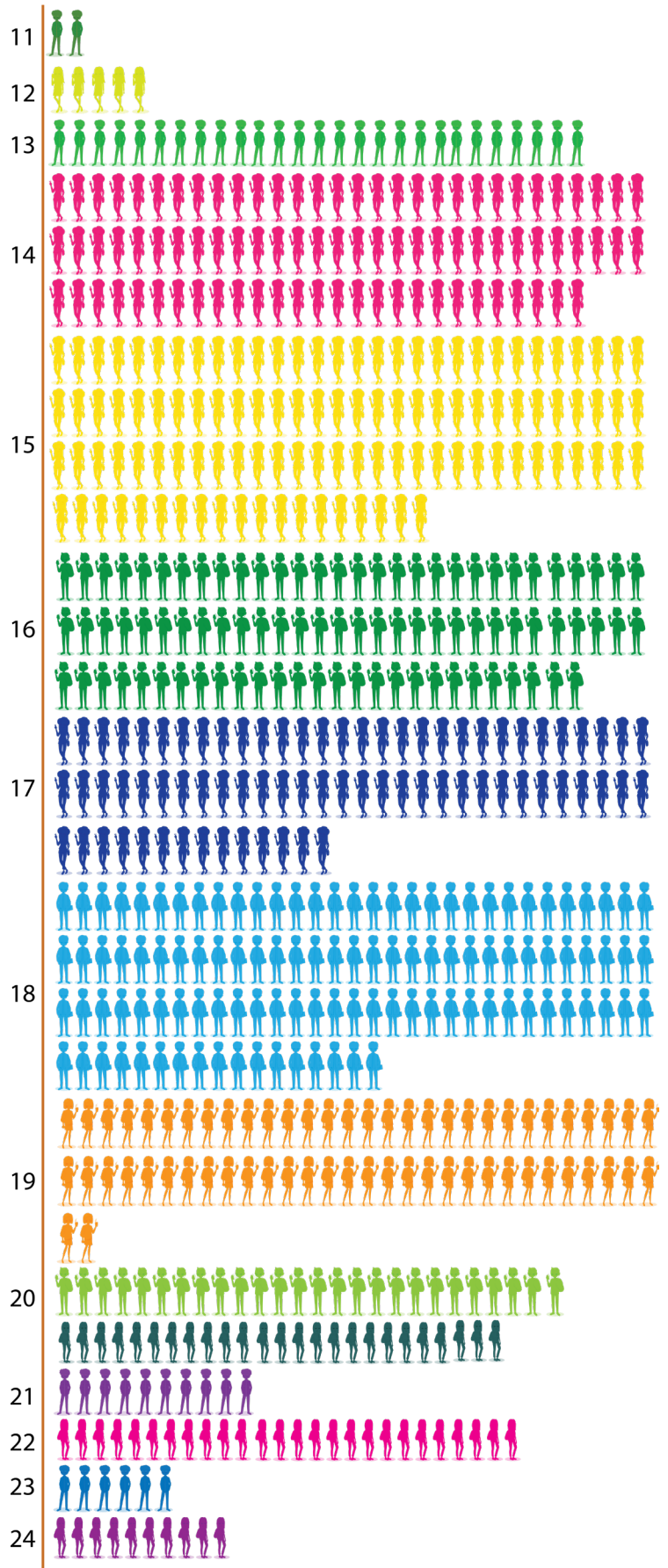
Submissions by Age

There was a broad age range of youth participating in this project.

The majority (51%) of young people who submitted were between the ages of 15-17.

Nearly one-third (29%) were between the ages of 18-24.

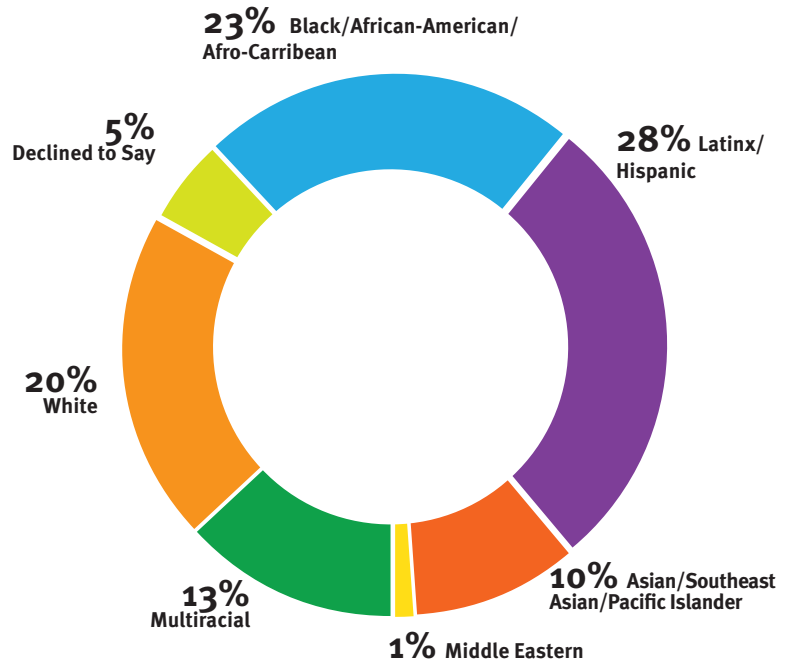
Young people aged 14 or younger accounted for 20% of all submissions.



Submissions by Race/Ethnicity

75% of the young people participating self-identified as Black or youth of color, 20% of young people identified as white, and 5% declined to say.

In an effort to create as much space as possible for young people to self-identify, young people were asked to “write-in” their racial/ethnic identity rather than select a “checkbox.” The categories here aim to capture the multitude of answers, but the categories have been condensed for the sake of data compilation.

