



Youth Transition Funders Group

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Investing in the Well-Being and Well-Becoming of America's Young People:
Recommendations for Philanthropy,
Policy, and Practice

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Older adolescence and emerging adulthood are pivotal periods of growth and development. During this time frame, young people experience distinct developmental milestones that are critical for becoming healthy, connected, and productive adults. This developmental phase is rich with possibility and promise as young people develop and understand their identities, begin to make their own decisions, pursue education and employment goals, explore and adopt a values system, and develop and deepen their relationships. Some young people become parents during this time, charged with the responsibilities of caring for their own children’s health and development.

During this time of growth and transition, young people can also experience increased vulnerability and risk. They may become disconnected from family, school, or work. They may lack access to physical and mental health care. They may engage in risky or unsafe behaviors or environments. They may experience homelessness or housing instability, the child welfare or justice systems, or—as is often the case—some combination. Young people of color experience the compounding and pervasive impacts of racialized trauma and systemic racism.

What happens during this significant developmental period has long-lasting implications on a young person’s present well-being and future well-becoming. For those farthest from opportunity or most held back, navigating this developmental phase can be particularly challenging. Without healthy resources and supports, it can be hard to deal with anticipated life challenges—in a learning environment, living situation, or in the workplace—as well as unexpected and unprecedented challenges, such as a global health pandemic or spikes in racial violence.

Well-being or “wellness” is a human condition of thriving, characterized by health and fulfillment.

Wellness is not a static state of being, rather a continual developmental process. The process of “well-becoming” is about becoming prepared to experience that state in the future.

To move toward wellness and well-becoming, young people need strong relationships, healthy family and family-like connections, and social networks to manage their health, to succeed in school, to locate a place to live, and to move into a career. They need ample and equitable opportunities to acquire new knowledge, develop and practice new skills, and safely struggle or fail. They need the supports to succeed personally, socially, and economically.

Well-being and well-becoming have to do with the levels and quality of supports and opportunities young people experience, to what extent they are supported by nurturing families and communities, and the ways in which public systems, policies, and practices are crafted to support their positive growth and development.

Young people are growing up and transitioning into adulthood during especially challenging times. The cost of inaction, inadequate investments, and the continued perpetuation of historic inequities is great.

Leading with Well-Being: The Role of Philanthropic and Public Leaders

How philanthropy and public and private leaders craft policies and practices to support youth and young adults, particularly those hardest hit and most held back, can have **significant, lasting, and transformative impacts** for these young people and for creating a **productive and equitable society**.

We cannot continue with business as usual. Narrow and uncoordinated approaches have historically not succeeded in significantly improving outcomes for the nation's most vulnerable young people.

To truly support the healthy development and successful futures of young people, system leaders, policymakers, and public and private funders need **a common framework to guide transformational initiatives and investments directed toward the well-being of young people. A comprehensive, science-based concept of "well-being" can serve as a powerful coagulating agent to support that alignment.**

Most recently, public and private leaders' national conversations have highlighted the need to move toward transforming current approaches to serving young people and families toward a system that is centered on young people and their well-being, justice, equity, and healing. As we consider the history and evolution of child welfare, education, youth justice, health, and employment, **the question becomes—what do we want youth-serving systems to look like, today and in the future?** This journey of transformation necessarily requires prioritizing wellness based on principles and commitments that are holistic and life-course-oriented.

This document is intended to support those efforts, offering definitions, reframed language, and organizing concepts that can be used in any transformational effort. Please refer to the full publication for detailed presentations of the framework and policy and practice recommendations.

The Relationship Between Racial Justice and Well-Being

Racial and ethnic equity is a foundational condition for young people's well-being and well-becoming. The detrimental impact of racism across life domains is a public health crisis. The evidence of the impact of racism on health indicators and outcomes is undeniable. Disparate access to education, wealth, physical safety, and fairness and justice is traumatizing. For Black and brown young people, trauma is constant, compounded, and historic.

