Structural Barriers and Youth Disconnection in the Antelope Valley

Prepared by CSU5 Reconnecting
Los Angeles Youth (ReLAY) Institute

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Forward

Los Angeles County is driven by committed community leaders, organizations, and public partners who work to expand opportunities and improve outcomes for youth and families. In the Antelope Valley, too many young people face structural barriers that limit access to education, employment, and supportive services. Geographic isolation, transportation gaps, economic hardship, and limited youth programming contribute to rising disconnection rates among young people who are neither in school nor working. The ReLAY Institute advances this shared vision by creating clear pathways to education, workforce development, and long-term economic stability. By identifying gaps and addressing systemic barriers, the ReLAY Institute helps ensure that all residents have equitable access to the resources and support needed to thrive.

CSU5

The CSU5 is a collaboration between the five California State Universities (CSUs) that serve the greater Los Angeles region to support business, economic, and community development:

- California State University, Dominguez Hills
- California State University, Long Beach
- California State University, Los Angeles
- California State University, Northridge
- California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

In keeping with the mission of the CSU, the purpose of the CSU5 is to ensure that the CSU and the educational and research strengths it comprises play a significant role in shaping the future of Greater Los Angeles. The CSU5 will apply its knowledge to the challenging tasks of defining and solving contemporary problems.

ReLAY Institute

Reconnecting Los Angeles Youth (ReLAY) Institute is a collaboration of public, private, and philanthropic agencies from across Los Angeles County, focusing on research and evaluation, training and capacity-building, and resource organization to strengthen services and improve opportunities for disconnected youth in the Los Angeles region. ReLAY Institute is a CSU5 initiative, headquartered at California State University, Northridge.

Executive Summary

Structural Barriers and Youth Disconnection in the Antelope Valley

Prepared in Partnership with the ReLAY Institute

Youth disconnection remains a critical challenge in Los Angeles County, particularly in the Antelope Valley. "Opportunity Youth"—young people ages 16–24 who are neither in school nor employed—face layered structural barriers that limit access to education, stable housing, workforce opportunities, transportation, and mental health services.

This mixed-methods study combines U.S. Census data, labor market analysis, organizational interviews, youth focus groups, and survey findings to examine the scope and root causes of youth disconnection in Lancaster, Palmdale, and surrounding North County communities.

Key Findings

Disconnection is geographically concentrated:
Lancaster has the highest youth disconnection rate in Los Angeles County, exceeding both the county and state averages. Rates are highest among young adults ages 21–24, particularly those transitioning out of high school, foster care, or juvenile justice systems.

Housing instability is foundational:
Housing insecurity emerged as the most significant destabilizing factor. Youth report income barriers (2–3x rent requirements), competitive rental markets, and limited youth-specific housing options. Without stable housing, progress in education, employment, and mental health is difficult to sustain.

Transportation deserts limit access:
Long distances, limited transit options, and safety concerns make it difficult for youth to access schools, courts, job sites, and support services. Typical travel times of one to two hours each way reduce program participation and employment.

Employment growth does not equal access:
Although jobs have increased in the region, many require advanced credentials, security clearances, or prior experience. Youth consistently describe the "experience paradox"—needing experience to get hired but needing a job to gain experience. Over half of the youth surveyed were unemployed at the time of data collection.

Education pathways face barriers due to cost and risk:
More than half of the surveyed youth reported having less than a high school diploma. While youth value education, they view college pragmatically, considering debt, stress, and uncertain job prospects. Career technical education and paid workforce pathways are seen as more reachable.

Mental health needs are high, but trust is fragile:

Youth express strong belief in the value of therapy, yet report barriers including stigma, long wait times, inconsistent providers, and fear of mandated reporting. Peer-based and youth-centered models show promise.

Belonging is activity-based, not geographic:

Youth describe the Antelope Valley as fragmented and, at times, isolating. However, structured activities—sports, faith communities, volunteer programs, and youth-serving nonprofits—create meaningful spaces of connection and identity development.

Strategic implications for Los Angeles County:

The findings indicate that youth disconnection in the Antelope Valley is driven by structural conditions—not lack of motivation. Youth demonstrate resilience, initiative, and desire for stability, but systems are often fragmented and misaligned with their realities.

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Introduction

Disconnected youth, also referred to as "Opportunity Youth," are young adults ages 16 to 24 who are not engaged in the economy through education or employment. Young people who receive proper training and college degrees typically earn much higher incomes over their lifetimes. They are better prepared for careers that interest them and lead to economic success.[1] Opportunity Youth, therefore, are young people who are neither working nor preparing for future careers through education.

Los Angeles County has a youth disconnection rate of 13.2 percent, corresponding to approximately 140,000 to 150,000 Opportunity Youth. This rate exceeds California's overall rate of 12.3 percent. The North Central region of Los Angeles County, in the Antelope Valley, stands out for its high youth disconnection rates: The city of Lancaster has the highest rate at 19.2 percent among the county's 88 city clusters.[2] The goal of this study is to address the disproportionately high youth disconnection in the Antelope Valley by employing mixed-methods research, including both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The aim is to identify collaborative organizational networks (public, private, and non-profit) that serve Opportunity Youth, map their locations relative to education and employment opportunities, and offer policy and program recommendations to engage Opportunity Youth through internships, jobs, careers, training, and further education.

Opportunity Youth Definition

While definitions vary, this study uses the federal definition of Opportunity Youth (OY), defined as youth aged 16 to 24 who are neither in school (e.g., high school, community college, or university) nor employed. A related term is Transition Age Youth (TAY), a subset usually indicating young people transitioning from adolescence to adulthood with experience in children's mental health, child welfare, or juvenile justice systems. Opportunity Youth is broader than TAY and may include youth facing additional challenges like poverty, homelessness, housing instability, disability, or family crises.

Given the high disconnection rate in the Antelope Valley, this study examines the factors and barriers that contribute to it. We asked the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges and barriers to OY access to services (such as distance, mental health, lack of support services, the need to work to support oneself and family, etc.)?
2. What is OY's perception of current resources? What changes would they like to see?
3. What types of employment opportunities are available in the Antelope Valley, and where can they be found? Are these positions open to hiring youth? Do youth qualify for these roles? Conduct an industry analysis and evaluate which pathways are viable for OY.

[1] Lewis, K. (2021). A Portrait of California 2021–2022: Human Development and Housing Justice. Measure of America, Social Science Research Council. https://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/APortraitofCalifornia2021-2022.pdf
[2] Lewis, K. (2022). Building Bright Futures for Youth in Los Angeles: Spotlight on Young Women. Measure of America, Social Science Research Council. https://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/BuildingBrightFutures-LosAngeles.pdf

4. What are OY's needs and desires regarding employment opportunities? Are they interested in roles within the AV, or are they considering commuting or relocating? Is there a sense of place or belonging that can be cultivated or supported? What types of support are necessary, and what does effective support look like?

5. Which organizations are reaching vulnerable youth? What services are being used, and where are the gaps in those services?

Background Issues

Youth disconnection remains a significant and ongoing problem affecting communities across California, including the Antelope Valley.[3] Disconnected youth—generally defined as young people aged 16 to 24 who are not in school or working—have limited opportunities to develop the skills, credentials, and social ties necessary for long-term economic stability. This period of life is critical for successful transitions to adulthood, and prolonged disconnection can have lasting negative effects on both individuals and their communities.

In California, youth disconnection rates have stayed high in recent years, especially following the economic and social disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Los Angeles County consistently reports higher disconnection rates than the state average, and areas like the Antelope Valley within the county face even greater vulnerability. Although disconnection data are not always available at the subregional level, the socioeconomic conditions in the Antelope Valley suggest a higher risk of youth disengagement.

Antelope Valley has higher poverty levels than more urban parts of Los Angeles County.[4] Many residents must commute long distances to work, which restricts young people's access to entry-level jobs. Educational issues, such as lower graduation rates and limited access to college and workforce training programs, also lead to youth disconnection. Structural inequalities significantly affect youth from low-income households and communities of color, making these challenges even harder to overcome.[5]

Tackling youth disconnection in the Antelope Valley is crucial for boosting the region's economic growth and social well-being. Effective solutions include coordinated investments in education, workforce development, transportation, and support services that help young people find successful pathways.

Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations

Prior studies on Opportunity Youth (OY)—young people ages 16–24 who are disconnected from school and work—have been synthesized by integrating ecological, developmental, trauma-informed, and systems-level perspectives. The literature indicates that youth disconnection is not an individual failure but rather the result of an interplay among structural, relational, and developmental factors. Accordingly,

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[3] Malka, Ari, Ph.D., and Robert Sainz. *Update on Teen & Young Adult Disconnection in California*. New Ways to Work, September 2024. https://www.newwaystowork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Update-on-Teen-Young-AdultFP.pdf

[4] U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). 2020 United States Decennial Census [Data set]. U.S. Department of Commerce. https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/decade/2020.html

[5] American Psychological Association. (2009; last updated May 2024). Children, youth, families and socioeconomic status. APA Office on Socioeconomic Status. https://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/children-families

effective responses require coordinated, place-based, healing-centered ecosystems that address both individual needs and systemic inequities

Ecological and developmental systems theories describe youth outcomes as the result of interconnected and interacting systems—family, peers, schools, neighborhoods, service networks, labor markets, and policy environments. Recent geospatial analyses show that youth disconnection tends to cluster in communities marked by concentrated poverty, racial segregation, weak labor markets, and transportation deserts. These findings highlight that opportunity is spatially distributed and not equally accessible. In regions such as the Antelope Valley, semi-rural geography, long commutes, and limited transit infrastructure further intensify these spatial mismatches between youth and opportunity. A public health perspective views youth disconnection as a widespread issue that requires prevention, early detection, and cross-sector collaboration. Incorporating place-based modeling into this approach enhances accuracy by identifying geographic hotspots of disconnection and service deserts, and by aligning interventions with neighborhood risk and protective factors. Place-based modeling uses GIS mapping, multivariate geographically weighted regression (MGWR), and spatial resource analysis to target outreach, improve service placement, and allocate resources equitably. Developmental science highlights emerging adulthood as a time of neurobiological plasticity, identity development, and growth in executive function. Youth need autonomy, ongoing relationships, and meaningful mastery experiences. However, access to these supports depends on neighborhood conditions, school quality, transportation options, and labor-market opportunities—underscoring the need to combine developmental support with geographic targeting strategies. Trauma and toxic stress frameworks emphasize how persistent adversity—such as homelessness, discrimination, family instability, and institutional betrayal—disrupts stress regulation, cognition, and decision-making. Healing-centered engagement builds on trauma-informed care by affirming identity, culture, and youth agency. For youth of color and LGBTQ+ youth, creating identity-safe and culturally responsive environments is vital. Place-based modeling strengthens healing-centered practices by identifying communities with layered adversities, enabling culturally responsive outreach rooted in the community context. Digital ecologies also influence youth development. Access to devices, broadband, and digital literacy varies by region, creating “digital deserts” that mirror transportation and employment deserts. Effective ecosystems must combine digital skills training with social support and ensure equitable broadband access in local infrastructure planning.

