



LEVERAGING RESEARCH TO IGNITE IMPACT

The Connecticut Opportunity Project's 2024 Annual Report



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MISSION

The mission of the Connecticut Opportunity Project is to invest in and help strengthen youth-serving organizations in Connecticut so they can work effectively, reliably, and sustainably with severely off-track or disconnected young people ages 14 to 26 in order to help them re-engage in and complete secondary education or a credential, then transition successfully to a post-secondary pathway leading to satisfying employment at a living wage that supports their self-sufficiency.

LETTER FROM OUR SENIOR PORTFOLIO DIRECTORS

As CTOP approaches the half-way mark in implementing its ten-year social investment strategy, we are taking the opportunity to step back and take stock of our progress to date relative to our three major goals.

CTOP's first strategic goal is to increase across its grantee partners the number of active program slots being delivered, which is a metric defined to mean that young people who are severely off-track from high school graduation or disconnected from education and the workforce are receiving the kinds and levels of support required to ultimately achieve long-term outcomes. Specifically, from a baseline of 0 in 2019, our target has been to increase the number of active slots to 1,080 by 2024 and to 2,500 by 2029. We are pleased to report that we have surpassed our target for 2024, with our grantee partners delivering 1,147 active slots this year, up from 925 in 2023. This increase represents another year of incredibly hard work on the part of CTOP's grantee partners, with our team's support, to build their organizational capacities and competencies to deliver transformative outcomes to the young people they serve.

CTOP's theory behind the active slot metric is that it serves as our early indicator of the number of young people likely to achieve intended outcomes of reconnecting to school or employment, and ultimately achieving self-sufficiency, which is our definitive measure of the social value that grantee partners will produce, with CTOP's support. This year delivered the strongest confirmation yet of this underlying theory, with the number of young people across our grantee partners maintaining education and employment at the 12-month mark following their program graduation rising to 178 in 2024 - a number that represents 85% of young people who had graduated from their programs in the previous year. With these results in hand, we can feel confident in the progress we are making relative to our second strategic goal - measurable improvements in young people's lives and prospects through sustained participation in a pathway to gainful employment.

Over the last few years, we have seen an accelerated trajectory in our third strategic goal to advance ethnic and racial equity by working to address systemic racism and structural dynamics that intensify challenges for severely off-track and disconnected young people who identify as Black and/or Latino/a. We started with an intentional shift in our decision-making around new partnerships, prioritizing the selection of those organizations run by and/or predominantly staffed by people of color - reflecting the population we support. We also designed and launched a multi-pronged, multi-year research initiative that complemented quantitative analysis of disparities in Connecticut with a qualitative analysis to bring forth the human experiences of the young people impacted by those disparities - particularly those who are Black and Brown. For the qualitative analysis, we sought out a research firm with experiential knowledge as well as methodological rigor, leading us to partner with Community Science, a research firm based out of Maryland that attributes their effectiveness to their diversity, cultural competence, and value of lived experience.

The development and publication of Dalio Education's research agenda over the last two years and accompanying public awareness campaign has provided a counternarrative to the often-negative representations of our target population of young people, generating a public conversation around their needs and opportunities for their futures. The catalytic impact of this research agenda, discussed further in this Annual Report, represents perhaps our team's greatest progress to date in working to elevate and address the systemic inequities that exacerbate challenges for the young people to whom we are dedicated. At the same time, as CTOP continues to evolve in response to the growing conversation spurred by our research, we remain committed to actively seeking new opportunities to advance our strategic goal around ethnic and racial equity through engagements aligned with our mission to support young people experiencing or at risk of disconnection across the state.

Our team looks forward with great excitement to continuing to build upon and accelerate our progress in these areas in the years ahead. We invite you to stay updated on our efforts through our website ctopportunityproject.org and by following us at @ctopportunity on X (formerly Twitter).

Adhlere Coffy & Amanda Olberg
Senior Portfolio Directors





LETTER FROM THE COMMUNITY ADVISORY GROUP

Dalio Education's initiative, the Connecticut Opportunity Project (CTOP), has a steadfast belief in the limitless potential of young people experiencing disconnection. They also recognize that realizing that potential requires the right supports, especially for those facing the most significant barriers. To help our state better understand and respond to the challenges young people face, they commissioned a three-part research series. The first report revealed a crisis: 119,000 young people in Connecticut are at risk of not graduating from high school or are disconnected from work and school entirely, with staggering consequences for each of their futures as well as for our state as a whole.

Following a second report that looked across the country to identify promising programs, practices, and policies that Connecticut could learn from, the final installment of the research series turned to young people themselves to inform our understanding of the problem and solutions. Through CTOP, Dalio Education commissioned Community Science to conduct a qualitative research study that interviewed 74 young people experiencing disconnection across Connecticut. They also assembled nine young people from Connecticut along with the four of us as professionals to form a Community Advisory Group (CAG) to advise the research team in understanding the Connecticut context and informing the collection and interpretation of data.

A core guiding principle in this final research project is that people with lived experience have the deepest knowledge of the challenges in their communities, as well as what solutions can really work to create lasting change. The research team didn't just consult with our advisory group as a formality; they worked with us as partners, strengthening the skills, technical knowledge, and confidence of the group, particularly its youth members, to channel lived experience into actionable recommendations. As it has for CTOP, we hope that this principle drives research and systemic-change efforts from other funders and strategic partners who care about the outcomes of young people experiencing disconnection by partnering with people most impacted to inform the approach and solutions.

In partnership with CTOP, we have leveraged our service on the CAG to advocate for systems-level change to re-engage 119,000 young people. Together, we are amplifying their voices and advocating for their futures. We hope that our findings, along with the work of CTOP and the tireless efforts of its grantee partners, continue to bring attention to Connecticut's crisis of disconnection, and most importantly, inspire action to create lasting and transformative change. The success of Connecticut hinges on the success of each of our young people.

In solidarity,

The Professionals of the Community Advisory Group

Vanessa Liles, PT Partners
Diego Lopez, COMPASS Youth Collaborative
William Johnson, William Casper Graustein Memorial Fund
Diondra Robertson, Our Piece of the Pie

YEAR IN REVIEW

CONNECTICUT'S UNSPOKEN CRISIS REPORT SERIES

To better understand the causes and consequences of disconnection and how to best re-engage young people, Dalio Education commissioned a series of three reports published over the last year.



Prepared by the Boston Consulting Group in October 2023, this report finds that approximately 1 in 5 young people in Connecticut between the ages of 14 and 26 are disconnected or at risk.

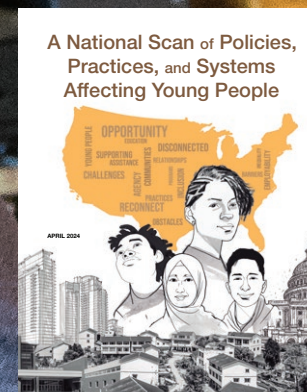
CTOP'S APPROACH

CTOP works alongside seven grantee partners to help strengthen their organizations and programs. We invest funding, coaching, and technical assistance to help our partners build the infrastructure required to deliver high-quality services that will meaningfully improve the lives of young people in our state, knowing that it takes years of dedicated effort to build the capacity needed to realize those outcomes.