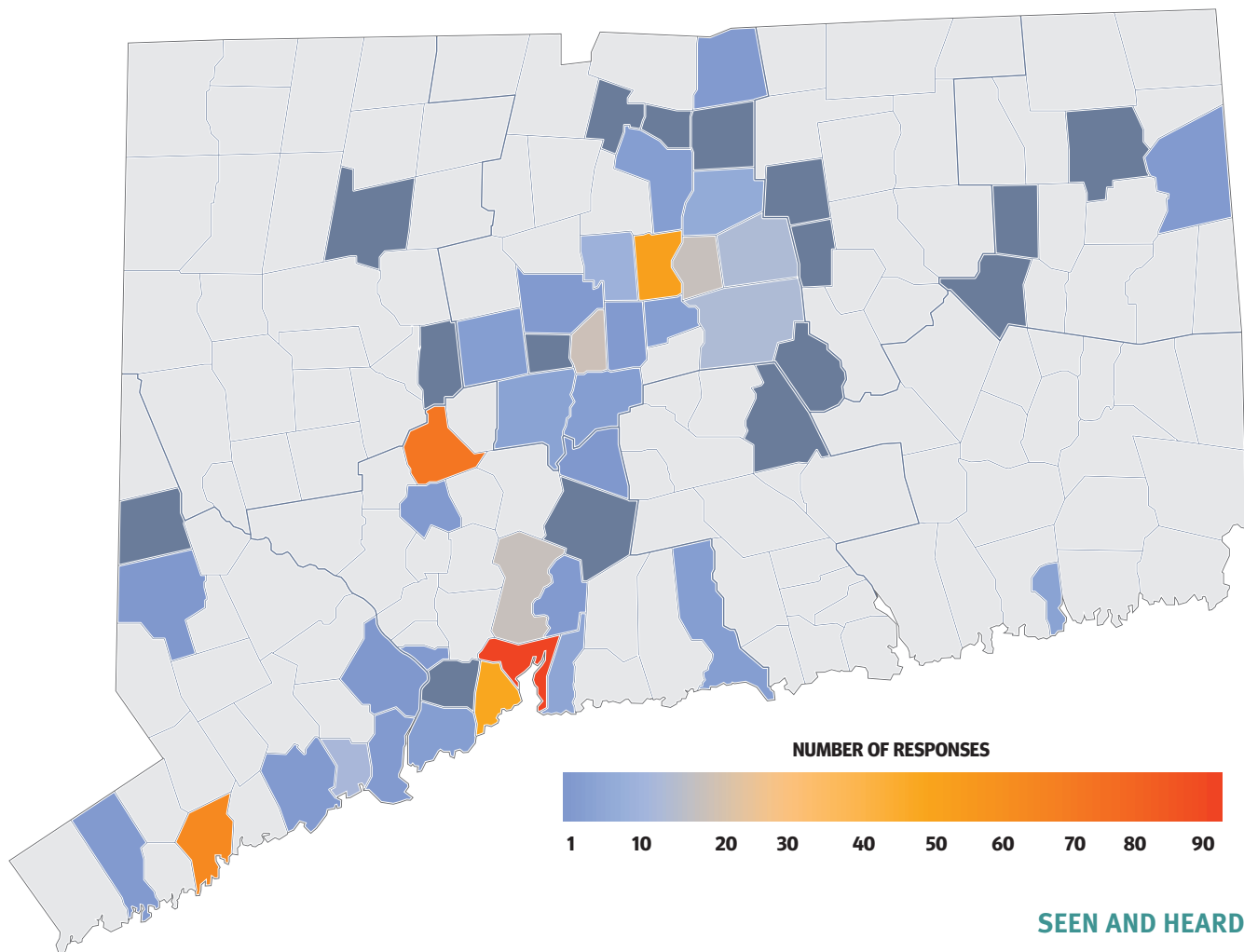


Submissions by Geography

Youth submissions originated from 53 different towns and cities across Connecticut, representing all 8 counties.

59% of submissions were from young people residing in Connecticut’s eight largest cities, while 41% were from youth in other towns, suburbs or rural communities.

The largest number of submissions came from New Haven, Waterbury and Norwalk, reflecting the local reach of the funding partners.



People don't think that I have a voice or an opinion...and that's messed up. I may be younger than you, but I'm human. I have ideas, I have thoughts, I have opinions. You can't just overlook me.... They look at us and they think we're fine. We're not. We can hide it, but no one seems to know what we're going through. So ask us.

-Janze, 13, Manchester

On (Not) Being Asked, Heard or Seen:

More than half (56%) of the young people who submitted elected to respond to the prompt that asked about their current reality or how they were impacted in ways that no one was talking about. The appetite for responding to this prompt underscores one of the most resounding themes across all submissions – young people frequently expressed that the adults in their lives aren't taking the time to ask or listen to them.

