



## ***Breaking Through Barriers: Elevating the Voices of Young People* Event Analysis Report**

### *Introduction*

For more than 25 years, the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) has provided professional learning events, resources, and supports for policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels regarding [specific youth populations](#). With the belief that those closest to the problem often have the solution, AYPF is committed to amplifying youth-voice in policymaking.

Traditionally, AYPF’s discussion groups are comprised of policymakers, researchers, state leaders, and most recently, practitioners. The impact of COVID-19 on the very young people we care most about encouraged AYPF to expand discussion groups to include the experts – that is, young people themselves. Thus, this summer (2020) AYPF hosted our first-ever youth-led virtual discussion groups. In these conversations, we engaged more than 15 young people across the country to discuss the myriad of barriers youths are facing through COVID-19 (check out this [blog post](#), including key-takeaways images). Our time together was spent discussing ways in which organizations like AYPF could be supportive of young people during troubling times, and there was one clear message: Young people are ready to be part of the change when given the chance!

### *Event Details*

The “*Breaking Through Barriers: Elevating the Voices of Young People*” event was a follow-up to AYPF’s prior engagement with young people over the summer. The goal of *Breaking Through Barriers* was to elevate the stories, voices, and talents of youths with previous experiences in the juvenile justice and foster care systems. The evening was dedicated to the most “vulnerable” young people with the goal of them leaving inspired to fight for the future they dream of and deserve.

Beginning the planning process, AYPF was intentional about working with systems-involved youth<sup>1</sup> to plan and execute this event- from beginning to end. With that in mind, AYPF hired two youth advisors, Marquez Davis and [Daftney Sanchez](#), with whom AYPF staff developed a solid relationship with prior to the creation of this event. This partnership was critical in the planning process, as we could not have possibly met the needs of the audience without Marquez and Daftne directly contributing to the creation and implementation of this project. AYPF also brought on board a former justice-involved youth as a consultant to support the planning and youth-adult engagement aspect of the event, Iliana Pujols, of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance. As a team, we participated in weekly meetings to thoughtfully co-create a successful youth-led event.

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<sup>1</sup> A young person with experience in the foster care or juvenile justice systems.



Throughout the planning process, Marquez and Daftney co-created the agenda, helped identify the content and artists highlighted throughout the event, and identified the most appropriate guest speaker. During the live event, they participated in the youth panel discussion and connected their lived experiences in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems to relevant topics such as the emotional long-term impact of systems involvement, financial trauma, and the influence the media has on vulnerable young people such as themselves. Included in this panel was another young advocate from Washington, DC, [Kenvin Lacayo](#). The evening's programming featured multiple pre-recorded pieces from [Casey Family Programs](#) youth advocates; spoken word, songs, and poetry from KJ Strong, [Performing Statistics](#), Raquel Perry, and [Gabrielle Zwi](#). Many of the submissions spoke to the issues a young person in the juvenile justice and/or foster care system face, including but not limited to, their emotional experiences, the reality of "Black America," and the need for gender equality. The culmination of the event featured an inspirational discussion with [Yasmine Arrington](#), the founder of [ScholarChips](#), a non-profit supporting youth

## **Guiding Questions for Panel:**

1. Can you recall what your mental health looked like during the time you were in foster care/while being a juvenile? How has that changed your life? What are some of the outlets you tapped into while in custody/care and/or during your lowest moments, and how did they help you cope with your reality?
2. What do you think financial trauma is and where do you think it comes from?
3. How do you think social media, or the media in general, influences a young person, their ideas of society, and their actions?
4. What advice would you give to another young person in America that is currently feeling isolated and lost?

with incarcerated parents. Yasmine shared her experiences with the juvenile justice system and ended with a message of hope for young people who are facing similar challenges.

Recognizing that there is often an inequality in compensation when engaging adults and young people, AYPF compensated each performer and participant appropriately for their time and contributions. We also acknowledged that this event could not have been successful without an engaging audience. As a result, we incorporated a way to incentivize them for their time. In between agenda items, AYPF utilized the break periods as a time to share song submissions and engage the audience in three trivia giveaways, specifically for young people 21 years and younger. Each trivia question provided an opportunity to engage the audience and educate them about the juvenile justice and foster care systems in America. Understanding that transportation, food equity, and finances are often a barrier, AYPF awarded the winners with Uber and Amazon gift cards.



Closing out the event, Maria and Iliana shared remarks about the importance of engaging young people in decision-making spaces, especially when they are being directly impacted by such decisions. The overall focus of the event was to inspire young people to become more engaged in advocacy around issues important to them and to hear directly from young people who share similar experiences as them.

## *What's Ahead?*

Reflecting on this event, it could not have been successful without the partnership with young people, and not including them would have perpetuated the same exclusionary actions we are actively resisting. Nationwide elected officials and folks in positions of power make decisions on behalf of individuals, many of whom share different experiences than those making the decisions. Specific to the juvenile justice and foster care systems, young people are rarely included in any processes that impact them directly. There is a statement, “*Nothing about us without us,*” that is applicable in every situation - whether planning an event or creating a policy.

Promoting the leadership of young people – and authentic partnership with young people – starts with giving them equal power in decision making and career opportunities. Below are three recommendations AYPF will implement to elevate our engagement with directly impacted young people moving forward:

1. **Build Staff Capacity**- Provide targeted professional development opportunities to cultivate staff skills and cultural-competence to productively engage young people from varying backgrounds.
2. **Move Towards Long-Term Commitment with Young People**- Make progress towards institutionalizing young people’s engagement at AYPF (e.g., Youth Council, Executive Board).
3. **Expand AYPF’s Network of Young People (14-28-year-old)** – Develop resources (e.g., microsite, tools, blog posts, etc.), and other strategies (e.g., awareness months campaigns, twitter chats) to expand AYPF’s network of young people.

These young people have experienced what it is like to be part of a system that cannot adequately serve their needs, and the only way we can address root causes that lead young people into these systems is by working **with** them to find solutions. Their feedback is critical and engaging them in work that impacts them is something that AYPF will continue to commit to as we engage with policymakers, educators, and researchers to facilitate conversations that lead to more informed policies.