The racial violence and uprisings in 2020 drew attention to long-standing inequities and highlighted the need to act with urgency to dismantle ineffective

and often harmful systems and to eliminate structural racism in all institutions. The glaring health disparities of COVID-19, the deaths of African Americans at the hands of police, and the improper care and physical restraint of youth in group care institutions have further exposed historic, systemic inequities.

Public agencies are often reactive and punitive, and they can initiate or exacerbate rather than heal trauma. Further, they operate by racist, classist, and pervasive systemic factors that have led to the inequitable distribution of resources and low-quality support services for children and families of color. To achieve racial equity, we must be proactive and strengths-based in supporting young people, families, and communities. This requires a seismic culture shift, and the unlearning of existing practices and beliefs that are deeply rooted in the approaches of all systems that serve and support youth, families, and communities.

Well-being is inextricably linked to racial justice, and an intentional focus on that unlearning process to dismantle racist policies and practices is essential for realizing the well-being and well-becoming of young people of color. Once dismantled, we must embrace new learning to strategically replace and rebuild what has been eliminated.

Youth Well-Being and Well-Becoming Across Public Systems

Comprehensive attention to holistic and lifelong well-being for youth and young adults is everybody's responsibility. Systems serving children, youth, and families each have a particular focus, mission, and realm of responsibility, whether that is educating young people, supporting their physical or mental health, maintaining their safety, or ensuring community safety. **But no one system has responsibility for the whole young person.** While systems do place a value on overall well-being, the specific value and role of each system as it relates to achieving well-being is often poorly defined. The fact that no one system specifically "owns," articulates, or identifies well-being as a critical and foundational value for the young people it serves demonstrates the challenge funders, community leaders, and advocates face when seeking to engage these systems around the vital need for investments in improved well-being outcomes.

All young people interface with multiple systems, including health care and schools. For vulnerable youth with trauma, abuse, neglect, and/or social-emotional challenges, the number of systems they interface with explodes exponentially.

With the introduction of each new system, hurdles and barriers to well-being arise. When multiple systems are involved in a young person's life, at best, barriers to well-being are created as a result of a lack or a perceived lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities. When a lack of clarity exists, accountability for well-being outcomes drops.

Every system that serves youth and young adults has a role and a responsibility to support comprehensive, holistic, and lifelong well-being. **Clearly articulating those roles and responsibilities benefits not only individual young people who are served, but also the ability of each system to be able to help young people achieve goals and experience well-being.**


Framework for Youth and Young Adult Well-Being and Well-Becoming


Well-being is a human condition of thriving, characterized by health and fulfillment.


Well-being is not a state of being that one achieves and lives in for a lifetime. Defining for oneself, moving toward, and achieving well-being is a continual developmental process beginning at infancy and continuing throughout life. Indeed, well-being is the state of health and fulfillment, while the term **“well-becoming” is about being prepared to experience that state in the future.** To move toward well-becoming, young people need opportunities, supports, and relationships to develop essential skill sets and resources to navigate life's ups and downs in healthy ways that work, enabling them to deal with challenges, to see opportunity in the future, and to realize success.

This framework offers an ecological model for defining both the necessary elements for the experience of well-being and the process of well-becoming within five domains, and specifically geared toward older youth and young adults. Equity and inclusion are essential aspects of well-being, and principles of equity are infused into each domain, as well as being included as a distinct and critical domain.


The five well-being and well-becoming domains are as follows:

 **Physical Health and Safety:** All young people should have the opportunity and supports—through family, community, and public systems—to maximize their physical health, strength, and functioning, be physically safe and free from violence, abuse, and neglect and have basic needs met.