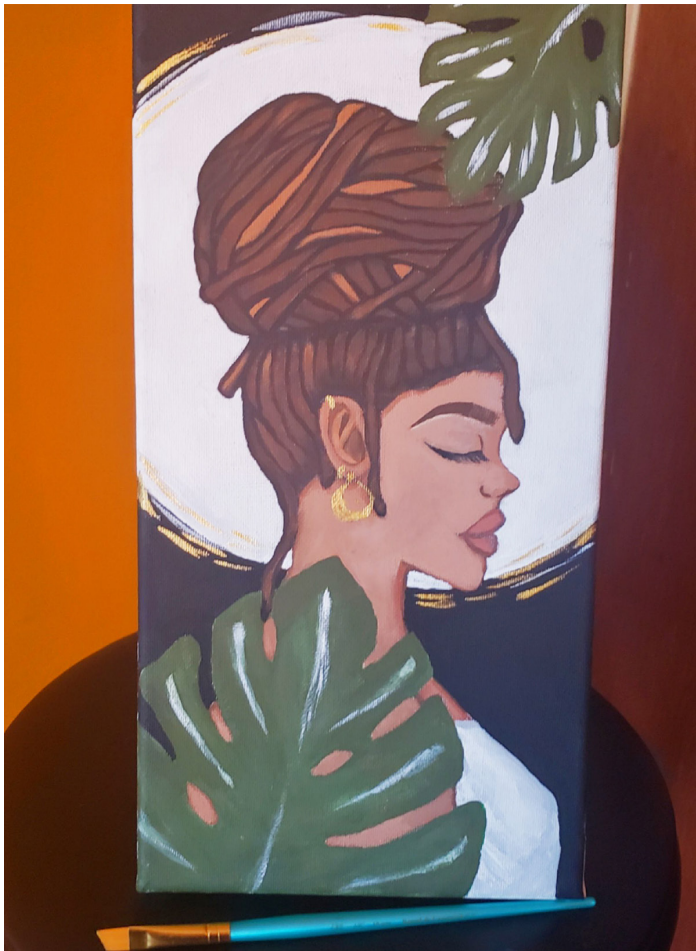
When asked, youth spoke about mental health, their experiences in school, the loss of milestone moments and celebrations, physical health concerns, financial challenges, and their ongoing frustration with or newfound awareness of our country's deeply entrenched racism and other inequities. The themes that follow are by no means a comprehensive compilation of all the experiences, issues, or topics discussed by young people, but they do reflect consistent and salient patterns across submissions.



BELOW: Outsider, Anonymous, 16, East Hartford



ABOVE: Nicol (she/her), 16, Waterbury



LEFT: Ariane (she/her), 21, Hamden

One of the most challenging things for me during this epidemic is keeping my spirits high and realizing that staying at home helps keep me and the people in my community safe. Some things I've done to keep me going is self care and self love, loving the little moments I spend in my company and with family. I have also picked up my passion for art again. During this time I was able to create a piece that not only brings me joy but encouragement.

No one asks us how we're coping. How we're feeling during a battle where we are **armorless**.

Anonymous, 17, New Haven

My brain needs to experience the outside world and/ Social media is not enough/ My new reality is pretty **rough**.

Seth, 15, Hartford

2020 was the new year of success/ but all I've been feeling is depressed

Anonymous, 16, New Britain

I am frightened about where to go after May 15, when I must check out of the suite I am currently in.

This stress weakens my stomach and I can feel my mental health deteriorating day by day.

Anonymous, 20, West Haven

I wish people realized that our mental health is more important than some online assignment.

- Anonymous, 17, New Haven

On Mental Health and Wellness:

Mental health was a frequently named concern for young people, with most young people saying that it was an issue which was not sufficiently acknowledged, understood, or addressed. In some cases, young people named mental health directly, pointing out that the cumulative stress of academic and personal responsibilities, global social upheaval, and fluctuating infection rates created a storm of unknowns that contributed to depression and anxiety. Other youth wrote about recognizable symptoms of mental health challenges, including feeling lonely, isolated, stressed, worried, unmotivated, or disruptions to their sleep patterns. Many youth shared about the stress and strain they experienced shouldering a new level of caregiving responsibilities – both for the younger siblings they watched while parents were working, and also for their parents, some of whom became sick themselves. Youth who spoke about mental health also noted that it was often sidelined as less important than performing in school and completing assignments.

While some young people noted that the switch to virtual learning helped to reduce social anxiety, others shared about how safety restrictions and social distancing limited options for self-care and restricted opportunities to unwind and decompress. Young people with preexisting mental health challenges also named how difficult it became to access the care and supports that were previously in place.

Youth also named concrete ways in which they could be better supported, including the routine inclusion of mental health checks as part of the daily school workflow, having adults simply pause to “ask if we are okay,” and the creation of government-sponsored mental health resources and virtually accessible facilities that could be included as part of future stimulus packages.

A 2021 Advisory from the US Surgeon General stated that depressive and anxiety symptoms among youth doubled during the pandemic and noted that Black, Latino, Indigenous and Asian American youth, LGBTQ+ youth, low income youth, youth in immigrant households, and youth involved in the juvenile justice or child welfare system were among those at higher risk of mental health challenges during the pandemic.¹

— [Office of the Surgeon General](#)



My mom, who is a nurse, suffered through the coronavirus...By the second week, she was hospitalized and I had to survive in my home alone for two weeks. That challenged me mentally. I was worried and scared for my mom.

- Anonymous, 17, West Haven

On Physical Health and Wellness:

As of February 2022, more than 10,000 Connecticut residents had died from COVID-19.... Black residents were twice as likely to die from the virus, while Hispanic residents were 1.7 times as likely to die from it.²

— [CT Health Foundation](#)

Young people expressed fear and concern for their own physical health and for the health of their loved ones, particularly when they had family who were frontline essential workers. Immunocompromised young people expressed concerns both about what they perceived as an irresponsibility of their peers or society at-large and the potential impact their actions could have on the wider world. Across many submissions, young people voiced concerns around the gradual reopening of public and private spaces, and they often shared profound mistrust in those in elected leadership positions, with many noting that they found politicians to be more invested in financial opportunities than the safety and well-being of their constituents.

The concerns about health and safety remained present even in the second wave of submissions, more than six months after the initial pandemic shutdowns. Many young people expressed a need and desire to maintain their own independent boundaries, beyond formal regulations and policies, in order to protect their health and safety. Young people also discussed the ongoing impact of COVID sufferers that they knew personally. Youth noted its ongoing toll, highlighting how it made daily life challenging and prevented them from working or completing academic responsibilities.