Evidence-Based and Promising Practices

Trauma-informed and healing-centered engagement consistently improves retention and participation, especially for foster youth and youth experiencing homelessness. Emotional safety, cultural humility, flexible expectations, and predictable structures help counteract instability and mistrust. Relationship-focused practice is among the strongest indicators of positive outcomes. Stable adult relationships build social capital, connect youth to employment opportunities, and buffer against trauma. Developmental relationships are particularly protective for foster youth and LGBTQ+ youth and are essential for long-term workforce readiness.

Holistic wraparound systems outperform isolated services. Effective approaches combine case management, mentoring, paid work-based learning, transportation assistance, mental health support, and

barrier removal. When paired with place-based strategies, wraparound systems can strategically locate services in high-need neighborhoods to align with community mobility patterns.

Positive Youth Development and empowerment frameworks see youth as active partners in shaping systems. Youth governance councils, co-research initiatives, and paid leadership positions build trust and improve system responsiveness. Incorporating youth-generated data into GIS mapping enhances the accuracy of place-based models by integrating lived experiences with quantitative indicators.

Workforce development is most effective when it combines mentoring, paid experience, education, and social work support. Employer partnerships should adopt trauma-informed supervision, skills-based hiring, and commitments to equity. Place-based labor-market mapping can identify growth sectors within commuting distance, guide transportation planning, and help align training programs with regional economic demand.

Peer support and youth-led mental health strategies increase engagement and credibility. Placing peer navigators in high-needs neighborhoods and community hubs improves access and reduces stigma. Spatial analysis helps identify where peer outreach is most needed. Collective impact structures coordinate education, workforce, housing, mental health, and justice systems around shared goals. Data-sharing agreements, GIS-guided outreach, and co-located service centers reduce fragmentation. Place-based collective impact models enable cross-sector groups to focus on neighborhood-level indicators, monitor geographic disparities, and evaluate system responsiveness over time.

Recommendations and Regional Implications

Research supports embedding trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and gender-affirming practices into organizational culture. Mentoring and peer support should be compensated and integrated into long-term developmental coaching models aligned with emerging adulthood. Workforce pathways should address structural barriers, such as criminal records and benefit cliffs. Utilizing place-based models ensures workforce pipelines reflect regional labor market conditions and commute feasibility. Comprehensive wraparound systems must address housing stability, childcare, transportation, and financial insecurity. GIS mapping can identify service deserts and guide the reallocation of resources to underserved neighborhoods. Youth voice should be formalized through paid governance roles and participatory mapping processes that uncover hidden barriers. Barriers exist at the youth, organizational, and structural levels. Trauma, placement instability, discrimination, service fragmentation, transportation deserts, housing shortages, low-wage labor markets, and digital exclusion all influence disconnection patterns beyond individual motivation. Spatial inequalities exacerbate these barriers, making geographic targeting crucial.

Methodology

Overall Study Design

The Antelope Valley Opportunity Youth study employed a mixed-methods converging-parallel design, analyzing both secondary quantitative data and primary qualitative data from existing sources. This study received approval from the Committee for Protection of Human Subjects (Institutional Review Board) of California State University, Northridge.

It used quantitative data sources—U.S. Census data, local business information from the Chamber of Commerce, and enrollment data from the local public school (K-12) district and community college. The demographic data and location analysis provided a detailed view of Opportunity Youth based on geography, sex, race/ethnicity, income, and household relationships.

Qualitative data were collected through extensive interviews with local stakeholders and service providers in public systems and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) serving youth in the target area; in-person focus groups with Opportunity Youth; and an online survey of Opportunity Youth that collected both qualitative and quantitative data on their life challenges and support needs. The narrative data helped capture the voices of youth and service providers working directly with them, providing contextual insights into the lived experiences of Opportunity Youth and those supporting them in the field.

U.S. Census Data

To understand the demographics, potential locations, and trends, U.S. Census data were used. Because the U.S. Census protects individual identities, the smallest geographic unit with complete data was the PUMA (Public Use Microdata Area), and the Public Use Microdata were used. The Public Use Microdata includes various codes used to identify Opportunity Youth. Opportunity Youth are identified if they meet three conditions: (1) they are between 16 and 24 years old, (2) they have not attended school in the past 3 months, and (3) they have worked 0 weeks in the past year.

Location Analysis

In this section, the study presents a series of maps illustrating the geographic distribution of Opportunity Youth in the Antelope Valley, with a focus on Lancaster and Palmdale. Additional sociodemographic variables are also mapped, including population density, median household income, and population distributions by age, race, and ethnicity. With support from the Antelope Valley Chamber of Commerce, existing businesses in the region were geocoded to identify potential employment sources for Opportunity Youth and to visually assess their geographic availability to this population.

Procedure

Data from the 2020 U.S. Decennial Census were used to identify individuals who may qualify as Opportunity Youth across a large geographic area. The Decennial Census was selected because it offers a complete population count and greater accuracy than the American Community Survey (ACS), which depends on sample estimates and reports associated margins of error.

Job and Education Opportunities

To identify businesses and non-profits, this study used a dataset from the Antelope Valley Chamber of Commerce. The original dataset had 427 entries. This study removed three entries because they were out of state and three that lacked location details. The ZIP codes for three businesses were updated, and four addresses with P.O. boxes were excluded. After these adjustments, the dataset included 412 entries. The study used the Census geocoder to get latitude and longitude coordinates. During geocoding, some addresses couldn't be matched; after a second attempt, 367 addresses were successfully geocoded. Entries with "no match" or "tie" results were left out. The final geocoded dataset had 361 entries, which may not represent all job opportunities in the area.

This study categorized businesses into five potential employment centers based on the training required for entry-level jobs (see Table 10). After classification, businesses were mapped using GIS.

Organization Interviews

Participants

A large-scale interview study was conducted with representatives of nonprofit organizations and public systems serving Opportunity Youth in the Antelope Valley. A total of 56 individuals from 31 government agencies and nonprofit organizations participated in the study. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Initial recruitment focused on organizations and agencies involved in The LAP3 – Horizons 32K Strategic Plan, a Los Angeles–based initiative aimed at improving education, training, and employment pathways for Opportunity Youth. Additional participants were identified through referrals and professional networks, with interviewees recommending other service providers operating in the Antelope Valley.

Procedure

Due to timeline constraints, data collection was conducted within a specified timeframe. Interviews were conducted via video conferencing across multiple platforms, increasing participant availability and enabling flexible scheduling. Verbal consent was obtained prior to participation for audio recording and transcription. Confidentiality was preserved by informing participants that individuals, organizations, and systems would not be identified in reports of quotes or findings.

Interviews were semi-structured, guided by a list of open-ended questions specifically developed for this study (Appendix A). The interview protocol permitted probing and exploration of emerging themes to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences. Qualitative data analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection, enabling the research team to identify when thematic saturation was reached. Saturation was considered achieved when no new themes appeared toward the end of the interview process.

Youth Focus Groups

Participants

Two focus groups of Opportunity Youth were held in order to incorporate participants' perspectives into the study. The first group comprised 9 members, while the second had 12. Researchers collaborated with

two nonprofit organizations serving Opportunity Youth in the Antelope Valley to recruit participants from the organizations' client bases. Participants needed to be current residents of the Antelope Valley and between 18 and 24 years old, inclusive.

Procedure

Both focus groups took place at host sites in Lancaster and Palmdale in the Antelope Valley. They were semi-structured, guided by a list of open-ended questions developed from existing literature (Appendix B). A single research team member moderated both groups. The sessions were held in a private conference room and audio-recorded. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before each focus group began.

Each session lasted approximately two hours and began with participant introductions, a review of ground rules (e.g., confidentiality and the absence of right or wrong answers), an overview of the study topic, and an icebreaker designed to foster a safe, open discussion environment. To ensure confidentiality, participants chose pseudonyms, and identifying information was removed from all transcripts. At the end of each session, participants had the opportunity to ask questions and were provided with the researcher's contact information. Each participant received a $50 gift card as compensation for their time. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of California State University, Northridge.

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and stored on a password-protected server. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify, analyze, and report patterns.

Youth Survey

Participants

Participants were recruited from the client bases of nonprofit organizations and public agencies serving Opportunity Youth in the Antelope Valley region. Recruitment was conducted via email distribution managed by these organizations and agencies. The recruitment emails included information about the study and a link to the online survey. A snowball sampling approach was employed, in which initial participants were asked to share the survey link with other young adults who met the study's eligibility criteria. To reduce the recruitment burden, organizations and agencies were contacted no more than twice during the study period. Eligibility requirements included being a current resident of the Antelope Valley and aged between 18 and 24 years old, inclusive.

Procedure

The survey was created and hosted on Qualtrics, an online survey platform. It used a mixed-methods approach, including quantitative items (e.g., rating scales, multiple-choice, and multiple-response formats) and qualitative items (open-ended text boxes), with topics developed from the existing literature (Appendix C). The first page explained and required explicit consent before continuing. Participants who did not meet the eligibility criteria were excluded. Data on gender, ethnicity, education level, current housing and employment status, and experience with justice or foster care systems were collected for demographic profiling. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns.

89 participants began the survey; 65 qualified for inclusion; 24 were excluded due to ineligibility.

Quantitative Findings: U.S. Census Data

Results

The Public Use Microdata includes several codes used to identify Opportunity Youth. Opportunity Youth are identified if they meet three conditions: (1) they are between 16 and 24 years old, (2) they have not attended school in the past three months, and (3) they have worked zero weeks in the past year. Table 1 shows the variable names and outcomes.

Table 1. *PUM variables used to identify Opportunity Youth*

PUM Variable	Possible Outcomes	Opportunity Youth Recognition	Comments
SCH – Indicating if attended school in the last 3 months.	• N/A (less than 3 years old); • No, has not attended in the last 3 months; • Yes, public school or public college; • Yes, private school, private college, or homeschool	"No, has not attended in the last 3 months" was the possible flag for an Opportunity Youth.	
WORKWEEKS – number of weeks worked in the last 52 weeks.	• 0 • 1 to 13 • 14 to 52	"0" was the possible flag for an Opportunity Youth	It is a recode of the variable "WKWN," which has values from 0 to 52.
AGEGROUPS – age of the population	• 0 to 15 • 16 to 18 • 19 to 20 • 21 to 22 • 23 to 24 • 25 to 64 • 65 to 99	"16 to 18", "19 to 20", "20 to 22", and "23 to 24" are all possible flags for Opportunity Youth.	It is a recode of the variable "AGEP," which ranges from 0 to 99.

The data were further disaggregated by sex, race, ethnicity, household income, and household relationship to better understand Opportunity Youth and identify groups that may require different approaches to support their success. These are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *PUM variables used to classify Opportunity Youth*

PUM Variable	Possible Outcomes	Comments
SEX	• Male • Female	

LATINO	• Latino • Non-Latino	LATINO was recoded just to be "Latino" or "non-Latino."
RACE	• White Alone • Black or African American • Asian Alone • Other	RACE was recoded to group smaller categories into "Other."
HINC	• <$20k • $20k to <$40k • $40k to <$60k • $60k to <$80k • $80k to <$100k • $100k+	HINC was recoded into these 5 income categories. It was originally a continuous variable.
REL	• All Other • Adopted • Grandchild • Roommate • Foster • Group Institution	REL was a recode of RELSHIPP and All Other, including: reference person, spouse (married or unmarried), biological son or daughter, stepchild, sibling, parent, in-laws, other relative.