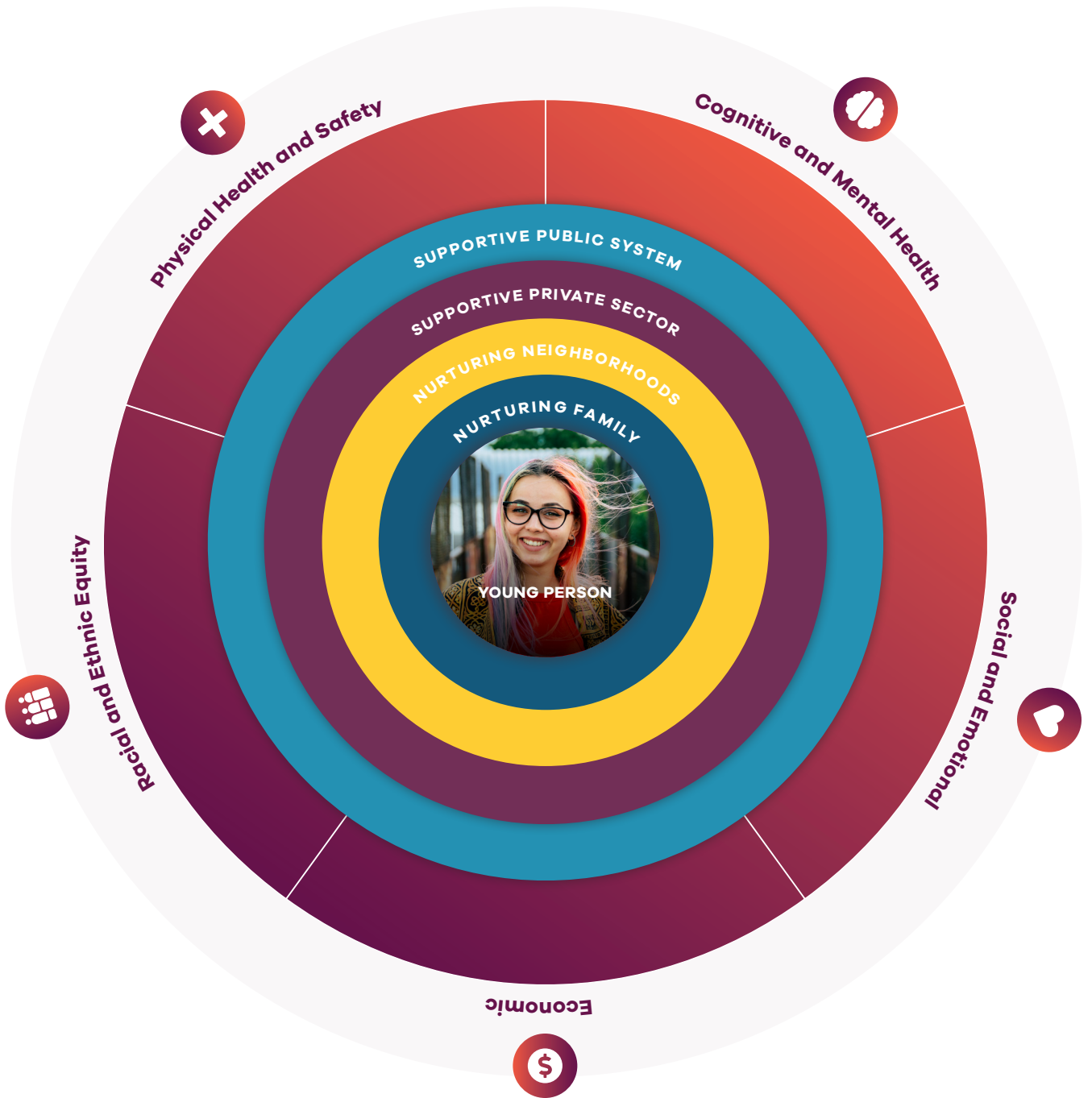
 **Cognitive and Mental Health:** All young people should have the opportunity and supports—through family, community, and public systems—to experience continuous cognitive health and intellectual growth and to optimize mental health, managing any mental health issues as they arise.

 **Social and Emotional Well-Being:** All young people should have the opportunity and social supports—from family, community, and public systems—to cultivate a strong and resilient self-identity and supportive and nurturing relationships.

 **Economic Well-Being:** All young people should have the opportunity and supports—through families, community, the private sector, and public systems—to obtain the learning and work opportunities needed to experience economic security and advancement and to accrue the financial and social capital needed to afford and access quality education, employment, and housing.