Since [my mother] works in a grocery store she is also at high risk, so most of the time I have to stay away from her because I have a weak immune system.

Stephanie (she/her), 15, Stamford

Famous basketball players and actors have gotten tested and have been provided all the resources to survive but, the Walmart manager working long hours, risking exposure all day, not being tested, and not getting proper protection does not have access to the same things. **Why?**

Graydon (he/him), 13, Bristol



ABOVE: Dymin (they/them), 23, New Haven

Isolation, will determine / Whether we succeed / In saving all our people from this deadly disease.

Fernando (he/him), 16, Norwalk



ABOVE: Josh (he/him), 20, New Britain

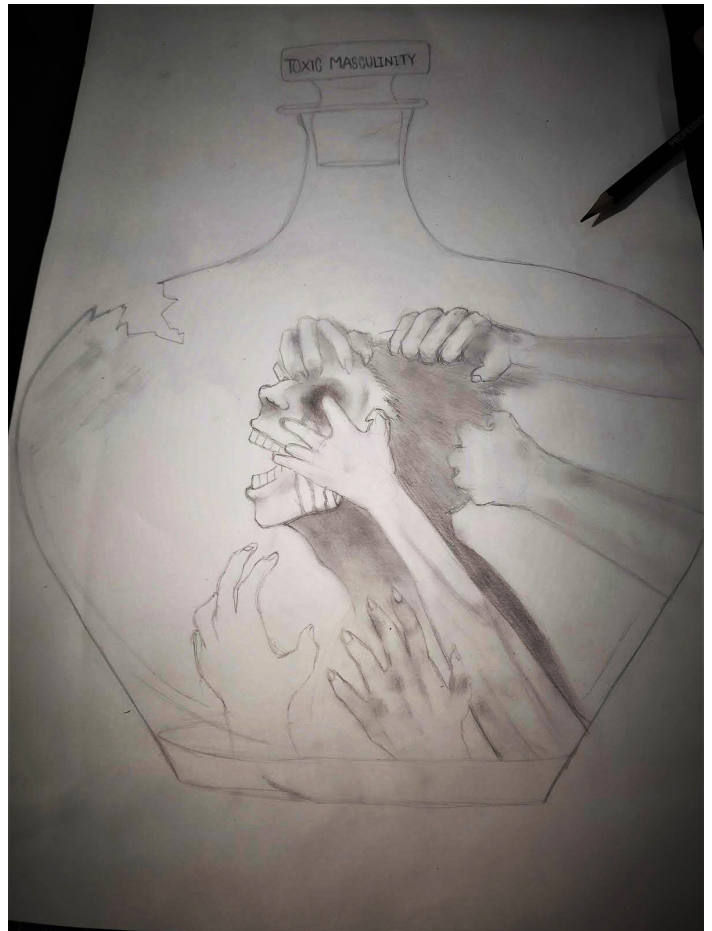
It's tough going without a paycheck and still having to pay for my car, gas, and groceries for me and my mom.

Anonymous, 19, Groton

RIGHT: Anonymus, 18

Having the constant feeling of having to help your family but (as a young man) not being able to do it messes up with our self-esteem and self-worth. Now that the pandemic has impacted our families economically, this feeling intensifies even more. Toxic masculinity plays an essential role in this too. We cannot express our feelings of uselessness because we have learned to bottle them up since our childhood. The young man inside the bottle represents the "bottling of emotions" the young man desperately wants to open up but is incapable of doing so because of the hands holding him. The crack in the bottle represents an opportunity to open up and get help. The hands holding him represent toxic masculinity, the insecurities and the repression of emotions.

BELOW: Management. Keona (she/they), 16, New Haven



Food? Or Rent? /
They can't help
but dread/
Should I feed my
family? / Or get
evicted instead?

Farah (she/her), 17 - West Haven

The wage gap between classes was also heavily revealed. Many people cannot afford to simply take days off to be safe in their homes. They have to risk their lives to make a living and have enough money to put food on the table.

- Anonymous, 19, West Haven

On Financial Challenges:

Teen summer employment hit record lows due to the pandemic. Nationally, less than a third of U.S. teens had paying summer jobs in 2020. White U.S. teens were more likely than Black, Hispanic, and Asian teens to be employed.³

— [Pew Research Center](#)

In addition to experiencing more pandemic-related hardships, residents in Connecticut's urban core cities were twice as likely as adults in other towns to have had recent difficulty paying for food and housing.⁴

— [Data Haven](#)

Many young people were candid about their personal and familial financial challenges, noting that the pandemic had exacerbated and amplified the intensity of already-existing pressures to make ends meet. Many teens discussed the role they had played or needed to play as earners and significant contributors to their household income. Many communicated a sense of deep responsibility to either financially support their families or care for them in other ways.

Young people shared their fears about having parents as essential workers or being an essential worker themselves. Several participants lived with older family members or parents and felt torn between continuing to work and possibly transmitting COVID to someone at home and needing to provide financially, despite the risks involved.

Of the young people that participated, 29% were between the ages of 18-24. Young adults who were members of the workforce also described the loss of employment and income, some while also parenting and caring for their own children. Young adults who had been working to pay for college either saw their hours reduced or were laid off all together. They were forced either to dip into savings to survive, work more hours, or attempt to find more employment that could substitute their lost wages in a topsy-turvy economy. Many of those young adults shared about finding themselves unhoused or of returning home to families who were also under a financial strain, unsure of how they would be able to sustain their enrollment and continue affording tuition.

I have to stay home and teach myself things that I don't even understand.