Public Use Microdata are available at the geographic level of Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs). Lancaster and Palmdale each have their own PUMAs representing the populations of their respective cities. The rest of northern Los Angeles County, referred to here as North County, includes the PUMAs for Santa Clarita and Castaic. All PUMAs in Los Angeles County are included in the data. Data was collected from 2017 to 2023, although 2022 data was unavailable at the time of processing. This results in two sets of geographical boundaries: those from 2010 and 2020 PUMA boundaries (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1. *Antelope Valley's PUMAs in 2010.*

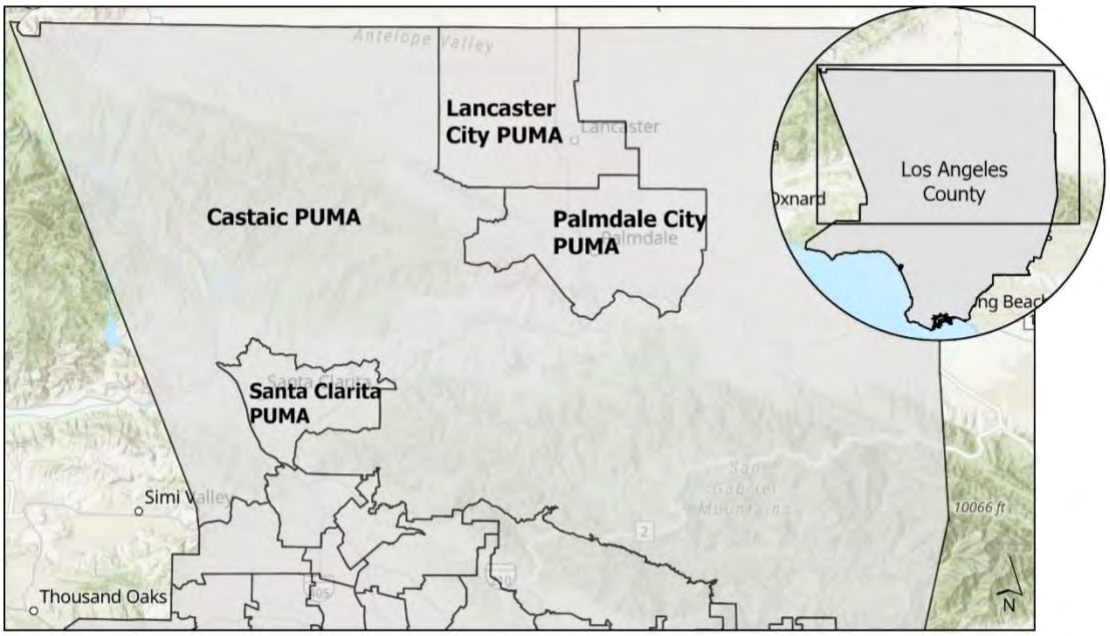
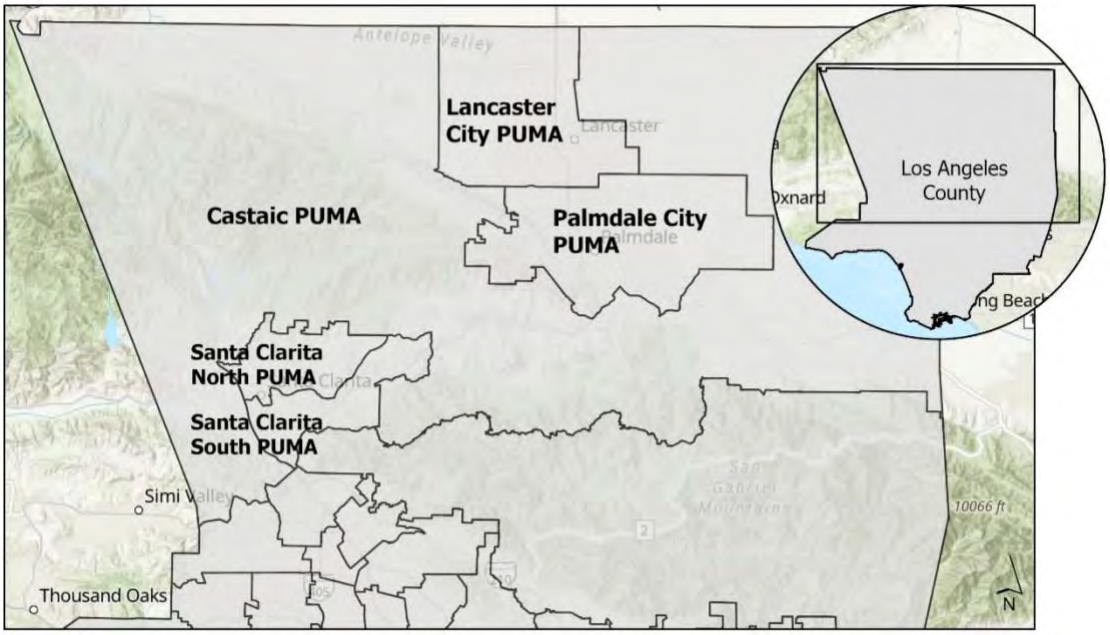


Figure 2. *Antelope Valley's PUMAs in 2020.*



The maps from the U.S. Census website depict changes in the North County PUMAs. Generally, Lancaster remains unchanged, while Palmdale expanded by about 23 percent due to suburban growth to the east. Santa Clarita was divided into two sections amid continued population growth. The rest, including Castaic, shrank due to the loss of developed land to Palmdale and Santa Clarita, as well as the loss of Angeles Forest land, which is uninhabited and has no significant effect. For this study, this microdata will be divided into Lancaster, Palmdale, North County, and Los Angeles County (as a reference). North County

comprises the PUMAs in northern Los Angeles County that are not included in Palmdale or Lancaster. The PUMAs for North County have remained largely unchanged in area between 2010 and 2020, except for the loss of Angeles Forest, making the data overall highly comparable.

Table 3. *PUMAs used in the study*

PUMA Name	2010 Code	2020 Code	Comments	Study Geography Name
Los Angeles County (North/Unincorporated)--Castaic	03701	03772	Area is smaller due to the loss of expansion of Santa Clarita and the loss of Angeles Forest land (which would have almost no population)	North County
Los Angeles County (Northwest)--Santa Clarita City	03702		Split and expanded into 03371 and 03772	North County
Los Angeles County (Northwest)--Santa Clarita City (South)		03771		North County
Los Angeles County (Northwest)--Santa Clarita City (North)		03773		North County
Los Angeles County (North Central)--Lancaster City	03703	03703	Boundaries look unchanged	Lancaster
Los Angeles County (North Central)--Palmdale City	03704	03704	Boundaries expanded	Palmdale

To obtain the data for Los Angeles County, all PUMAs in the county were extracted (Appendix D).

Findings

Trends

Overall, COVID-19 has generally declined since then, reaching near pre-COVID levels by 2023.

The 5-year American Community Survey (ACS) PUMS data (see Figure 3) indicate that Opportunity Youth peaked in 2019 (before COVID) and has declined since then. This pattern is consistent across all regions. Lancaster has the highest Opportunity Youth rates, while Palmdale's are close to LA County's, and North County has the lowest.

The general trends using 1-year ACS data (see Figure 4) show slight declines from 2017 to 2019. are unavailable due to COVID-19 disruptions in data collection and reporting. increased. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, levels increased, except in Palmdale. The largest increase was in Lancaster, which grew by more than 5%. Lancaster has had the highest values, except in 2018. Post-COVID, Palmdale shifted from generally being higher than LA County and North County to about the same level as them.

Among the different regions, Lancaster has the highest percentage of Opportunity Youth. Palmdale is slightly higher than LA County and North County overall.

Figure 3. *Opportunity Youth trends (5-yr ACS).*

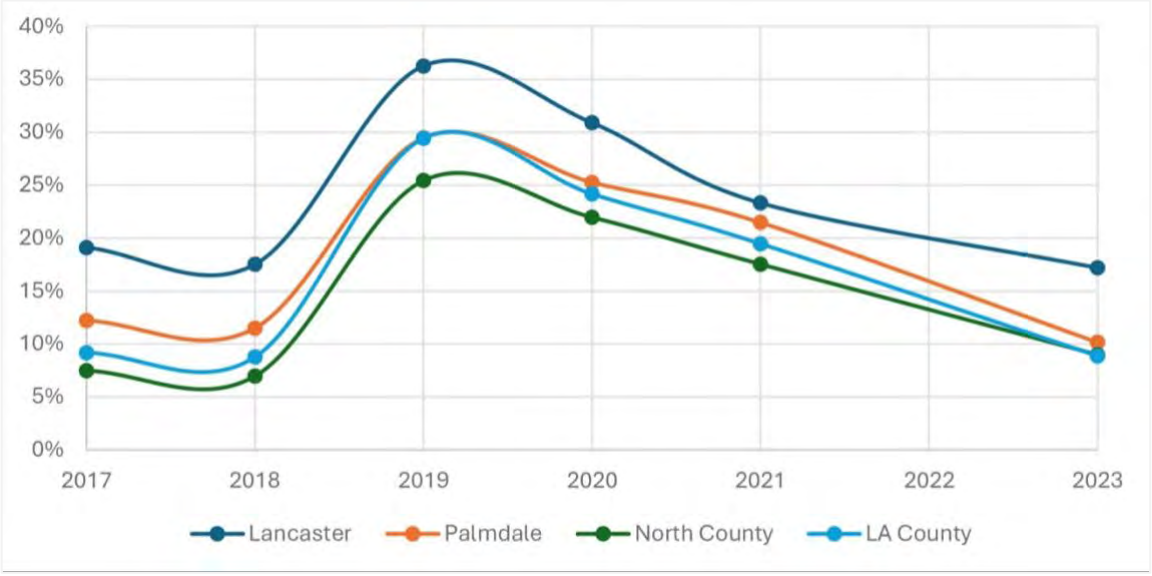
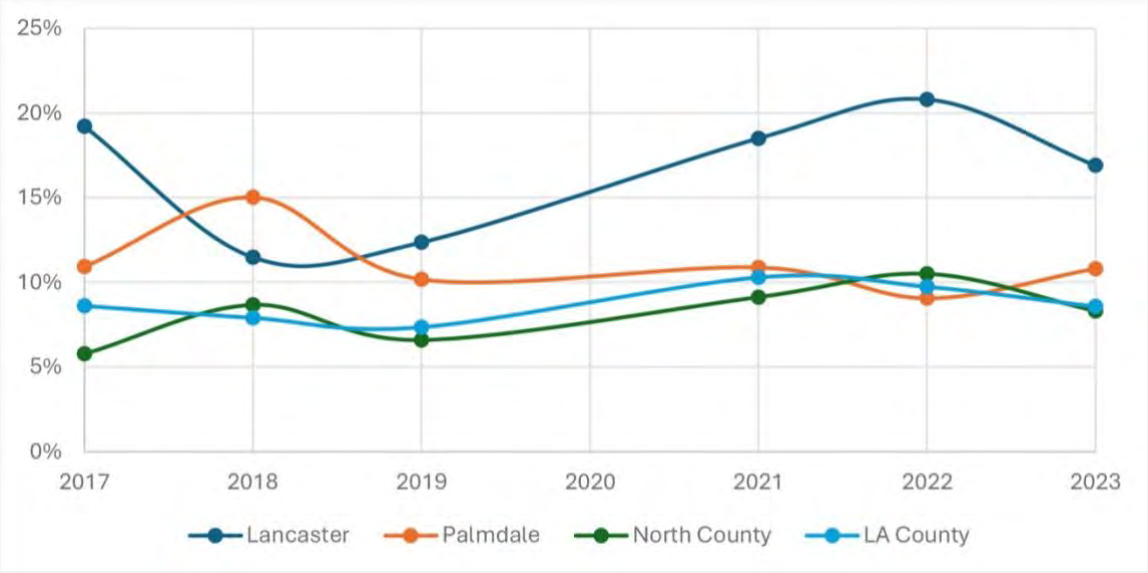


Figure 4. *Opportunity Youth trends (1-yr ACS).*



One puzzling question is why the 5-year and 1-year data differ. The 5-year data show a spike in 2019 that subsequently tapers off, whereas the 1-year data do not. It is possible that fewer people were incarcerated. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's Spring 2025 Population Projections show a decline in the institutional population from 129,400 in 2018 to 99,500 by 2021. If the released population were young, it could increase the percentage of opportunity youth.[6] By 2023, the percentages are similar.