TARGET POPULATION

The young people who are part of CTOP's target population face structural, institutional, and other complex challenges. The conditions they experience as a function of pervasive systemic inequities can lead to the presentation of risk indicators, which CTOP uses to describe our target population and differentiate among sub-groups within it to ensure we invest in nonprofits serving the young people we intend to reach and best support our grantee partners in their work. The target population of youth that CTOP serves is young people ages 14 to 26 who are severely off-track or disconnected based on the following risk indicators:

- **Severely off-track youth** are enrolled in high school but are at risk of dropping out, as indicated by chronic absenteeism, failure to earn credits in a timely way, and/or 2+ suspensions; and, they have been failed by the traditional high school environment to the extent that they need intensive additional supports to get back on track to graduate - whether provided within the traditional high school context or an alternative education setting - such as mentoring and comprehensive case management that incorporates trauma-informed practices.
- **Disconnected youth** do not have a high school diploma and are not enrolled in school or work; or, they do have a high school diploma but are not participating in the workforce in a sustained way. Additionally, disconnected youth have experienced one or more of the following traumatic life events: involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice system, previous involvement with the Department of Children and Families including placement in foster care, periods of homelessness, and perpetrating and/or being victimized by violence.



This report by MDRC published in March 2024 reviews the programs, practices, and policies across the country that are facilitative of, or create barriers to, supporting our target population.



Community Science's qualitative research published in August 2024 interviews young people in Connecticut to expand our understanding of their lived experiences of disconnection.

PRODUCING LONG-TERM OUTCOMES

85% of the young people graduating from our grantee partners' core programming maintained educational engagement or employment for at least 12 months.



CTOP INVESTMENTS IN 2024

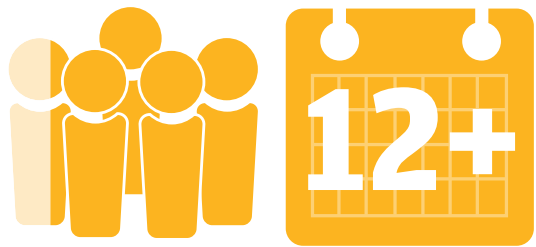
\$9,893,330 Over seven grantee partners



GRANTEE PARTNERS



85% of the young people graduating from our grantee partners' core programming maintained educational engagement or employment for at least 12 months.



All of CTOP's organizational development work with our grantee partners is in pursuit of our north star, which is to help young people change their lives by successfully reconnecting to education and gainful employment on a pathway to self-sufficiency. Before organizations can consistently produce these outcomes for young people, they must build their capacities and competencies to be able to do their work effectively, reliably, and sustainably, which requires an organizational investment of time and energy measured in years, not weeks or months. And because the obstacles that our young people face are extensive and complex, our grantee partners often work with young people for multiple years before they are ready to graduate successfully from their programs. For both of these reasons, we do not expect partners to generate the kinds of long-term outcomes we ultimately care about in the first few years of our work together, but we are starting to see those outcomes now.

Succeeding in Education and Employment

As CTOP now approaches the midway point of implementing its ten-year social investment strategy, we can begin to take stock of our grantee partners' growing track record of performance relative to our north star. CTOP's Key Performance Indicator (KPI) that provides the ultimate measure of our grantee partners' success and the value of our partnership, and for which CTOP holds itself accountable in terms of monitoring its own performance, is the number of CTOP target population youth who are still actively engaged in school or work 12 months following their graduation from a CTOP grantee partner's programming. In aggregate, across our grantee partners, the number of young people attaining this critical milestone in 2023-24 was 178 - which represents 85% of all young people who graduated from their programs in the previous year (see Figure 1).

For all of our grantee partners, their definition of program graduation requires that a young person has graduated high school, enrolled in post-secondary education or educational training, or secured employment, which means that CTOP's KPI of the number of young people graduating from our grantee partners' programming reflects not simply an output but a critical outcome. In 2023-24, the number of young people graduating from our grantee partners' programming was 201, up from 137 in 2022-23.

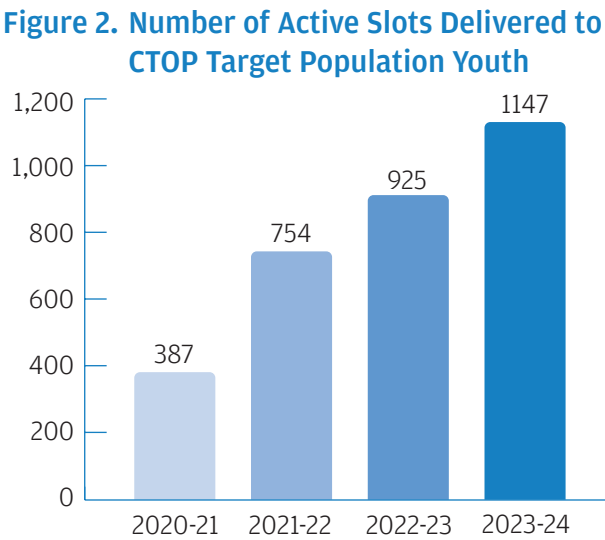
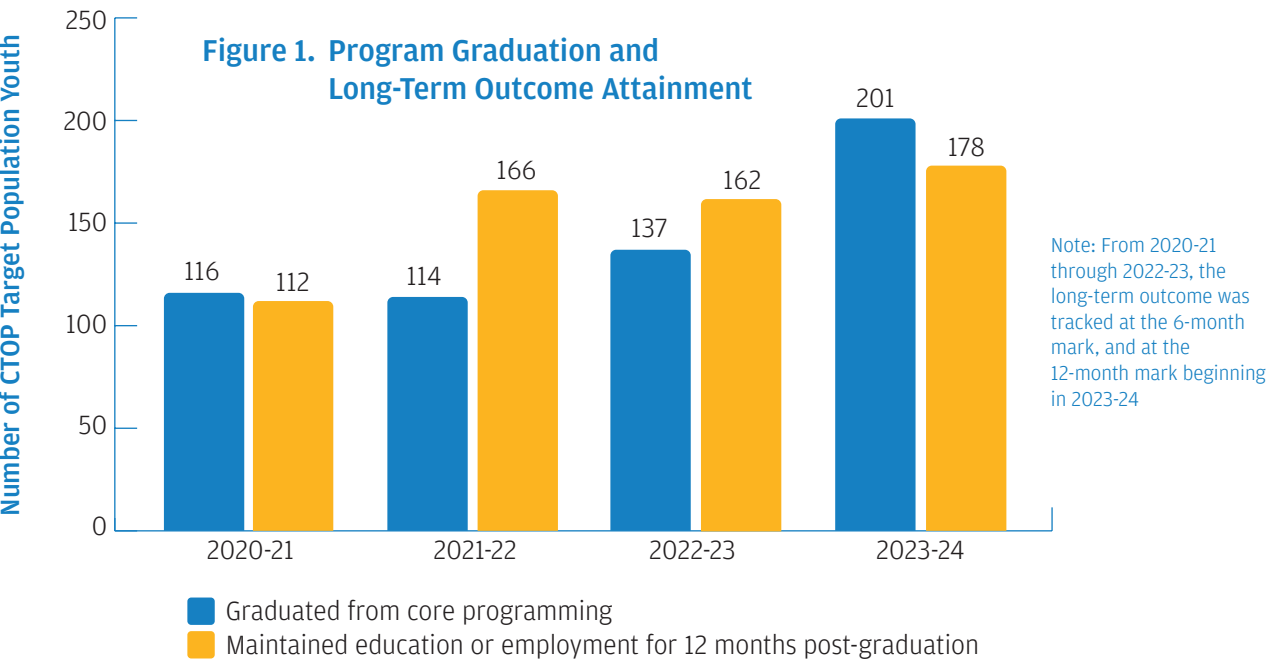
What Are Young People Getting from Their Programs?