– Yarivette (she/her), 16, Hartford

On School and Education:

According to the Office of Civil Rights, the educational gaps that existed before the pandemic—in access, opportunities, achievement, and outcomes—are widening. Many of these impacts are falling disproportionately on students who went into the pandemic with the greatest educational needs and fewest opportunities.⁵

— [US Department of Education](#)

COVID-19 has raised new barriers for many postsecondary students, with heightened impacts emerging for students of color, students with disabilities, and students who are caregivers, both for entry into higher education and for continuing and completing their studies.⁶

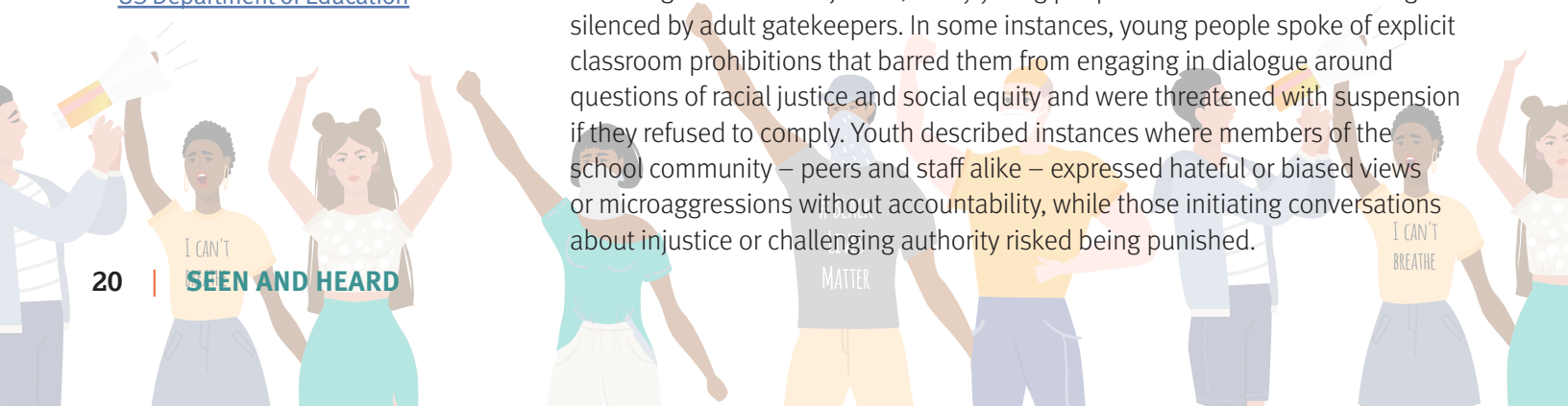
— [US Department of Education](#)

Shortly following the shutdown, there was a period of time when education – specifically access to the technology necessary to engage in remote learning – was the leading topic of discussion among policymakers and philanthropy. While access to laptops was no doubt important, young people's submissions painted a far more complex and nuanced take on their experiences and desires as students. Youth frequently shared that their experiences with school were a source of frustration, depression, and disappointment. While some young people found remote school a welcome shift, most youth that shared reflections on education described remote learning as stressful and overwhelming, noting classes that had been challenging in-person became nearly impossible online. Limited communication and time constraints made problem-solving a largely independent effort.

Many young people also described feeling overwhelmed by the sheer amount of work they were expected to accomplish and felt their teachers, educational administrators, and adults broadly ignored the impact the present moment was having on them. Some expressed feeling dehumanized by a system that turned them into “machines,” and they reproached adults for shielding them from information or depriving them of spaces to process. Others were left exasperated by the seeming indifference to the magnitude of responsibility that young people had absorbed. They were no longer just students. They were also caregivers and teachers of their younger siblings who were also struggling. They also shouldered household stress and strain from income and job loss.

Some youth described feeling betrayed and abandoned by the school system altogether. Students of color, in particular, expressed fear and resentment at the apparent abandonment of supports in navigating the college application process and preparing for steps beyond graduation.

Young people who participated in the call for submissions in the fall brought a different critique of their school experiences. Returning to school following the murder of George Floyd and a summer of historic mass actions across our country and the globe for racial justice, many young people shared instances of being silenced by adult gatekeepers. In some instances, young people spoke of explicit classroom prohibitions that barred them from engaging in dialogue around questions of racial justice and social equity and were threatened with suspension if they refused to comply. Youth described instances where members of the school community – peers and staff alike – expressed hateful or biased views or microaggressions without accountability, while those initiating conversations about injustice or challenging authority risked being punished.



Do you guys realize how stressed the Junior class is? And not because we can't do the work, because I assure you we are all capable, but because of the quantity of things we are expected to do now.

Mercedes (she/her), 16, East Haven

The young people that are not really talked about are those students of color that are being affected on another level due to now being exposed to uncertainties at home that they were not worried about while being on their campuses.

Elaine, 22, New Haven



LEFT: Wooden Corpse, Amelie (she/her), Wethersfield

WE ARE **YOUNG**.
Our age doesn't define us at all times, but this time it does.

Petrina (she/her), 17, Manchester

I am a single mother to a toddler, a college student, and a program assistant... All these different roles that I am are very mentally and physically draining.

Ashley (she/her), 24, Hartford

"Pandemic" By Helen

"Please Don't shoot" they said, as their eyes envisioned life, Past and present holding on Hope for the future. It don't matter if it's a knife or a bag of skittles, they'll shoot you because your skin is more of a threat if it has melanin, even just a little. Arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor.

Now is the time, well, it's been time to open your eyes to the evil that's been all around us, from the first slave ship in 1619, the criminal justice system in twenty nineteen. But wait, it's 2020

Defund the police!

Enough is enough. we can't tell them we have a dream and say violence isn't the answer because we supposed to work as a team. It will never work, or it would've happened in 1965, or in 1959, couldn't we all agree? But it didn't, so people had to pretend like racism had an end and #BlackLivesMatter! was just a trend and now the president wanna Make America Great Again? But it was Never great. It was always full of hate, and with this pandemic he blamed it all on the chinese, said that they all had the disease, and now white people saying I can't Breathe, because of a mask. But we been said it. Now listen, this gets real deep, when we say that we can't breathe, it's not cause of Covid-19.