However, because the 2023 percentages are similar when using 1-year and 5-year ACS (see Table 4), the 5-year ACS data will be used for the rest of the study. The 1-year ACS data are based on a much smaller sample, so they have a larger margin of error, which makes it harder to estimate percentages.

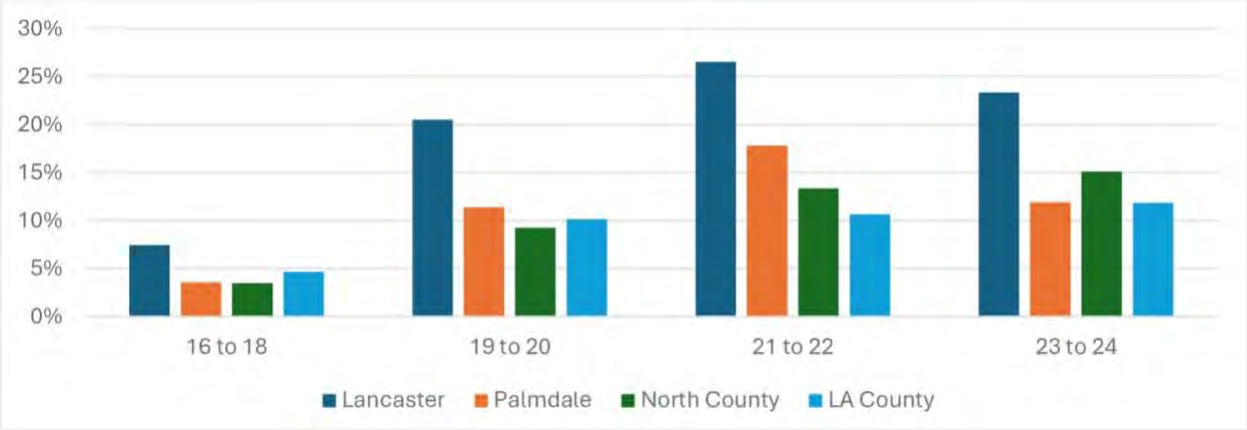
Table 4. *Percent of Opportunity Youth in 2023 using 1-yr and 5-yr ACS data*

Area	1-yr ACS	5-yr ACS
Lancaster	16.9%	17.2%
Palmdale	10.8%	10.1%
North County	8.3%	9.0%
LA County	8.6%	8.9%

By Age

In 2023, younger youth (ages 16 to 18) had the lowest proportion of Opportunity Youth, likely because they were still in high school. When mandatory schooling ends, the percentages increase. The 19- to 20-year-old age group is the second-lowest, likely because California offers two years of free community college. The highest levels are observed in the 21- to 22-year-old age group for Lancaster and Palmdale, but in the 23- to 24-year-old age group for North County and LA County. The older post-school youth seem to be at the greatest risk.

Figure 5. *Opportunity Youth by age group (2023 5-yr ACS).*



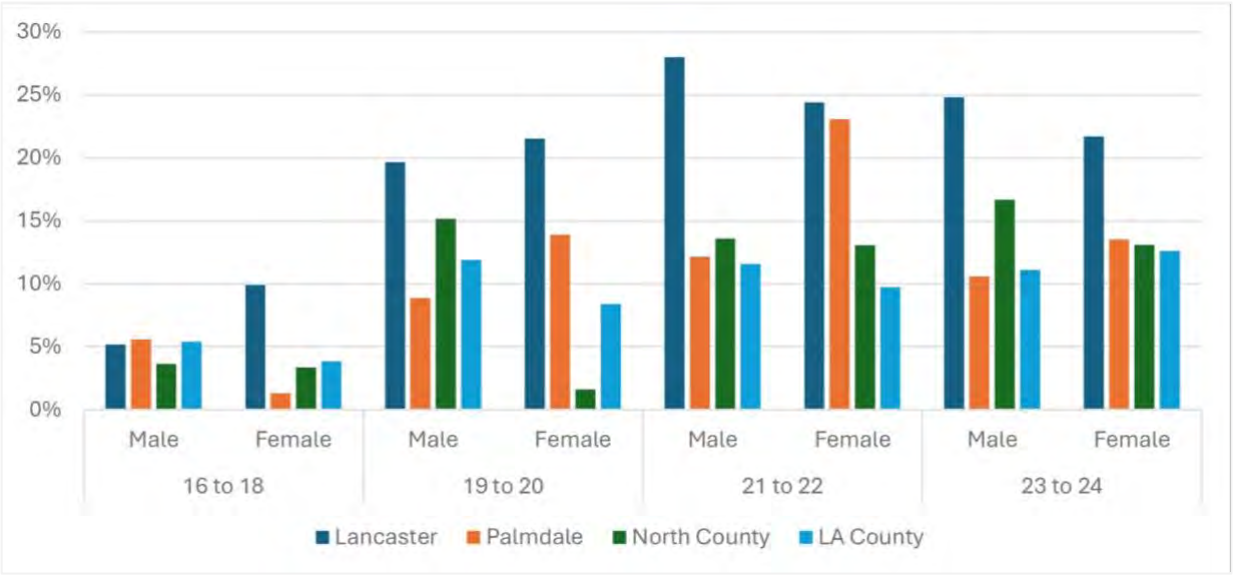
[6] California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Office of Research. (2025). *Spring 2025 population projections* (May 2025 revised) (pp. 1-53). https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/research/wp-content/uploads/sites/174/2025/05/Spring-2025-Population-Projections_May_2025_revised-1.pdf

By Gender

When the data are further refined to include sex, males generally have a higher percentage of opportunity youth in the age groups 16-18 and 19-20 (see Figure 6). Between ages 21 and 22, the difference decreases, and by ages 23 and 24, females tend to be higher.

This trend is seen in LA County but varies by location. In Lancaster, females have a higher proportion of Opportunity Youth in the 16-18 and 19-20 age groups, but a lower proportion in the 21-22 and 23-24 age groups. In Palmdale, females constitute a lower proportion in the 16-18 age group but a higher proportion in the remaining age groups, particularly in the 21-22 age group. North County consistently shows a higher percentage for males.

Figure 6. *Opportunity Youth by age group and sex (2023 5-yr ACS).*



By Race/Ethnicity

The following eight figures (Figures 7 to 14) show the total number and percentage of Opportunity Youth by Race/Ethnicity, Sex, Age Group, and Location. Each pair of graphs illustrates a different Age Group. Overall, there are few Asian Alone or Other non-Latino Opportunity Youth across all three age groups.

For 16- to 18-year-olds, the highest counts are among Latino males across all three locations (see Figure 7). Latina women generally perform well but are disproportionately represented in Lancaster. However, although the counts are high, the percentage of Latino/as remains about average (see Figure 8). White Alone females have high counts and percentages in Lancaster and North County. Few Palmdale females are classified as Opportunity Youth. Black males in Palmdale and Black females in Lancaster also show high counts and percentages. The percentage of Lancaster males who are Asian Alone is high, but they account for only a small number of youth.

Figure 7. *Count of Opportunity Youth for 16- to 18-year-olds by sex and race/ethnicity (2023 5-year ACS).*

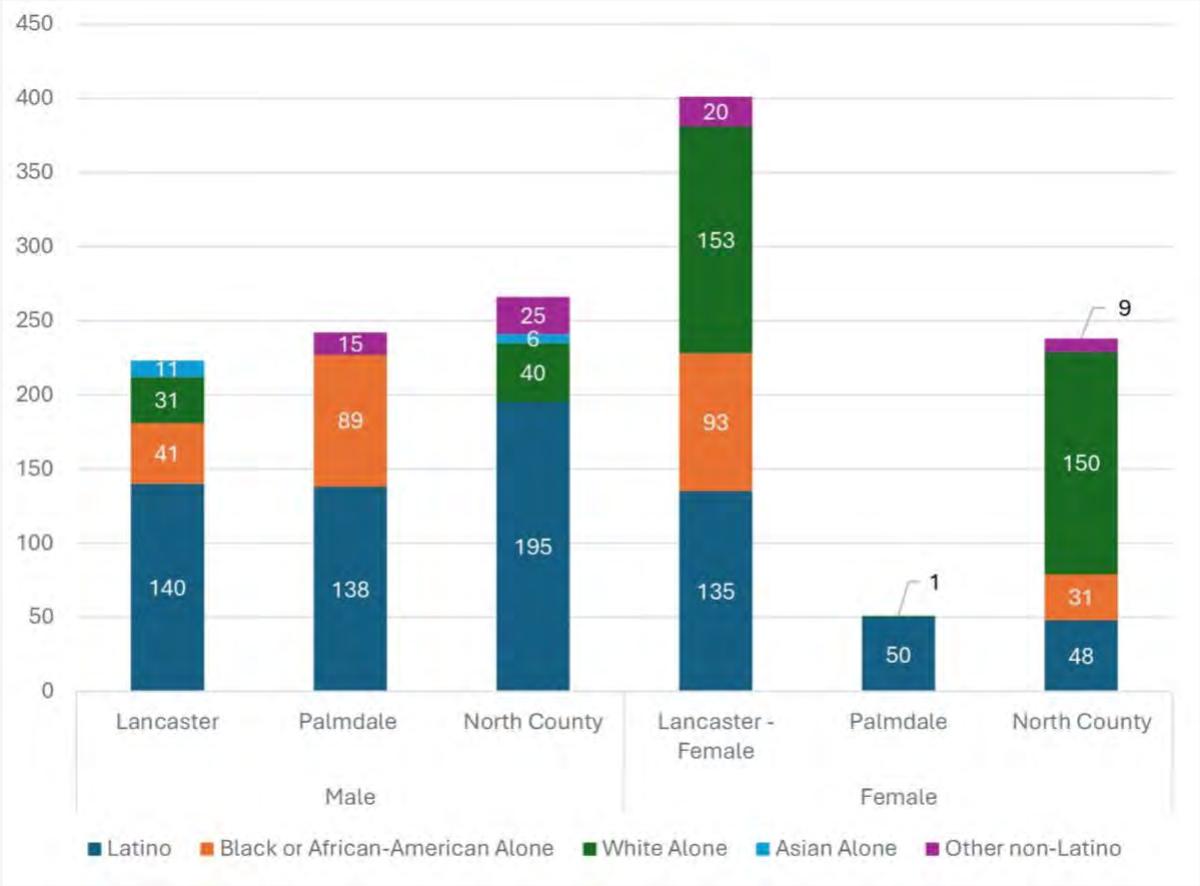
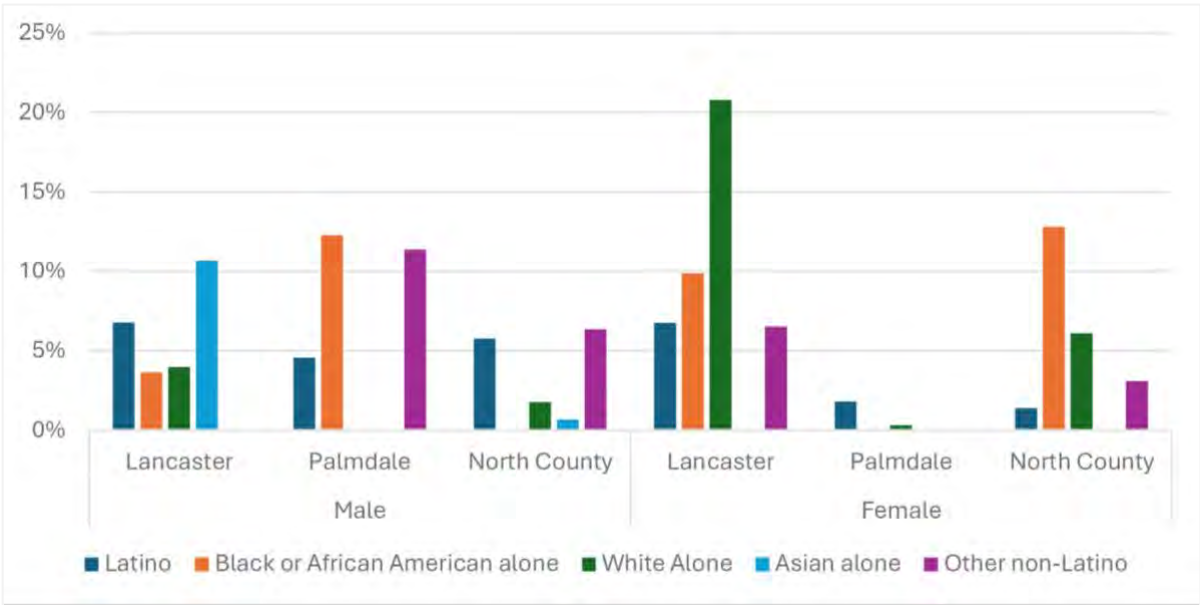