As a proxy for how many young people currently being served by a program are likely to graduate, and to subsequently sustain their education or employment 12 months following program graduation, CTOP uses a KPI called the active program slot. To be considered in an active program slot, a young person must meet the program's enrollment criteria and receive the kinds and levels of services and supports that the organization's theory of change identifies as required to ensure that young person ultimately achieves its promised long-term outcomes. In contrast

to looking at the number of individuals served by a program, which is commonly used as a metric in the social services sector, the active program slot metric tells us what young people are actually getting from a program, and can therefore serve as an indicator of whether they are likely to truly benefit from it.

In each year of implementing CTOP's ten-year social investment strategy, the number of active program slots that our grantee partners have produced in aggregate has climbed steadily, reaching 1,147 in 2023-24 (see Figure 2) - even as some of our grantee partners have not yet reached the stage of organizational development where they are producing active program slots. The number of active program slots delivered in any given year continues to be significantly higher than the numbers of young people graduating from their programs and achieving long-term outcomes. These data align with our expectations because youth participate for multiple years in the programming of most of our grantee partners, which by definition means that only a fraction of youth enrolled in active program slots in any given year would be expected to have made the progress necessary to graduate in that year.

PERFORMANCE REPORT



GRANTEE SPOTLIGHTS

Catalyst CT works to ensure the safe and healthy development of youth, young adults, and families by actively engaging organizations, public officials, and community leaders around issues that matter most to the community.



For the last year, StreetSafe has spent on average, 2 hours with each of their clients during each successful in-person contact made, with an average of 5 contacts per month.

"I meet with Harry like four times a week," Gabriel says about his mentor from Catalyst CT's violence prevention program, StreetSafe Bridgeport, which works to reduce youth violence in the city by creating a safe environment where youth can develop relationships with outreach workers and share their challenges, concerns, needs, and hopes for the future. "The mentors at StreetSafe played a big role in helping me to be myself. They're always telling me, don't listen to what people think, always go for it if that's your dream, and don't be afraid to pursue your goal."

With the support of Harry and StreetSafe, Gabriel has remained focused on his goals despite distractions in his neighborhood. He says, "I don't put myself in a bad environment. I know a lot of people in gangs and involved in violence. My mom and dad have been to jail before. But I try to keep myself away from that." Instead, he meets with Harry and StreetSafe mentors at a local community center to eat, meet new people in the program, and think about and plan for his future. Harry has helped Gabriel to be more open, work on his mindset, and stay focused on his goals.

Gabriel knows his experience is not unique in Bridgeport and he plans to be part of changing that for young people in his hometown. So that he can better support and empower youth facing similar challenges, he joined the Bridgeport police cadets and plans to enroll in the police academy when he turns 21, as well as start his own nonprofit, the Bridgeport Youth Committee.

"I hate to hear that our young people can't live a life or go to school, get an education, and get a career. Instead, they're out there on the streets. My nonprofit is about advocating for youth, the challenges that they face every day, such as mental health, violence, brutality, and educational attainment. I want to be a voice for youth."

Gabriel wants to impart the lessons he learned from his StreetSafe mentors to the next generation of Bridgeport youth. "I want young people to stay away from the negative things. If you know that there's positive people around, stay around them so you can pursue your goal and be yourself."

** Formerly Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership (RYASAP)
This story uses a pseudonym.*

When Justin joined COMPASS as a 14-year-old, he didn't know what a social worker was. But now, four years later, he's enrolling in college to pursue a career as one.

Growing up in Hartford, Justin witnessed family members navigate life in the streets. But after meeting his Peacebuilder, Brian, he started to see another path forward for himself. He says, "Everyday, Peacebuilders are trying to teach you right from wrong and be there for you. Give you a support system. So, you don't think all the stuff you see day-to-day is the stuff you have to do."

Justin started meeting with his Peacebuilder regularly, engaging in tutoring, receiving therapy, and learning cognitive behavioral skills, which COMPASS teaches to help young people manage their emotions and change their behavior. **"Brian would pick me up and we talked about how I think, how I feel, what are my reactions, then how you can change. I learned how change can be a good thing. It might be hard to change, but it can positively impact you."**

Before, he says, "I would just do stuff for no reason, not thinking about the consequence at all. I got in fights or argued with people and stuff." Now, cognitive behavioral skills are becoming second nature to Justin. He says, "I don't realize that I'm using these skills sometimes, but then I use them, and I'll be like, oh, I just did that!"

With help from COMPASS, Justin got his driver's license and opened a bank account that he's now using for direct deposits of the wages he's earning in the organization's Training for Employment program, working at a food pantry while developing the skills he needs to be successful in the workplace in the future. "It's like training you for everything you need to become, to have a real job and so you don't have those hiccups when you're trying to start something good for yourself."

As Justin begins his pursuit of a degree in social work, he reflects on the impact that COMPASS had on his life. "Having social workers that work in here, I can go and talk to them and ask them for the steps to know how they did it and have someone to talk me through it." He pauses for a moment and then sums it up: "COMPASS prepared me."

This story uses a pseudonym.

Hartford, CT



COMPASS Youth Collaborative interrupts violence in the City of Hartford by building transformative relationships with youth at the center of the violence. COMPASS Peacebuilders provide youth the tools to create sustained behavior change and transition successfully to adulthood.

100% of young people served receive support from COMPASS in meeting their basic needs. Support may include securing food, clothing, and emergency housing, as well as covering fees for obtaining licenses and certifications.



66% of the CTVIP staff share lived experience with participants, which provides an entry point for relationship building with participants as well as living proof of the possibility and potential impact of turning their lives around.

Connecticut Violence Intervention and Prevention (CTVIP) is a group of trusted, trained community members that disrupt, prevent, and stop the spread of violence which results in trauma through crisis intervention and proactive relationships with the highest-risk youths and the institutions that impact their lives in the Greater New Haven area.



At age 13, Terrence began to get into trouble. And by 15, he was incarcerated. “It was hard to adjust,” he reflects back on his life in detention. One day, he received a mail slip that had Connecticut Violence Intervention and Prevention’s (CTVIP) logo on it. His mom let him know that someone named Tiger wanted to talk. Although hesitant and unsure, Terrence gave Tiger a chance. “I’m not the type of person to open up and tell someone my personal business and what I’ve been through, but after a couple conversations with Tiger it felt natural – like he’d been there my whole life. He told me what he had gone through, and I finally had someone who could understand.”