We Are Black

- Jada (she/her), 14, Waterbury

Once upon a time
They saw us as slaves
Now, It's like the "Police's Prime"
To shoot us into the grave

Holding their children in fear
Then hearing the parent(s) scream
But they're sleeping there
Just to wake up to know it's not a dream

The parent(s) has to bury their child
Because what you did wasn't right
But while your boss smiled
The parent(s) cried at night

We are going to stand up
Instead of standing back
Because at the end of the day
We are Black

Untitled

- Emily (she/her), 14, Naugatuck

When i was younger, i learned
That voices would be heard
And violence would never be our solution
And i believed it, as i knew
Because i always felt listened to
/ Though the wall of understanding extends
only to one side

I thought if someone were to speak,
Everyone would hear
And if someone were to hurt
Everyone would feel
/ but that their sympathy is selective, I
never knew

I had heard of burning cities, but i always
turned an eye
Because violence wasn't the answer, right?
/ They were supposed to sit quiet and cry?

I remember one day, i was filled with rage
For the first time when i heard them say
That injustice could be solved with peace

It had never felt that way before
When i had to stand back and watch this
civil war
Of silent injustice right below us

I met people who told me
Of things they had seen
Murder and bloodshed
Swiped and left clean
No justice for the dead
/ but silence was expected

And i woke up one morning
To hear news of a name
George Floyd
And his death that same day
I expected it to be like every other story
Silent, and soon vanished

When i woke up that morning
Hope filled my heart
With their anger and their pain
They tore that city apart
And for the first time it made sense to me
No justice, No peace

I thought silence was polite
I thought kindness was the answer
I thought there was no need to fight,
because you will be heard

164 people in 8 months were not heard
328 parents,
Left to mourn
Thousands of friends and family
That would never be heard

But we heard that man's name
He was the sun behind the cloud
The garden of young, innocent people
I heard that man's name
And because of him, i heard the next 164

You can not sit back and stay quiet,
Because that is not the thing to do
I mean it wholeheartedly, from me to you
That it is more than violence
It is more of pain
Through the red and through the smoke
There is blue in the flame

While the novel coronavirus continues to destroy our world and displace the lives of thousands, the plague of systemic racism, especially in the United States, continues to thrive.

– Sidharth (he/him), 17, Hamden

On Race, Class, and Justice:

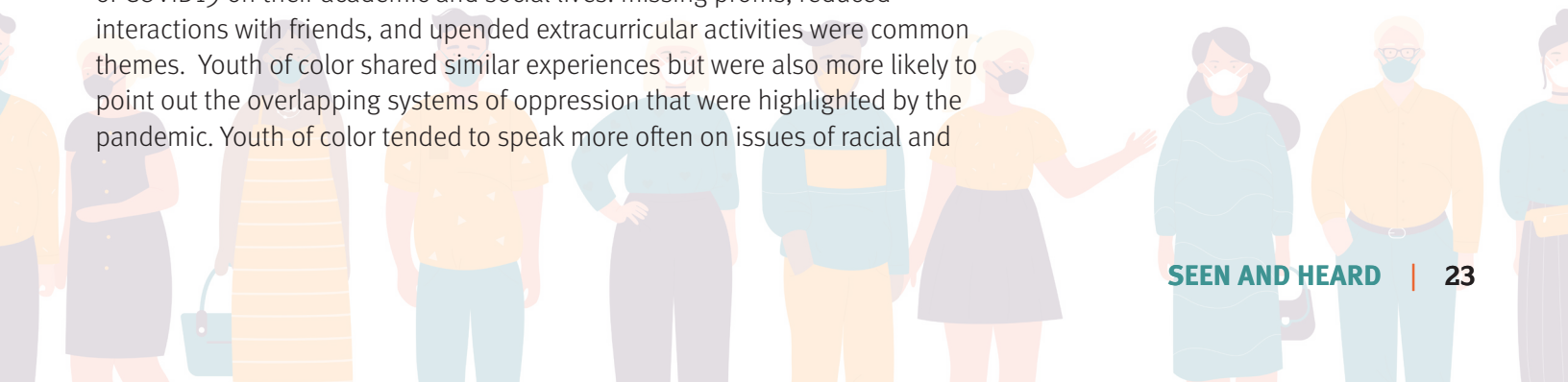
During the first wave of submissions, 8% of youth participants responded to the prompt asking what the pandemic revealed about race, class, and justice. In the second wave of submissions, which came in the wake of mass actions across the country in support of Black Lives Matter, more than 40% of youth participants responded to the prompt asking how events of the past year had shifted their perception of race, class or justice. This reflects how deeply young people were impacted by the police murder of George Floyd and ensuing racial justice rallies and protests, and it also reflects young people’s appetite and desire to talk about it.

Importantly, however, both waves of submissions demonstrated young people’s astute insights about how unfolding events were linked to and shaped by racism and other root-cause inequities pervasive in our country’s health, education, immigration, and workforce systems. Many young people addressed and lamented the sharp rise in Anti-Asian sentiment and violence at the start of the pandemic, while also noting the bigotry of a misleading presidential administration that incited acts of prejudice and hatred. Other young people shared about the way in which immigration status – in particular being undocumented – impacted how they navigated the pandemic and eliminated their access to necessary health care and economic relief. Still others expressed anger and frustration with American myths about equal access and opportunity which were belied by the pandemic. Many spoke directly and specifically about police violence and systemic racism.