Figure 8. *Percent of Opportunity Youth for 16- to 18-year-olds by sex and race/ethnicity (2023 5-year ACS).*



For 19- to 20-year-olds, Latinos again have a high count at all locations regardless of sex, but low percentages (see Figures 9 and 10). There are many Black Opportunity Youth in Lancaster for both sexes, but only a high percentage are Opportunity Youth, indicating that 30% to 50% of the population is Opportunity Youth. The only high White Alone count is among males in North County, with an Opportunity Youth rate of 17.3%. Lancaster also has a high count of Other non-Latinos, resulting in a 58.2% Opportunity Youth rate.

Figure 9. *Count of Opportunity Youth for 19- to 20-year-olds by sex and race/ethnicity (2023 5-year ACS).*

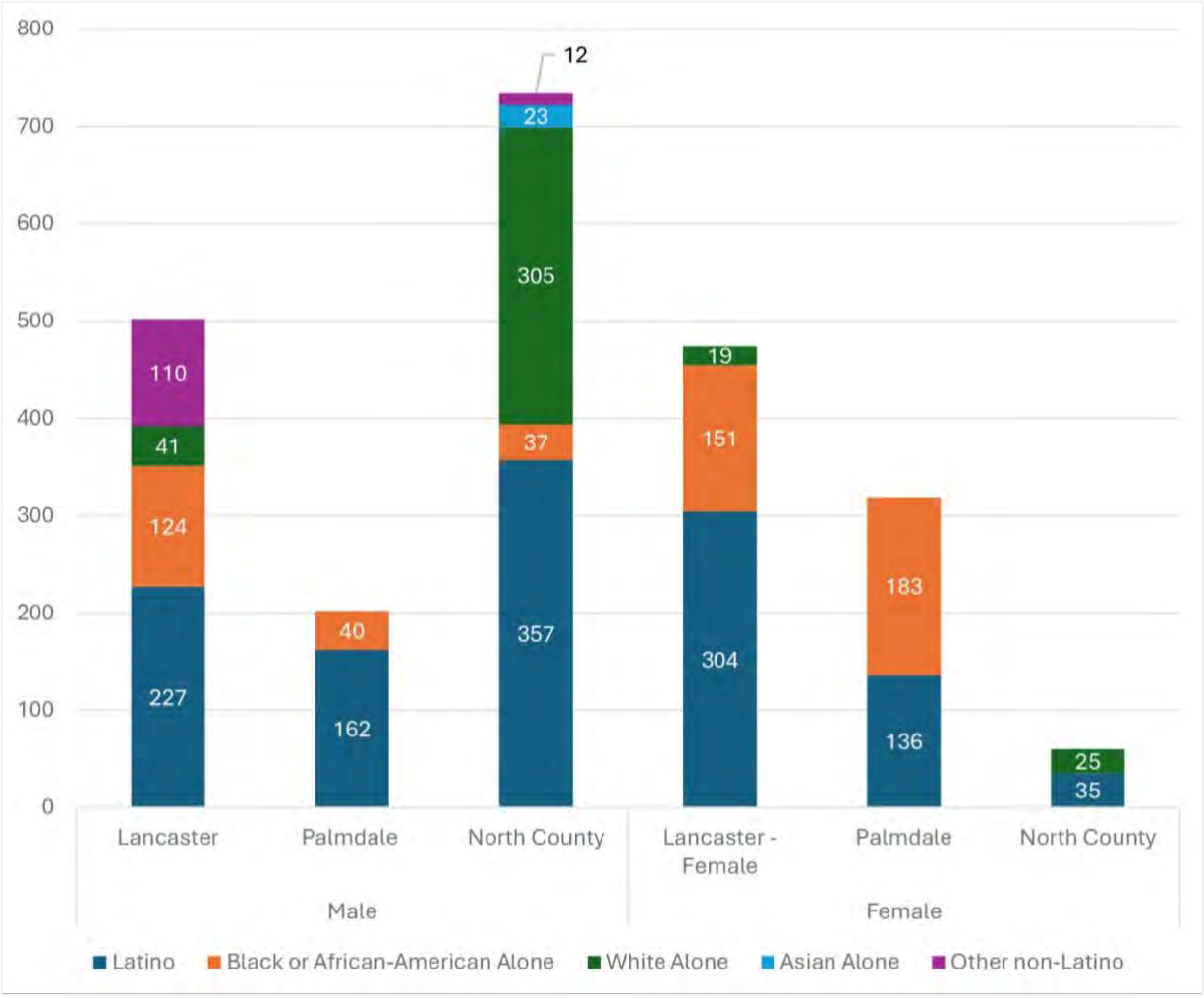
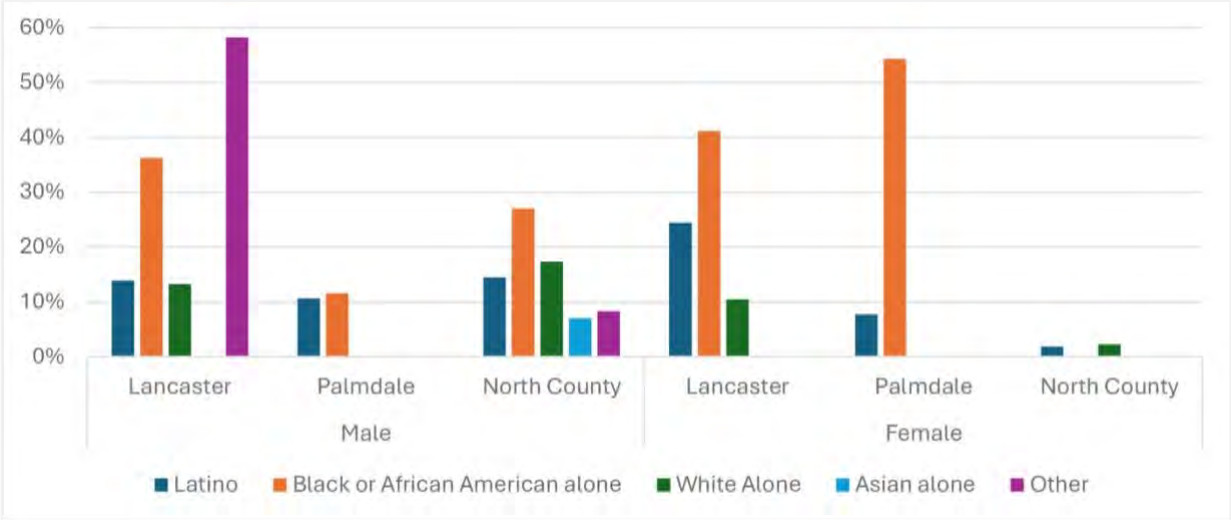


Figure 10. *Percent of Opportunity Youth for 19- to 20-year-olds by sex and race/ethnicity (2023 5-year ACS).*



Among 21- to 22-year-olds, Latino men and women have high counts (see Figure 11). However, Lancaster males share, whereas the percentages for the rest of the Latino/a group are not especially high (see Figure 12). There are higher counts of Black males across all three locations, with Lancaster Black males and Palmdale females showing the highest percentages. On their own, females represent a very high percentage. Other non-Latino females also have relatively high percentages. Similarly, Asian Alone counts are relatively low, but the percentages in Lancaster range from 20 to 30%.