Tiger invested in Terrence: calling often, adding funds to the phone account, checking in on how he and his family were doing, and helping him to think about and plan for life beyond incarceration. In these conversations, Tiger used cognitive-behavioral skills to start helping Terrence to change his perspective. They worked on how to be present, identify his feelings, expand his emotional vocabulary, and shift his thinking to see life in a more positive way. “Step by step, I started to see how this could help me...I got comfortable with being uncomfortable.”

Terrence is on a different path and not looking back. He says, **“Tiger is my go-to person. Anytime I have a problem, I think about my resources first, how far I’ve come, what I have to lose, the pros and cons...I have a support system like no other.”**

Now at 19 years old, Terrence is a high school graduate, employed, and enjoying the opportunity to give back to his community by sharing his story with young people all over Connecticut to help them find themselves and a path forward that avoids the mistakes he made. He says, “If I can help one person change, I feel like I did a lot.”

And staff at CTVIP think so too. They are starting a junior Violence Intervention Professional program, and Terrence will be a program leader because of his commitment to young people disconnected from work and school or at risk of becoming so in New Haven.

“We look forward to his greatness,” Tiger says with a wise smile.

This story uses a pseudonym.

“I just turned 21 years old yesterday, and I’ve achieved every goal that I had set.” Simone is employed with a full-time job, owns a car, just moved into her own apartment for her and her son, and runs her own dessert business on the side. “I’m a completely changed person.”

If you asked her at 19, she might have thought about herself differently. She remembers how stuck she felt then. “I was in a really rough patch where I couldn’t find a new job, no matter how much I applied where I was looking. Nothing was working for me.”

But then a friend told her about Domus Kids and their transitional employment program, DomusWorks. There, Simone had the chance to engage in a variety of work experiences to explore what she liked and where she excelled. In tandem, she started working with a youth development specialist, Keeya, to build her professional skills, like emotional regulation and communication. Domus uses the Thoughts, Emotions, Behaviors (TEB) curriculum to teach their young people cognitive behavioral skills to help them build resiliency.

“If you’re having a bad day, TEB helps you regulate yourself and start over. If you’re having crazy thoughts, it helps you calm down and reset your brain to get through the situation you’re in. I use the TEB skills all the time,” Simone says. **“It has taught me so much about myself, how I present myself, how I speak... and definitely with dealing with other people’s emotions, too, because you can’t let that change how you react, or who you are. You have control of your own feelings.”**

Of the many social enterprises that Domus runs, Simone recalls, “The bakery was my favorite. I learned how to bake from scratch.” Keeya saw Simone’s leadership abilities and gave her increasing responsibilities. Soon, Simone says, “I was knocking orders out and helping the other girls.”

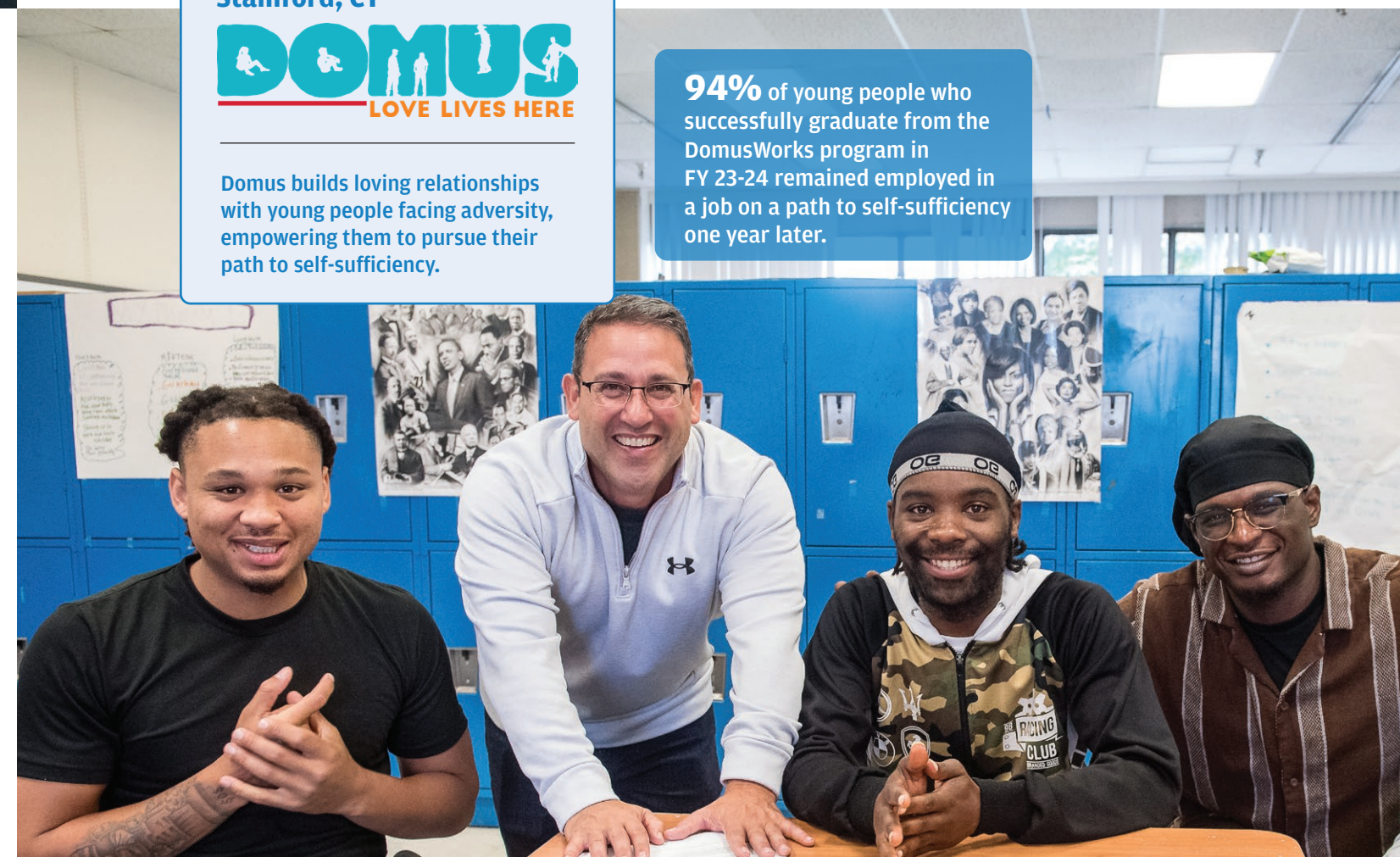
Simone is filled with love and gratitude for the people who supported her growth to help her get where she is today. “It just took some people to believe in me and give me a push. And Keeya did that.”

Stamford, CT



Domus builds loving relationships with young people facing adversity, empowering them to pursue their path to self-sufficiency.

94% of young people who successfully graduate from the DomusWorks program in FY 23-24 remained employed in a job on a path to self-sufficiency one year later.





Young people rotate through **8** different shadow shifts at Forge City Works to explore other areas of the restaurant business, including line cook, table runner, host, café counter service, barista, catering, bakery, and working in their grocery store.

Forge City Works serves people in the Hartford community who have barriers to employment by providing job training in the food and hospitality industry to help them achieve sustainable careers.

FORGE CITY WORKS

Hartford, CT

Jonah loved to cook for his dad growing up. He would make meals for him to take to work, often getting creative because his dad tended to be picky. “I already liked culinary...I found out about Forge City Works. I wanted to have some type of continued education after I dropped out of college,” he says, so he decided to apply for their job training program.