There was a notable interplay in young people’s racial identities and their reflections. White participants were more likely to discuss the impact of COVID19 on their academic and social lives: missing proms, reduced interactions with friends, and upended extracurricular activities were common themes. Youth of color shared similar experiences but were also more likely to point out the overlapping systems of oppression that were highlighted by the pandemic. Youth of color tended to speak more often on issues of racial and

Black and Hispanic Connecticut residents were more likely to leave home for work during the pandemic, to lack health insurance or a primary care provider, and face a level of economic vulnerability that made the consequences of missed work more dire. They were the most likely to get COVID, to have underlying conditions that made complications more likely, and to die from the virus. They lost jobs at higher rates during the economic downturn. Often, they were the last to receive access to the resources that helped keep people safe, including tests and vaccines.⁷

– [CT Health Foundation](#)



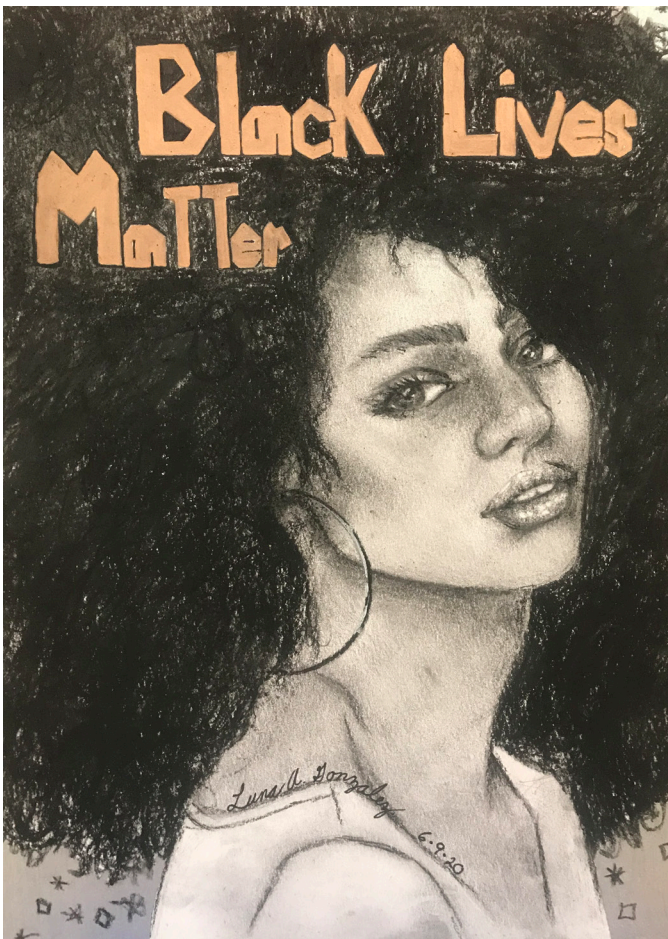
According to a Washington Post-Ipsos Survey, teens say political divisions, health costs, racial discrimination and gun violence are biggest threats to their generation.⁸

— [Washington Post](#)

social justice, explicitly pointing out the glaring inequities in policing that were globally challenged following the police murder of George Floyd. Many pointed to examples either in their own lives or the lives of those they cared about to demonstrate the impact of these challenges. Whether it was less income due to job loss or a harrowing traffic stop, Black and Brown youth shared stories where they experienced racism, discrimination, or other inequities. Young people of Asian descent also specifically spoke of the sustained and unrelenting impact of being the targets of inflamed slurs and discrimination. When sharing their experiences, they often made direct reference to the context of the vitriolic presidential leadership at the pandemic's onset.

When white participants reflected on questions of injustice, many spoke about their own burgeoning awakening. For some, the marches and demonstrations in the summer of 2020 sparked new motivation to learn about and gain a deeper understanding and awareness of long-standing racial inequities. Across the board, for many young people that submitted, the racial justice demonstrations of 2020 were their first time being engaged in civil disobedience or collective actions. Collages, poems, and essays described the impact being in a crowd of people united for a common cause had on them.

Youth of color who described residing in suburban communities or largely white schools also shared examples of their own shifting political awareness, describing how they were now seeing and reckoning with the past and present biased and racist actions of others in their schools or communities. Some participants discussed discomfort with challenging racist statements made by classmates and “friends”, particularly when the incidents went unremarked upon by educators or other adult authority figures. These youth expressed a profound tension with wanting to feel cherished and respected, along with a deep sense of pain and confusion at how peers and society-at-large could participate in this prejudice. Other young people shared feeling emboldened and inspired to take public stands for justice which they might not have taken before.



LEFT: Luna, 17, BLM Charcoal

“The fight for justice is far from over, but we are ready.” – Jazlyn (she/her), 17, Tolland