Figure 11. *Count of Opportunity Youth for 21- to 22-year-olds by sex and race/ethnicity (2023 5-year ACS).*

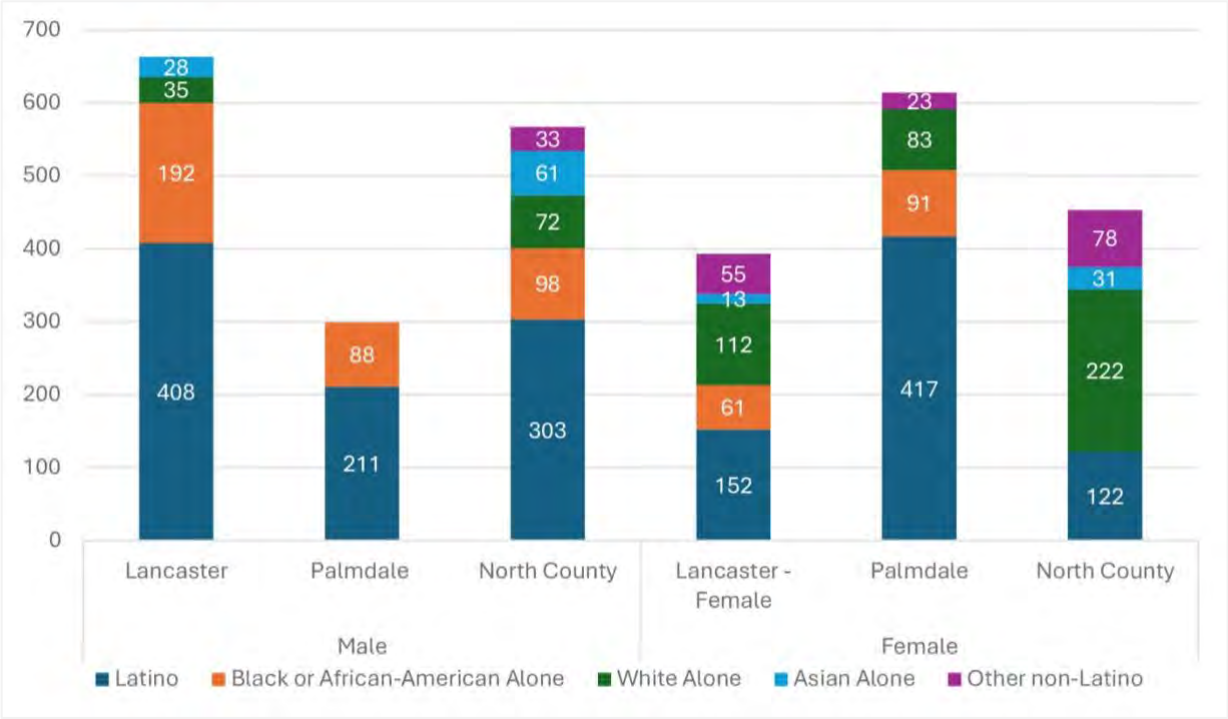
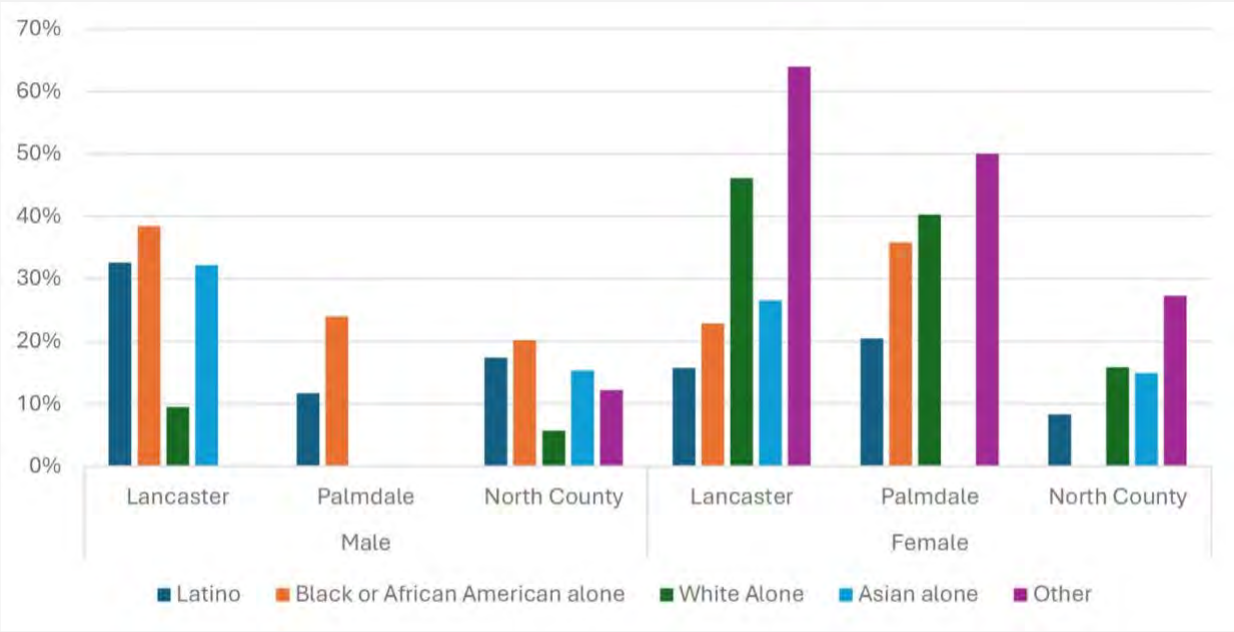


Figure 12. *Percent of Opportunity Youth for 21- to 22-year-olds by sex and race/ethnicity (2023 5-year ACS).*



For 23- to 24-year-olds, Latinos generally have the highest counts, especially Latino males, although they do not have the highest percentages (see Figures 13 and 14). Black Opportunity Youth counts are high, particularly in Lancaster. The percentage of Black Opportunity Youth is high across all locations, except for Black females in North County. White Alone is high in North County and among Lancaster females, who have the only high percentage at 34.9%. The Asian Alone percentages for Lancaster males and North County females are also high, although the counts are only about 60 each.

Figure 13. *Count of Opportunity Youth for 23- to 24-year-olds by sex and race/ethnicity (2023 5-year ACS).*

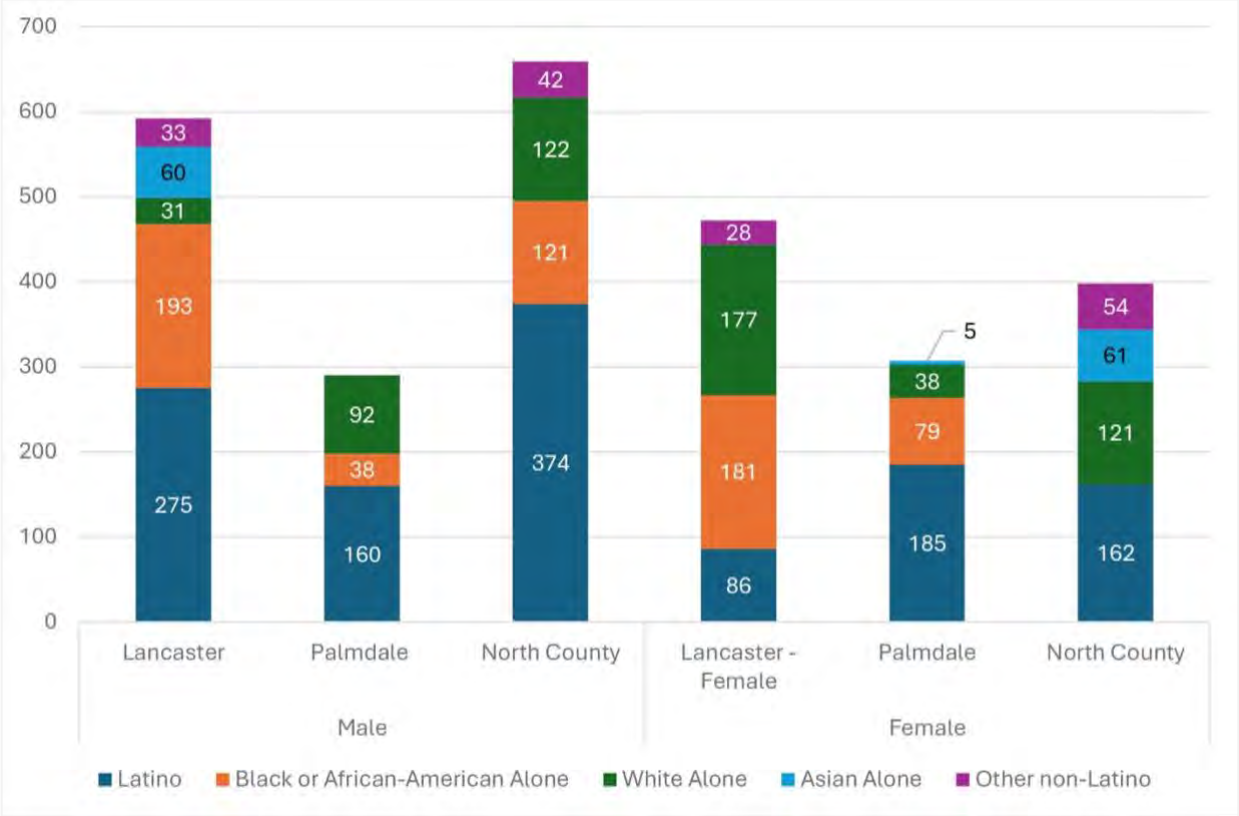
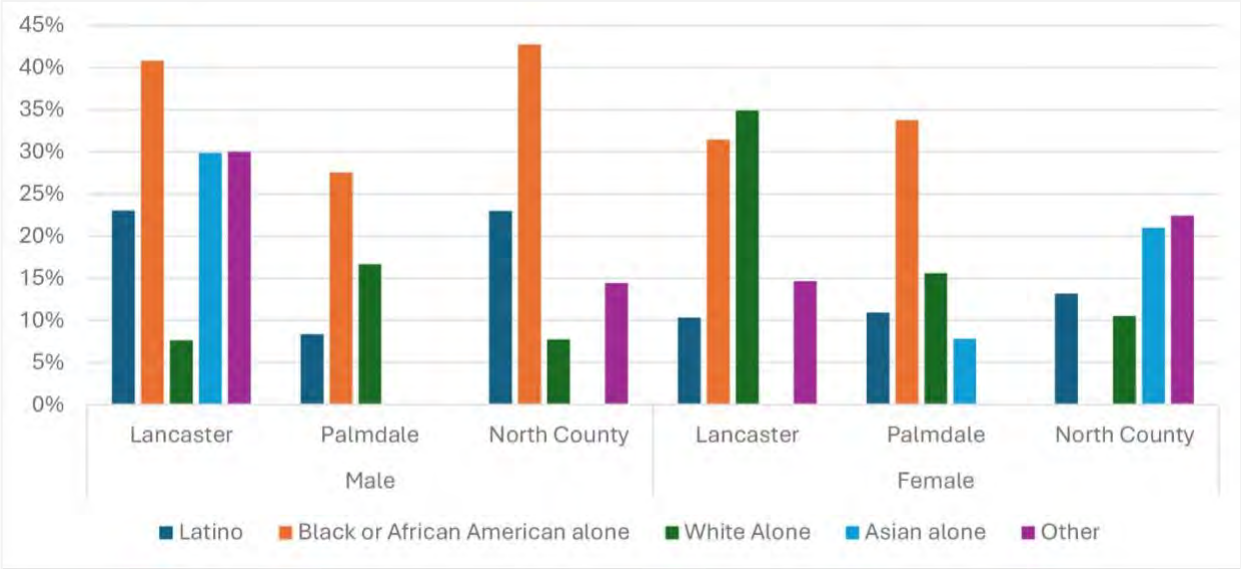


Figure 14. *Percent of Opportunity Youth for 23- to 24-year-olds by sex and race/ethnicity (2023 5-year ACS).*



By Location

Overall, Lancaster had 3,720 Opportunity Youth in 2023, Palmdale had 2,324, and North County had 3,375. However, analyzing the data in detail helps tailor strategies to meet the needs of Opportunity Youth. Among the three areas, the majority of Black Opportunity Youth are in Lancaster, with some in Palmdale. There are generally few Asian Alone Opportunity Youth; they are mostly in Lancaster and North County. Most fall within the 21-24 age range.