At Forge City Works, Jonah learned the inner workings of the restaurant and catering businesses that Forge City Works operates as social enterprises so that the participants of its job training program can gain real-world work experience while developing the soft and hard skills they need to succeed in the workforce. He participated in kitchen labs, shadowed every kind of work shift, and ultimately worked as an intern in the catering business, earning certifications to support his career growth all along the way.

Through his internship, Jonah found his path forward after his setback with college. “I want to have my own catering business and hopefully a personal chef business in the future,” he says.

In reflecting on everything he’s learned at Forge City Works to help him turn his dream into reality, Jonah says, **“I see everything that goes into it now. I know how to do inventory. I have customer service skills from working the front of the house. I never thought I would be able to expand my knowledge in that. I know how to handle cash, work with point-of-sale systems... I understand how the food reaches the table, and how it goes through multiple chains of command, how to make it all work.”**

Forge City Works helped Jonah to attain the necessary certifications to put him on his path forward too. “I have my food handling license, Food Allergy Certification, ServSafe Alcohol Certificate. Now, I’m studying to try to get my ServSafe Manager Certification too because I want to go all the way.”

Before coming to Forge City Works, Jonah wasn’t sure what path he should chart, and he didn’t have a support system. At Forge City Works, Jonah found, “There are a lot of people that support you there, but they also push you to want to do better.”

This story uses a pseudonym.

After immigrating to the United States at five, Seraphina moved around Connecticut a lot before settling in Hartford. “I had to attend about 7 different schools, and each school doesn’t pick up from where you left off from. So, education was kind of like a bit of a struggle, she says. Further complicating the multiple school transitions, her family also experienced language barriers. “We weren’t able to understand teachers or peers...and it wasn’t easy for them to understand us,” she reflects.

Despite these challenges, Seraphina graduated high school and enrolled in a local community college but never felt certain about her career path. “So, I just stopped school for a year. I had no intentions and wasn’t really looking to go back to school. I didn’t know which way I should go, really.”

That changed when she met Cecile, a Youth Development Specialist (YDS) at Our Piece of the Pie (OPP). Cecile shared a pamphlet with her for an Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) training, which piqued Seraphina’s interest because she remembered how much she enjoyed a welding class in high school. “They saw something within me,” Seraphina says with smile.

Cecile encouraged her to try the training to see if she enjoyed it and she did. With continued guidance from her YDS, she earned her OSHA-30 certificate and enrolled in Asnuntuck Community College’s Advanced Welding and Manufacturing program. OPP partners with Asnuntuck to provide opportunities for their young people to advance their education and attain certifications that further their careers. She remembers the feeling she had in her first few classes there: “It made me feel like this is where I actually belong.”

Seraphina and her YDS still check in regularly, sometimes daily – quick touchpoints to see how she is doing, find out if she needs support with school or personal items, and offer her new networking opportunities to expand her employment opportunities after she graduates.

Seraphina is on track to graduate and hopes to one day secure her dream job at Pratt & Whitney.

“I’m the first to actually attend college and finish college in my family. I’m going to show my bloodline that there is a way for us to be successful. There’s more than just poverty or struggles,” she says beaming with pride.

This story uses a pseudonym.



Hartford, CT

OPP

Our Piece of the Pie®

Our Piece of the Pie®, Inc. (OPP®) empowers youth with the key competencies needed to overcome barriers and succeed in education and employment.

In 2024, **82%** of OPP’s students who were enrolled in and eligible to graduate from post-secondary programming earned a vocational certificate or college degree.



Roca's mission is to be a relentless force in disrupting incarceration, poverty, and racism by engaging the young adults, police, and systems at the center of urban violence in relationships to address trauma, find hope, and drive change.

Roca 
Hartford, CT

93% of participants enrolled 24 months or longer had no new arrests, despite 76% previously having a history of arrest.

Esmé found herself in a Hartford juvenile detention center at fourteen, eight months pregnant. She remembers when her probation officer gave her a call to tell her about Roca Hartford Young Women's Program, which had just recently opened.

That's how Esmé was introduced to Jennie, a youth worker at Roca Hartford. "The first time I saw Jennie, she came to my house. We talked at the table. She was telling me about the program, what they offer, how they help. Then after I gave birth to my daughter, and they took my daughter from me, that's when I started coming into Roca, like every single day, doing classes, talking to people and Jennie, doing programming, and restorative circles."

Esmé reflects on her early days in the program and her relationship with Jennie that kept her coming back. "She's the one person that I can really say knows me. Jennie knows how I handle situations, my emotions, how to calm me down, Jennie just knows me. I don't know how else to explain it. She's always there for me, she always understood, she always heard me out and never judged. But she always told me when I was wrong, too, and asked me how can we fix it for the next time."

After a difficult conversation that turned into an argument, Esmé stopped talking to Jennie and the Roca staff. But Jennie didn't give up on her, Esmé remembers: "They came to my house, and they still reached out." Through Jennie's commitment to Esmé and Roca's continued relentless outreach, Esmé re-engaged.

Jennie worked with Esmé on developing skills to identify her feelings and change how she reacted to them, using cognitive behavioral skills that Roca teaches to help their young women regulate their emotions and make better decisions. "Now, when I get upset at things, I don't lash out. I don't do nothing. I remain calm, I take a deep breath... I've come a long way," she says.

Three years later, Esmé is more motivated than ever. **"I'm working on graduating from high school and when I'm older, I want to be a paramedic and a crime scene investigator. There's no such thing as giving up in my mind, like giving up is not a word and is not an option."**

This story uses a pseudonym.

PATHWAYS TO CAREERS

Youth who are severely disconnected



Results of efforts through pathway

EMPLOYED ON A CAREER PATH

EMPLOYED

Results of efforts of a single organization

Over this past year, CTOP launched a new strategic approach to help young people who are severely disconnected, meaning they are not ready, willing, or able to engage in youth development programming or employment because of their experience of repeated trauma, including exposure to violence, to become employed - and not just in any job, but one on a career path that can yield upward mobility for themselves and their families.

Rarely can one organization provide the full range of services that is required to support a young person over the course of this entire journey. To initially engage a young person who is severely disconnected, an organization needs to specialize in relentless outreach and related services such as crisis response, as well as the delivery of programming that develops a young person's readiness to engage in more traditional youth development programming. Meanwhile, young people preparing to enter and then subsequently grow along a career path need an organization that can provide a robust transitional employment experience that recreates as closely as possible the real-world work environment they will encounter upon program graduation and offers opportunities for the development of increasingly advanced soft and hard skills.

Through the new Pathways to Careers (P2C) strategy, CTOP facilitates the development of partnerships between two organizations where young people begin their journey with one organization and complete it with another, with the goal that young people experience a seamless delivery of a continuum of programming as each organization delivers the services in which it specializes while coordinating their work together as if they were one. CTOP's first P2C partners this year were COMPASS Youth

Collaborative and Forge City Works, who first engaged in a series of exploratory conversations and site visits to one another's organizations to ensure there was authentic mutual interest in the partnership, while learning more about each other's programs. This spring, the two organizations participated in a workshop series facilitated by CTOP to articulate the following core components of their P2C design:

- **How will we know young people are ready to be referred into the pathway?** What indicators of readiness in the areas of safety, skills and behavior, and basic needs will we use, and have we calibrated in a bi-directional way what those indicators really mean?
- **How will our two organizations work together as one?** How will we integrate the activities and dosage our programs provide individually, and what will be our referral process, as well as the cadence and design of our standing case conferencing meetings to coordinate our supports, along with our joint response when young people are not making progress as expected?
- **How will we know if we are working together well?** What metrics will we use to understand how young people are progressing and the quality of their experience in the pathway?