What We Can Do

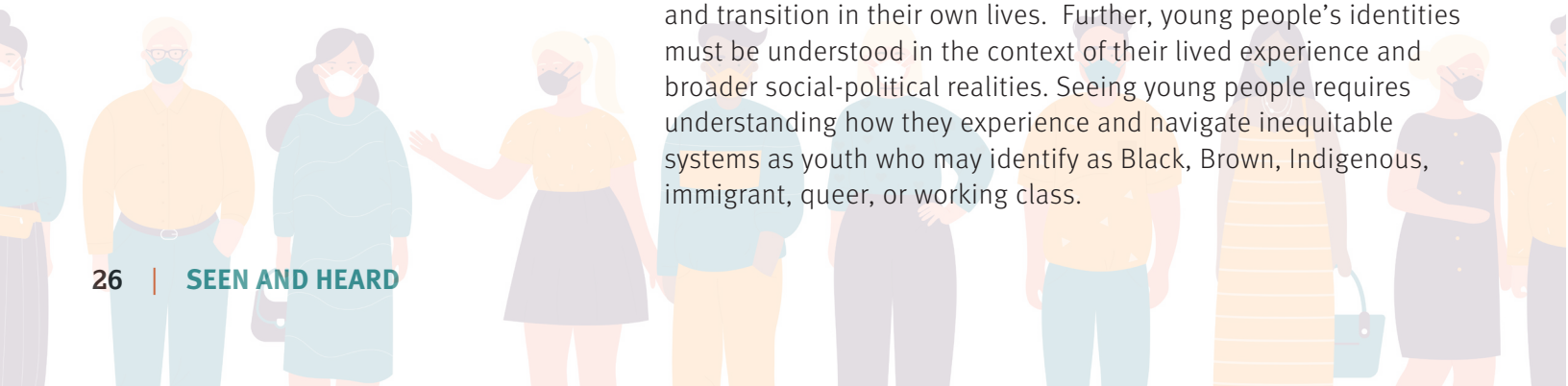
Young people shouldered a tremendous weight during the watershed events of 2020. It may be tempting to believe the precipitating events of the pandemic and racial justice uprisings are now two years behind us, the reality is the reverberations are still making themselves known.

Young people know what is and what is not working for them, their families, and their communities. Yet, those in positions of authority with access to resources and power to make decisions seldom ask young people their perspective and analysis, what they need, want, envision – much less heed the possibilities and solutions they voice. Young people are incredibly creative and innovative. Historically, their bold vision for a more just future has propelled our country’s movements for change. It is not young people’s responsibility to “fix” this current crisis, but there is also no real, lasting way out of it without them.

Any future work undertaken in the name of serving and supporting young people must honor the complexity of their realities and center what youth need and deserve in this moment and beyond. The philanthropic sector can and should act in alignment with these recommendations:

1 Prioritize youth voice and partnership. Make understanding what young people think, see, and experience a critical component of the design and development of any program or strategy, and compensate them for their engagement in the process. Take what they say as seriously as facts, statistics, and other data.

2 Acknowledge that young people hold multiple identities. Refrain from taking a one-dimensional view of young people. They are more than just students, clients, or participants in an after-school program. They are brothers, sisters, children, caretakers, income earners, and adolescents in significant moments of growth and transition in their own lives. Further, young people’s identities must be understood in the context of their lived experience and broader social-political realities. Seeing young people requires understanding how they experience and navigate inequitable systems as youth who may identify as Black, Brown, Indigenous, immigrant, queer, or working class.



3 Expand the definition of “youth.” Often, programs directly supporting young people end at age 18, once youth graduate from high school. Young people over the age of 18, whether in college or navigating the workforce, are in a pivotal period of life transition, and often lack access to the supports focused on their ongoing growth and development as young adults not just as students or workers.

4 Invest in spaces that support young people to process, contextualize, and take organized action to advance change. Young people’s submissions undoubtedly revealed glaring gaps in services for youth. But submissions also made clear that we can’t “service” or “program” our way out of the structural inequities young people are facing. Youth need collective spaces with their peers and adult allies to discuss, explore, and unpack the connections between their identities, lived experiences, and systems and structures they encounter on a daily basis. They also need spaces to act. It is notable that across submissions young people were more likely to talk about what they experienced than what they want to see. This is not for lack of vision, but is a reflection of the need to build more opportunity platforms that afford young people the space and support to exercise agency for change. Resourcing youth organizations that build young people’s critical consciousness and engage young people in community organizing for racial and social justice will support their holistic development while also transforming systems.

5 Invest in social-emotional wellness and mental health supports that respect youth voice and agency. Young people spoke with resounding clarity about the need for more comprehensive mental health supports. This also requires thinking about health and wellness in an innovative way that extends beyond traditional service delivery models and accounts for the particular impact of systemic inequity and oppression on young people’s well-being.

6 Ensure that your funding strategies explicitly name and work to address the deeply entrenched race and class inequities in our state which create and perpetuate the structural obstacles and barriers young people face. Short-term interventions that respond to the symptoms or indicators of need are often vitally important, but lasting change demands attention to the structural root causes. This also requires funders to think about connections across generations and across the issue-area silos that drive funding priorities.

About The Funding Partners



The Leever Foundation

Founded in 1991 by Harold and Ruth Ann Leever, [The Leever Foundation](#) is a private foundation dedicated to supporting opportunities for people in Waterbury Connecticut, especially children, to fulfill their potential. By working collaboratively with communities, learning experientially and staying grounded in a core set of values, the foundation is steadfast in its support of place-based transformational change efforts towards a just and equitable society.



nellie mae EDUCATION FOUNDATION

[The Nellie Mae Education Foundation](#) is committed to using our power and privilege as a philanthropic institution to advance racial equity in public education. We champion efforts to prioritize community goals that challenge racial inequities and advance excellent, student-centered public education for all New England youth. We are focusing our work strategically on addressing structural racism and white supremacy in our education system, so that all youth have access to an excellent and equitable public education.



PERRIN FAMILY FOUNDATION

[The Perrin Family Foundation](#) envisions a society free from systemic oppression and communities where Black and Brown Youth exercise their innate power and live fully, at ease, in joy and liberation. Focused on the state of Connecticut, we invest in and cultivate support for an ecosystem that builds the collective leadership and power of Black and Brown youth in order to advance movements for racial and social justice.



RITTER FAMILY FOUNDATION

[The Ritter Family Foundation](#) believes every child has the right to a quality education and social, emotional and physical support and learning, regardless of the zip code in which he or she is born. The foundation invests in and partners with organizations that work to improve the opportunity, access and quality of services for children and families in under-resourced communities. Its investments are aimed at improving children's outcomes through community-based systems solutions and where the potential leverage to improve equity and outcomes is the greatest.

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