 **Racial and Ethnic Equity:** All young people should have the opportunity—through family, community, and public systems—to be treated with fairness and respect, have equitable access to opportunity, and have their wellness not determined by race or ethnicity.

A Framework for Well-Being



Environments that Enable and Encourage Well-Being

Young people are at the center of this framework. Young people must be central actors in defining and achieving well-being and must be given the knowledge, power and opportunities to exercise voice and choice. Yet, young people cannot and should not stand alone in this growth process. All young people affect and are affected by their family, community, and public systems.

Experiencing a safe and nurturing family (or family-like relationships) throughout life is foundational for healthy growth and development. For some young people, separation from family has occurred as a result of placement in the child welfare, justice, or residential care system. When this is the case, the system has the added responsibility of ensuring that the parenting roles described in this framework are met, through their own action as well as their work in partnership with the young person's family. Families play a critical role across well-being domains—modeling healthy behavior, providing support and affirmation, creating conditions for growth and development, and helping to access new opportunities.

Some older youth and young adults have children themselves. The framework includes the unique well-being conditions required for young parents to raise children and the unique and distinct supports and services they may need to fulfill their parenting role in healthy ways, while continuing to grow and develop themselves.

Neighborhoods play a critical role in supporting the well-being and well-becoming of youth and young adults. Those local organizations and individuals that operate and live nearby offer significant learning opportunities, healthy environments, and sources of positive role models and support. The faith community, local nonprofits, and service providers can play a powerful role in supporting well-being.

Private sector partners represent another important setting that can contribute to the healthy development of young people. The private sector includes employers, financial institutions, private hospitals and health care organizations, and others. These organizations can offer significant opportunities and resources to young people in how they live, learn, and work.

The final circle in this ecosystem are **government and public systems**. This setting broadly includes federal, state, county, and local offices as well as the public agencies that interact with and serve young people and their families. **Government and public systems have enormous power, reach, and resources. They can harm well-being, or they can promote and protect it. Given that power, the recommendations included in this document largely focus on these public system and governmental leaders.**

Please refer to Table 1 in the full publication for a detailed cross-walk of well-being domains by environments, describing the full range of intrinsic skills and capacities of individual young people, as well as opportunities and supports offered by families, communities, private sector partners and government and public systems to promote young people's well-being.

Recommendations for Youth System Leaders, Policymakers, and Public and Private Funders to Improve the Well-Being of Vulnerable Youth and Young Adults

1

Support and elevate the leadership of young people and their families.

2

Actively and intentionally design and implement anti-racist strategies to mitigate the impacts of racial injustice on young people and to build a more just society.

3

Deconstruct harmful policies and practices that are inconsistent and incompatible with well-being.

4

Reorient and transform youth-serving systems toward well-being and racial justice.

5

Create policies and practices that promote youth wellness and invest in essential supports for well-being and well-becoming.

6

Create and invest in policies and practices that include employers as essential partners in offering economic opportunities and providing employment supports to young people.

7

Identify and customize support for vulnerable youth populations within youth-serving systems, and engage in intentional and meaningful cross-systems alignment, investment, and coordination to build on their unique strengths and address their diverse needs.

8

Invest in ongoing research and evaluation.

9

Develop effective financing and other investment strategies to support the implementation of well-being and well-becoming recommendations.

Conclusion

To move toward wellness, young people need strong relationships, healthy family and family-like connections, and social networks to manage their health, to succeed in school, to locate a place to live, and to succeed in a career. They need ample and equitable opportunities to acquire new knowledge, develop and practice new skills, and safely struggle or fail. They need the supports to succeed personally, socially, and economically. This document provides a robust framework for understanding well-being in an equitable, inclusive, and holistic context and offers a series of recommendations to transform public systems and communities to nurture and enhance lifelong well-being for vulnerable young people as they make the transition into adulthood.

Young people are growing up and transitioning into adulthood during especially challenging times. The cost of inaction, inadequate investments, and the perpetuation of historic inequities is great. The benefits of strategic, thoughtful, coordinated action and investment centered on well-being to support young people are nothing short of limitless.