This summer, COMPASS and Forge City Works began operationalizing their P2C design by launching their referral process and case conferencing, with the first COMPASS young people to be enrolled at Forge City Works as part of their P2C partnership in the coming year.

As part of CTOP’s approach to capacity building, we create and facilitate opportunities for organizational learning across organizations that leverage the expertise that exists within the grantee cohort in furtherance of positive outcomes for severely off-track and disconnected young people. This past year, we hosted our annual grantee partner convening and piloted the Professional Development and Learning Community (PDLC).

CONVENING

Over 60 participants, from front-line staffers to the executive team across all seven grantee organizations, joined us at this year’s annual grantee partner convening for a full day of professional development. The CTOP team supported organization leaders in selecting and articulating a current challenge to share at the convening as a part of the highly valued Problem of Practice protocol. In small groups bringing together individuals across organizations, participants analyzed each organization’s defined challenge and collaboratively brainstormed potential solutions and next steps for the presenting organization to consider.

Participants also attended a panel bringing together key stakeholders in the work to reconnect our young people, including leaders from state agencies, including the Departments of Education,

Housing, Children and Families, and Mental Health and Addiction Services, as well as the Judicial Branch’s Court Support Services Division, the Governor’s Office, and community members who participated in the Community Advisory Group as a part of the Community Science research. The conversation explored how they all contribute to getting young people back on track and participants identified opportunities to build relationships and promote better coordination of efforts.

The convening concluded with grantee partner-led workshops that presented promising practices from their organizations, ranging from data collection to talent development to the design and implementation of various components of their programming, which they coached one another in considering how to implement in their own organizations.

98%

of respondents said that during the Convening they explored a strategy or idea they can bring back to and implement in their organization.

96%

of respondents said that the Convening will help my team to improve their work.

100%

of participants said that the PDLC series was relevant or very relevant to their professional development needs.

PDLC

The pilot cohort of the PDLC was designed to support recently promoted mid-level managers and emerging leaders working at our grantee partner organizations in developing the skills necessary to succeed in their new managerial roles. In this five-month cohort, 11 participants engaged in workshops with subsequent one-on-one coaching sessions on a monthly basis to develop and then deepen their understanding and application of the skills introduced in the workshops. This body of work, led by Portfolio Director Samantha Miller, covered the following leadership topics: shifting your mental model, building skills and systems of coaching, conducting crucial conversations, setting goals for supervisees, and supporting them to achieve expectations. As a result of this workshop series, participants began applying their learnings and shifting the culture of their organizations.

The CTOP team will continue to evolve our learning agenda in the year ahead as we continue to be responsive and strategic in supporting our grantees in becoming sustainable, outcomes-producing organizations. We look forward to developing even more opportunities for them to learn and grow alongside one another with our support.

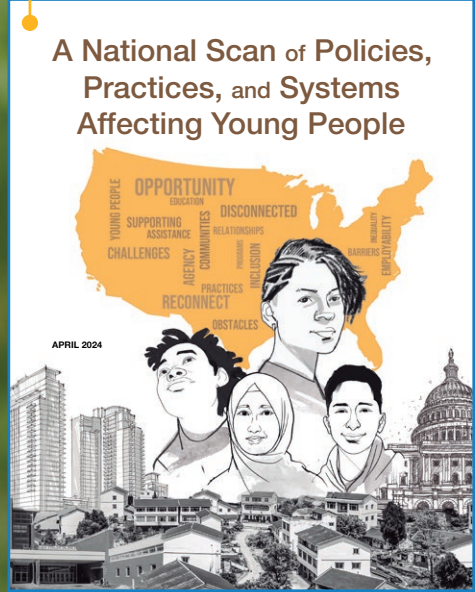


LEARNING AGENDA

To better understand the causes and consequences of disconnection and how to best re-engage young people, Dalio Education commissioned a series of three reports published over the last year. In October 2023, the first report in this series, prepared by Boston Consulting Group (BCG), found that 63,000 young people ages 14 to 26 are not engaged in prosocial institutions and/or not on track for gainful employment. To learn more about the circumstances that lead to disconnection and how to effectively re-engage young people, we commissioned two additional research reports.

REPORT 2

A NATIONAL SCAN



Published in March 2024, research from MDRC reviews programs, practices, and policies across the country to identify those that help reconnect young people to school, work, and other social supports.

To learn more, read the full report:
<https://www.ctopportunityproject.org/national-landscape-scan>

52
Programs Scanned

32
Programs with Evaluations Analyzed

25
Experts Interviewed

State Policies Reviewed

METHODOLOGY
Of those programs best equipped to engage young people, key characteristics include job preparation programming; mental health services including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT); services to help young people earn education credentials; and case management to develop strong relationships and implement supportive services.

Key strategies to promote participant engagement include strong and meaningful adult-participant relationships; training and development for staff to support their work and retain them in their roles; partnerships with other programs to connect participants to resources like SNAP benefits, educational opportunities, and legal assistance; and flexibility in the design of how participants move through a program's phases and activities.

POPULATIONS OF INTEREST		
16 to 26 years old	AGE	18 to 30 years old
Not engaged in work, school, or a training program	EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND WORK	Engaged or not engaged previously disconnected
Varying levels: none to extensive	LEGAL SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT	Past or current involvement

YOUNG PEOPLE NOT WORKING OR IN SCHOOL OR TRAINING

REENTRY

CONNECTICUT'S UNSPOKEN CRISIS REPORT SERIES

REPORT 2

A NATIONAL SCAN

PROMISING STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

- **Low case loads:** fewer than 12-25 youth per case manager
- **Mentoring:** transformative relationships with youth are key to their engagement
- **Culturally competent mental health services:** programs with in-house services more easily provided youth with help

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

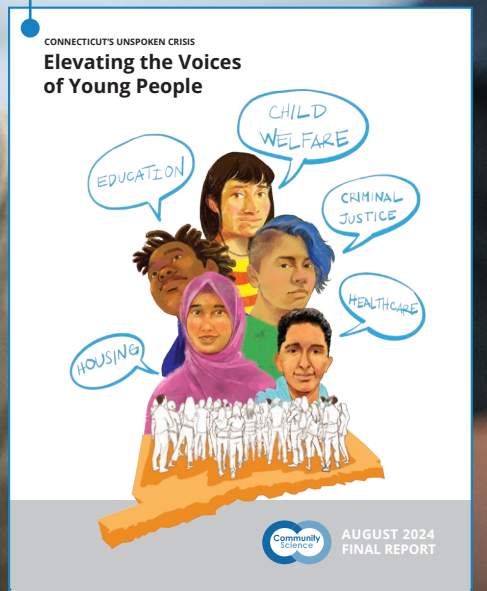
- **Transitional employment:** builds participants job readiness while providing income
- **Partnerships with local employers:** help develop job opportunities for young people
- **Ongoing job support:** follow up services promote job retention and persistence in school

KEY POLICY & SYSTEM IMPLICATIONS

- **Fund programs at true cost** by supporting the full scope of need for evidence-based programs and practices
- **Increase service coordination and data sharing** among systems that serve young people
- **Test policies and partnerships** for large-scale **employer engagement** in employing young people in quality jobs
- **Remove policy barriers that prevent access** to employment, housing, safety net benefits, and mental health services for justice-involved people

REPORT 3

ELEVATING THE VOICES OF YOUNG PEOPLE



In a report published in August 2024, Community Science brings to life the data reported by BCG by interviewing young people across Connecticut currently navigating the crisis of disconnection, informing our understanding of root causes and implications.