Overall, Lancaster males follow the traditional pattern of higher Opportunity Youth in the older age groups (see Figure 15). This is true for the two largest groups, Latinos and Black males. Black males have a high rate—35 to 40%—of Opportunity Youth in the 19 to 24 age range (see Figure 16). Hispanic males have the highest rate, over 30%, for 21- to 22-year-olds and a still high rate of 23% for 23- to 24-year-olds.

Overall, the number of Lancaster females is evenly distributed across all age groups. The White Alone female group is sizable in most categories, except among 19- to 20-year-olds, with rates ranging from 20% to 45%. Black females are numerous, except in the 21- to 22-year-old group, and have high percentages (20% to 40%) across all age groups except 16- to 18-year-olds. Latino females increase in number and percentage in the 19- to 20-year-old group and then gradually decline.

Figure 15. *Count of Lancaster Opportunity Youth (2023 5-year ACS).*

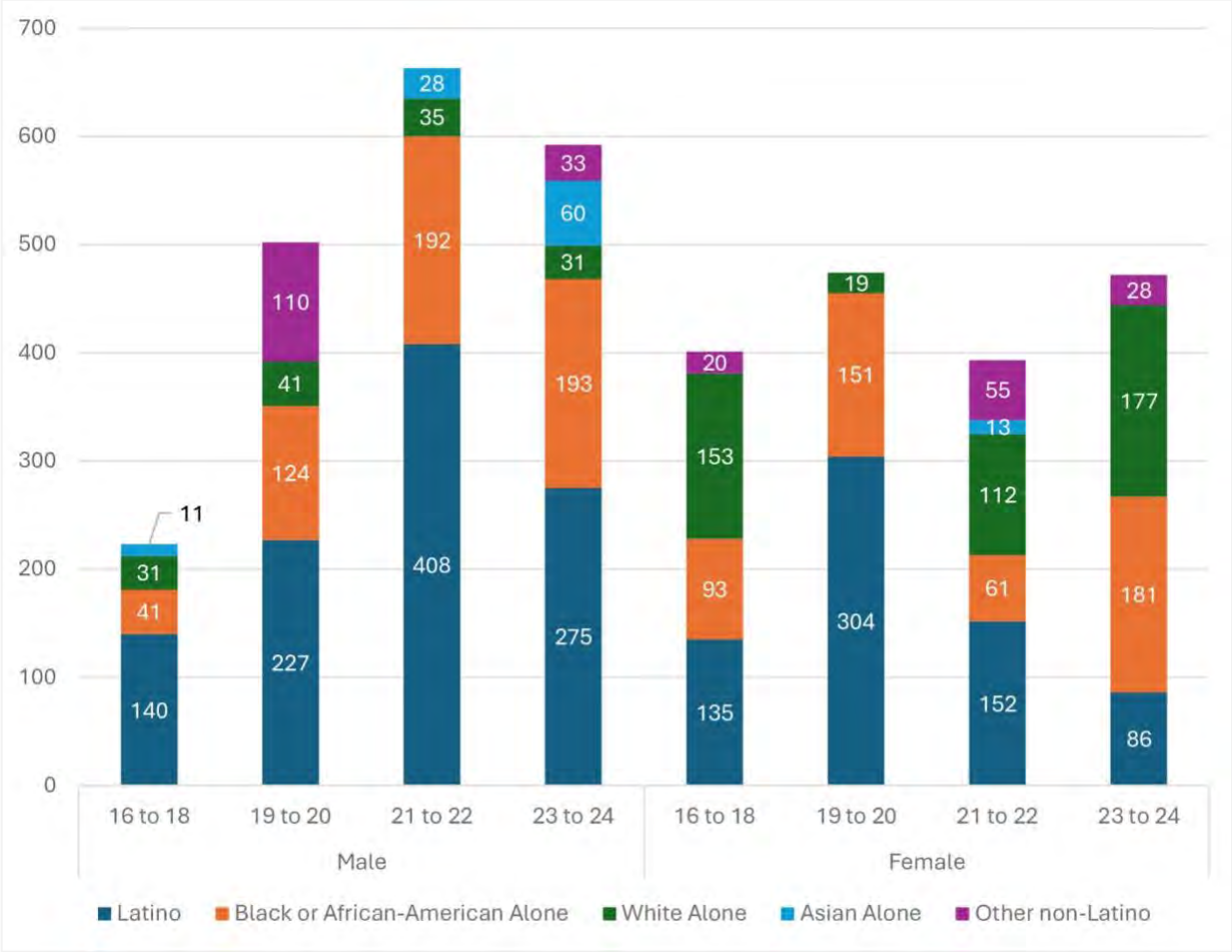
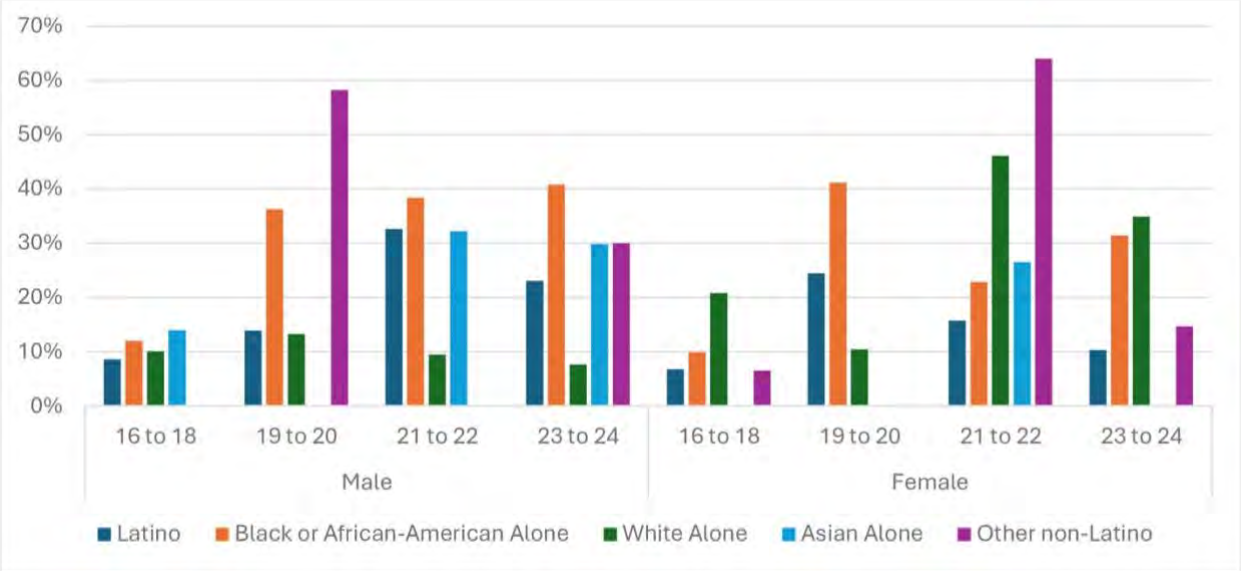


Figure 16. *Percent of Lancaster Groups who are Opportunity Youth (2023 5-year ACS).*



In Palmdale, the number of Opportunity Youth males remains stable across age groups. However, females have very few Opportunity Youth in the 16-to-18-year group, then increase greatly in the 19-to-20-year and 21-to-22-year groups, before dropping in the 23-to-24-year group (see Figure 17).

Palmdale male Opportunity Youth are predominantly Latino across all age groups, with relatively stable numbers and low percentages (5-12%). White Alone males are virtually nonexistent, except in the 23- to 24-year-old group, where they account for a significant 17%. Black males have fairly high counts and the highest percentages within each age group. However, their representation is close to the average (around 10%) among 16- to 20-year-olds, then increases to nearly 25% among 21- to 24-year-olds.

Most female Opportunity Youth are Latina, with numbers low among 16- to 18-year-olds, peaking among 21- to 22-year-olds, and then declining among 23- to 24-year-olds. The percentages follow the same pattern and are at or below average for all age groups, except for 21- to 22-year-olds, who are around 20%. White-only females constitute a large share in the 21- to 22-year-old group (about 40%), then decline to around 15% in the 23- to 24-year-old group. Black females have the highest counts and percentages for 19- to 20-year-olds; thereafter, both decline. The 19- to 24-year-olds have an Opportunity Youth rate ranging from 30% to 55%.