To learn more, read the full report:
<https://www.ctopportunityproject.org/elevating-voices>

METHODOLOGY

In our research study, youth participated in interviews that lasted about one hour.

We wanted to understand:

- How youth view themselves and their community
- The kinds of successes and challenges youth experience
- Resources youth consider useful to support progress toward their goals

Our questions were aimed at helping us understand the stories of young people who are not connected to work or school

- Experience living in their specific neighborhood or community
- History with different systems (e.g., education, housing, child welfare)
- Plans and hopes for the future (goals and aspirations)

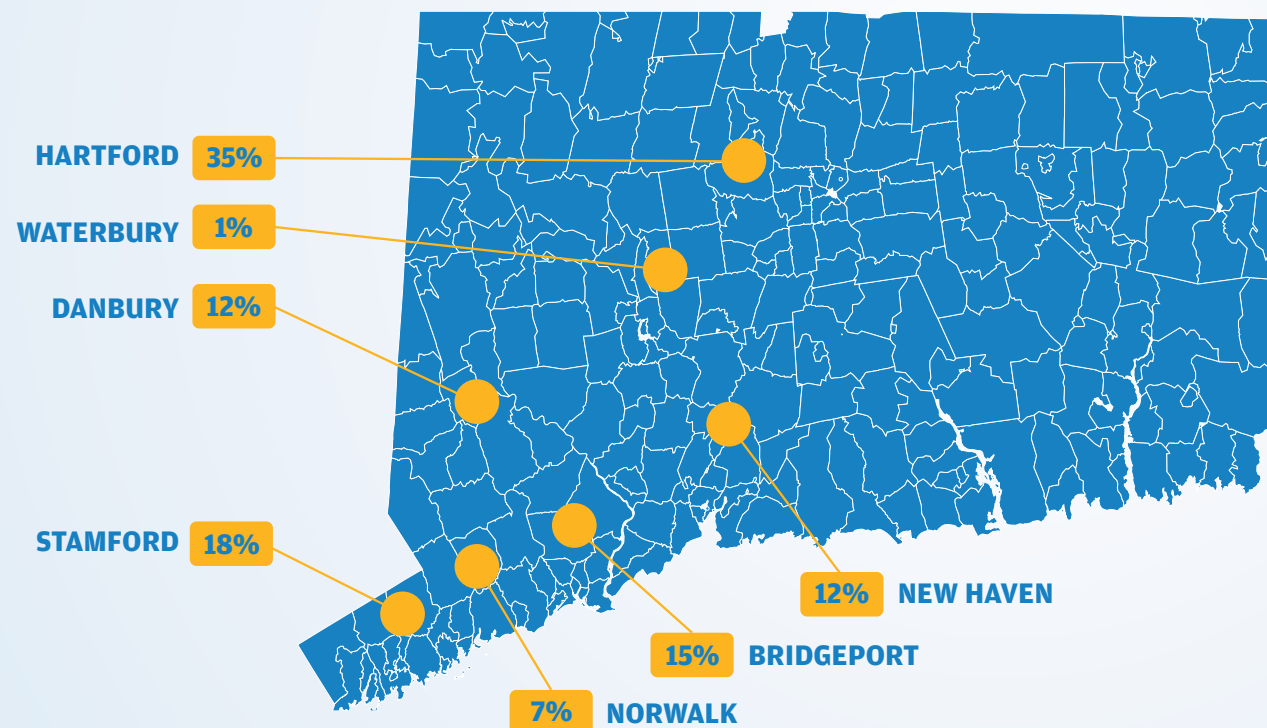
REPORT 3

ELEVATING THE VOICES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT TOTAL BY CITY (N=7)

Most Participants lived in or were from Hartford, with substantive participation of at least nine or more participants from Stamford, Bridgeport, New Haven, and Danbury. 57% of participants identified as African American/Black and

64% of participants identified as Hispanic/Latino(a), aligning with findings from the BCG and MDRC studies that Black and Brown youth are more likely to experience disconnection.



COMMUNITY ADVISORY GROUP COMPOSITION

To support the research team with sensemaking of the qualitative research from interviews with young people, a Community Advisory Group (CAG) worked together to provide local context for the study team and deepen their understanding of how young people experience disconnection in Connecticut. Their participation informed the research and ensured the report reflected and prioritized the voices and lived experiences of young people in our state.

13

MEMBERS

The CAG membership consisted of 13 members, 9 youth and young adults and 4 professionals from various sectors

14-32

YEARS OLD

Youth and young adults ranged from 14-32 years old

4

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERS

The 4 professional members worked with and in support of young people through various organizations:

- Compass youth Collaborative
- Our Piece of the Pie
- PT Partners
- William Casper Graustein Memorial Fund

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

State education, child welfare, criminal justice, healthcare, and housing systems play a critical role in shaping opportunities and outcomes for young people who are disconnected. These systems are highly interconnected, with interaction with one system often leading to another, frequently exacerbating disconnection because of inadequate system alignment.

The interconnectedness of systems contributes to significant barriers, such as limited access to resources, systemic racial injustices, and enduring traumas, which impede young people's ability to thrive or connect to prosocial institutions. Youth experiencing disconnection are also confronted with heightened risks of homelessness, exposure to violence, and a lack of social capital.

Despite the challenges many young people face, most shared aspirations and goals and were hopeful about their future. Their definitions of success commonly reflected their resilience, resourcefulness, and determination to transcend the limitations imposed upon them by societal norms and structural inequalities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUILDING CONNECTION

- **Increase system coordination and communication** to provide young people experiencing disconnection with holistic support to re-engage with work, school, and prosocial institutions.
- **Strengthen the social safety net and equitably resource programs** to address systemic barriers, prioritizing equity and reducing harm.
- **Enhance access to resources and tailor support services** to provide young people with interventions that are responsive to their specific needs.

To learn more about system-specific recommendations, read the full report: <https://www.ctopportunityproject.org/elevating-voices>

Over the past year, Dalio Education and CTOP have spearheaded a public awareness campaign in response to *Connecticut's Unspoken Crisis*, in collaboration with our grantee partners and other stakeholders across the state. Our efforts to raise awareness ran parallel to a growing coalition committed to re-engaging Connecticut's young people, that inspired real progress toward creating an ecosystem where every young person can thrive.

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE ECOSYSTEM?

Connecticut Passed New Legislation Impacting Youth Experiencing or At Risk of Experiencing Disconnection

The Connecticut legislature passed HB5437: An Act Concerning Education Mandate Relief, School Discipline, and Disconnected Youth. The definitions for “at-risk” and “disconnected” in the bill align closely with the definitions from the first installment in our research report series. The bill also requires

partners, Our Piece of the Pie in Hartford and Domus Kids in Stamford, are the implementation partners for their cities and provide young people with paid service opportunities to learn the skills they need to succeed in the workforce while contributing to their communities.

Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM) Launched the 119k Commission

In response to what CCM learned during six regional forums from experts and Connecticut residents about *Connecticut's Unspoken Crisis*, the organization created the 119K Commission, a bipartisan group of municipal leaders from across Connecticut whose mission is to develop a strategy to cut the number of disconnected young people in half over the course of ten years. The commission gathered community input through a series of public hearings and youth round tables, and via additional public testimony, and as part of its strategy identifies annual metrics and detailed descriptions of aligned actions to drive, track, and assess progress towards the goal.

The Establishment of Likely and Unlikely Partnerships

Recognizing their mutual interests in addressing this crisis, the Connecticut Education Association, representing organized labor, and the Connecticut Business and Industry Association (CBIA), representing business sector leaders, gathered community input to better understand the barriers to employment for Connecticut's young people and to begin identifying potential solutions. In addition, the CBIA Foundation released a new Economic Action Plan that aims to create an environment where all young people in our state can advance their career opportunities.

P20WIN, Connecticut's statewide longitudinal data system, to develop a plan to establish a statewide data intermediary and annually report on disconnected youth to the legislature using specified data - representing a critical step forward for the state in tracking at-risk and disconnected young people in order to better support them. In addition, the legislation also begins to identify and respond to contributing factors of disconnection, such as the need for reliable and affordable transportation for students in Hartford and New Haven.

State Youth Service Corps

The Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development awarded the cities of Hartford \$640,000 and Stamford \$460,000 to support the implementation of their respective Youth Service Corps programs. Two of our grantee

OP-EDS IN THE NEWS

This past year, CTOP staff, grantee partners, key stakeholders, and community members have penned nearly 20 op-eds across five Connecticut news outlets to promote key findings from our research report series, call for care for and support of this population of young people, and stimulate public dialogue about Connecticut's Unspoken Crisis.



- CT YOUTH FACING OBSTACLES NEED ADDITIONAL SUPPORT
- CONSIDERING A CT “CRISIS” DURING ADOPTION MONTH
- FOR YOUTH, CT’S “QUIET CORNER” IS BECOMING THE “FORGOTTEN CORNER”
- WORKING TOGETHER TOWARD A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR CT’S YOUNG PEOPLE
- “BETTER FAWSA,” WORSE RESULTS
- DEVELOPING A PATH FORWARD FOR CT’S DISCONNECTED YOUTH
- TO FIX CT’S HOUSING SHORTAGE, BUILD A CONSTRUCTION WORKFORCE
- OCTOBER – A MONTH TO FOCUS ON IMPROVING CT CHILDREN’S LIVES
- CT’S UNSPOKEN CRISIS: ELEVATING THE VOICES OF YOUNG PEOPLE
- SCHOOLS SHOULD BE A PLACE FOR OPPORTUNITY & GROWTH NOT A PLACE OF FAILURE & DISAPPOINTMENT



- DALIO REPORT SHOULD SPARK BI-PARTISAN CONVERSATION
- WHEN FACT IS MORE ALARMING THAN FICTION, ACTION IS REQUIRED
- THE POWER OF GOALS AND INTERGENERATIONAL ASPIRATIONS



- GOING DEEPER IN THE DATA ON CONNECTICUT’S 119,000
- HOW TO ADDRESS CT’S UNSPOKEN CRISIS
- PREPARING CT’S YOUTH FOR OPPORTUNITY CAN’T WAIT



- CT CHILDREN IN CRISIS CAN LEARN “LETTING PEOPLE HELP ME IS OK”



- CT’S DISCONNECTED YOUTH CRISIS HAS AN ENORMOUS HUMAN, ECONOMIC COST

INSPIRING CHANGE CTOP’S CATALYTIC IMPACT

LOOKING AHEAD

In the year ahead, the Connecticut Opportunity Project will continue advancing its core capacity-building work with grantee partners while expanding key strategic initiatives:

LEARNING AGENDA

In addition to hosting another convening in 2025 and continuing the Professional Development and Learning Community launched this past year, CTOP will train and certify its staff in cognitive-behavioral skills so that CTOP can launch its own training and coaching program for grantee partners. This will support their teams in cultivating and deploying these skills with young people in furtherance of their progression toward outcomes.

PATHWAYS TO CAREERS

In addition to supporting COMPASS and Forge City Works in launching their first cohort of youth in January 2025, CTOP will facilitate the development of a formal partnership between Roca Hartford and Forge City Works via CTOP’s design workshop series so that in 2025 a second pathway can be activated in Hartford that will enable youth who are initially severely disconnected to become employed on a career path that leads to upward mobility.


DATA REFRESH

To support the state in delivering on its mandate in HB5437 to annually report on disconnected youth to the legislature using specified data, Dalio Education and the Connecticut Opportunity Project have engaged Boston Consulting Group to support P2OWIN, the state’s longitudinal data system, in refreshing for publication in 2025 key data from the report *Connecticut’s Unspoken Crisis: Getting Young People Back on Track*, while also refining the playbook that will enable the P2OWIN team to re-create the analysis in future years.


ABOUT CTOP

CTOP is founded, funded, and operated by Dalio Education. CTOP’s mission is to invest in and help strengthen youth-serving organizations in Connecticut so they can work effectively, reliably, and sustainably with off-track or disconnected young people ages 14 to 26 in order to help them re-engage in and complete secondary education or a credential, then transition successfully to a post-secondary pathway leading to satisfying employment at a living wage that supports their self-sufficiency.


CTOP PROGRAM TEAM




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Rosa Ortiz
Director of Operations

CTOP ADVISORY BOARD



Gordon Berlin
Former President, MDRC



Sam Cobbs
CEO, Tipping Point Community



Carol Thompson Cole
Former President & CEO, Youth Invest Partners

CTOP INVESTMENTS FOR THE 2024 FISCAL YEAR



Cohort 1	
COMPASS Youth Collaborative	\$1,180,000
Domus Kids	\$1,500,000
Our Piece of the Pie	\$1,510,000
Cohort 2	
CT Violence Intervention Program	\$550,000
Catalyst CT (formerly Regional Youth Adult Social Action Partnership)	\$1,250,000
Roca Hartford Young Mothers Program	\$1,000,000
Cohort 3	
Forge City Works	\$755,000
Matching Fund Investments	\$1,148,330
In-Kind Investments	\$1,000,000+
Total Investments	\$9,893,330

As a social investment fund of Dalio Education, CTOP makes multi-year general operating support grants with funding level determined based on an organization’s developmental stage and budget size. CTOP also provides access to additional resources for capacity building as indicated by developmental progression, including in-kind investments in the form of consultation with CTOP’s team and technical assistance from CTOP’s network of vendors as well as restricted grants for targeted purposes. Some restricted grants are made via matching funds that leverage investments from other private and public funders.



www.ctopportunityproject.org

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