Figure 17. *Count of Palmdale Opportunity Youth (2023 5-year ACS).*

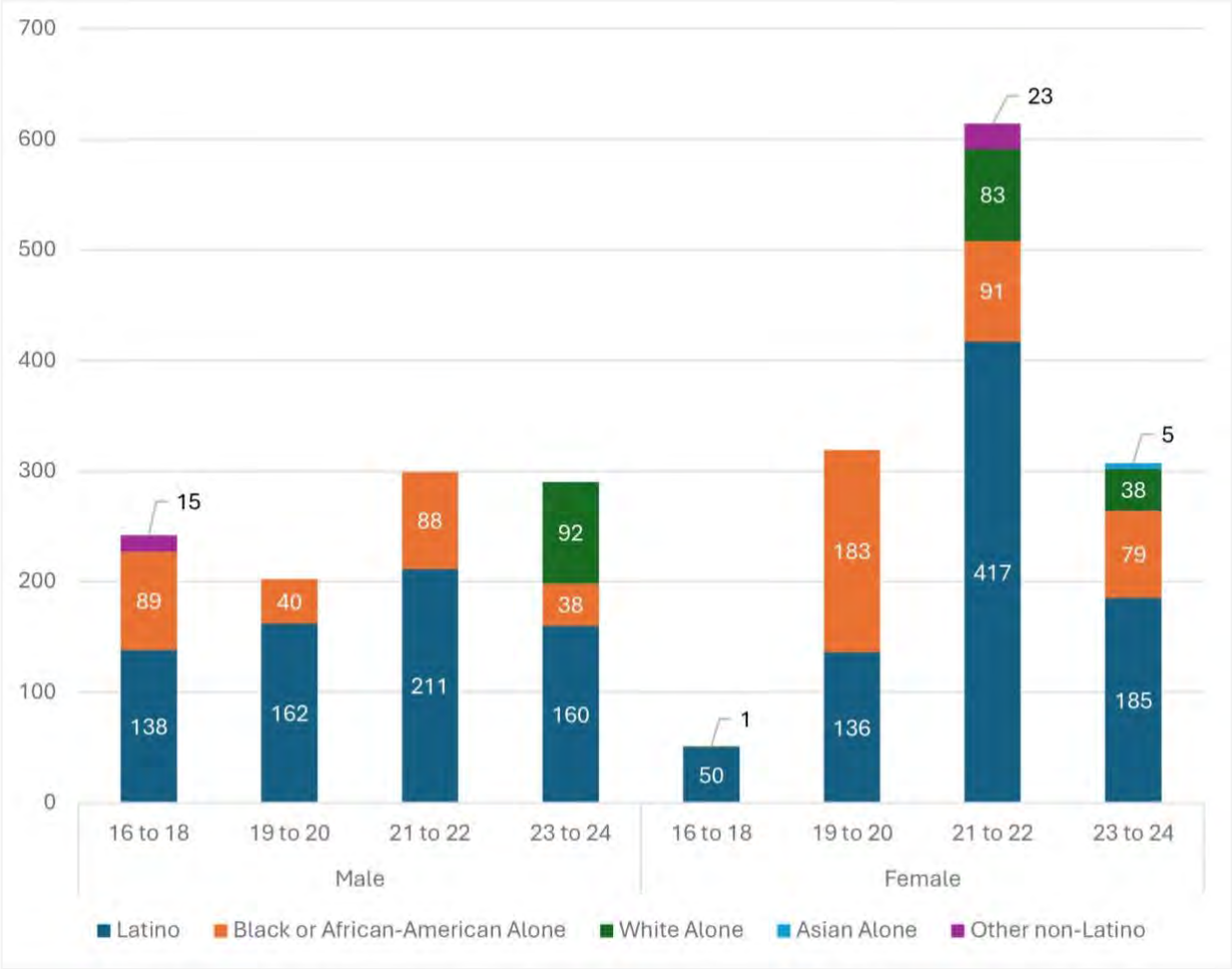
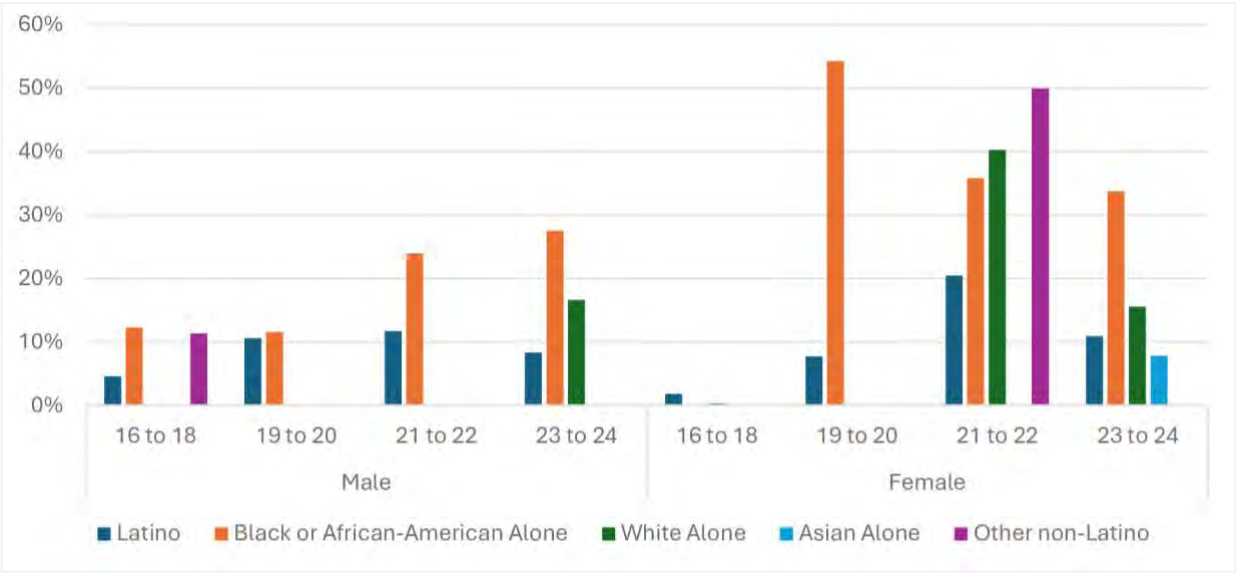


Figure 18. *Percent of Palmdale Groups who are Opportunity Youth (2023 5-year ACS).*



North County has more males than females among Opportunity Youth (see Figure 19). Latino males constitute the largest group, with their percentage increasing from approximately 5% among 16- to 18-year-olds, to 14% among 19- to 20-year-olds, and then steadily rising to 23% among 23- to 24-year-olds (see Figure 20). White Alone males are notably prominent in the 19- to 20-year age group, with a share of about 16%, whereas all other age groups are below 7%. Black males show a steady increase in numbers, starting with a low percentage for 16- to 18-year-olds and rising from 20% to 43% in older age groups. The 21- to 22-year-old Asian Alone males also have a high percentage at 15%, with a count of 61.

White Alone females have the highest counts across all age groups, especially among 21-to-24-year-olds, with percentages ranging from 10% to 15%. Latina females show a similar pattern but do not exceed 12.5%. Black female Opportunity Youth are only present in the 16-to-18-year age group, with a rate of 12.5%; no data for other ages. A few Asian individuals and Other non-Latino individuals in the 21-to-24-year-old group have percentages from 15% to 27%.

Figure 19. *Count of North County Opportunity Youth (2023 5-year ACS).*

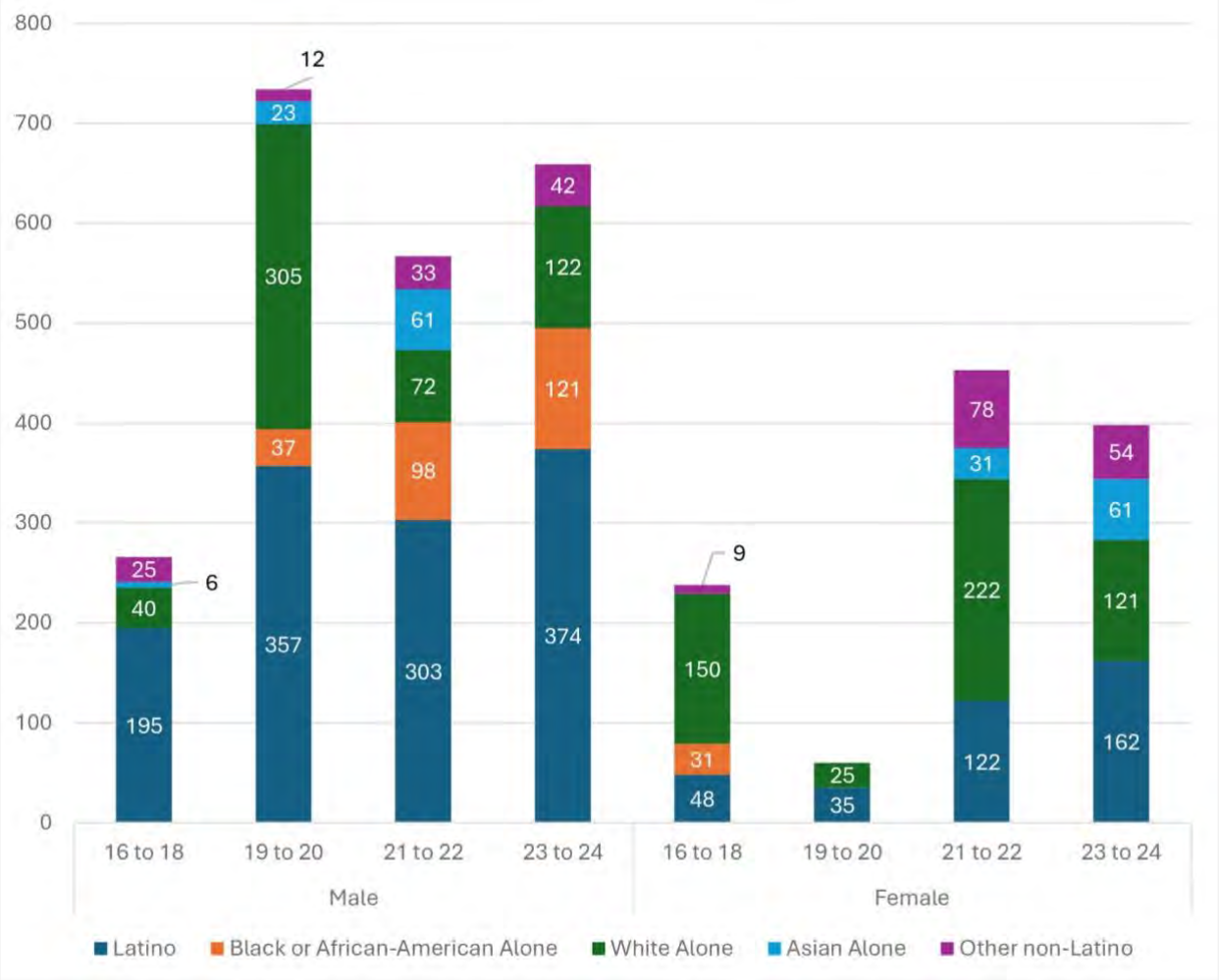
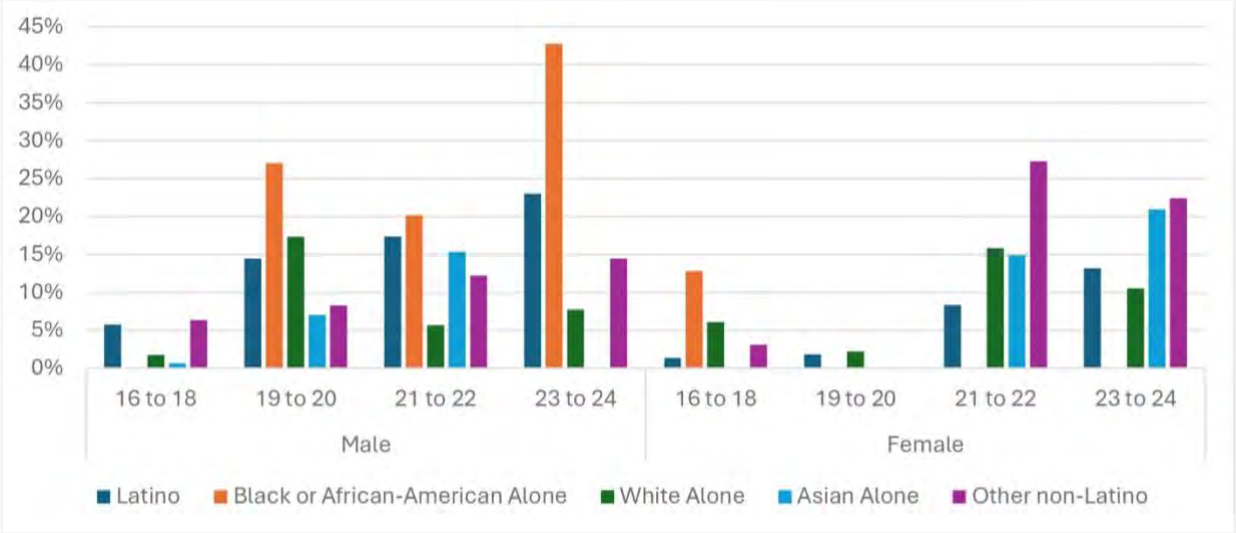


Figure 20. *Percent of North County Groups who are Opportunity Youth (2023 5-year ACS).*



Income and Opportunity Youth

Overall, Opportunity Youth live in households with lower incomes than their age group (see Figure 21). However, when we analyze the data by age groups and areas, several surprises emerge (see Figure 22). In Lancaster, the percentage of Opportunity Youth aged 16 to 18 in the $80k to <$100k income range increases from 15% to 20%, where a decrease would have been expected. In Palmdale, the income range of $100k+ among 16- to 18-year-olds increases from about 35% of the population to 55% of Opportunity Youth. Additionally, in Palmdale, 19- to 20-year-olds in the $20k to <$40k income range see a significant increase from about 10% to 30% of the Opportunity Youth. North County and LA County follow the expected trend: lower-income youth comprise a higher proportion of Opportunity Youth across all age groups.

Figure 21. *Percent of Youth by Household Income Groups split by Area (2023 5-yr ACS).*

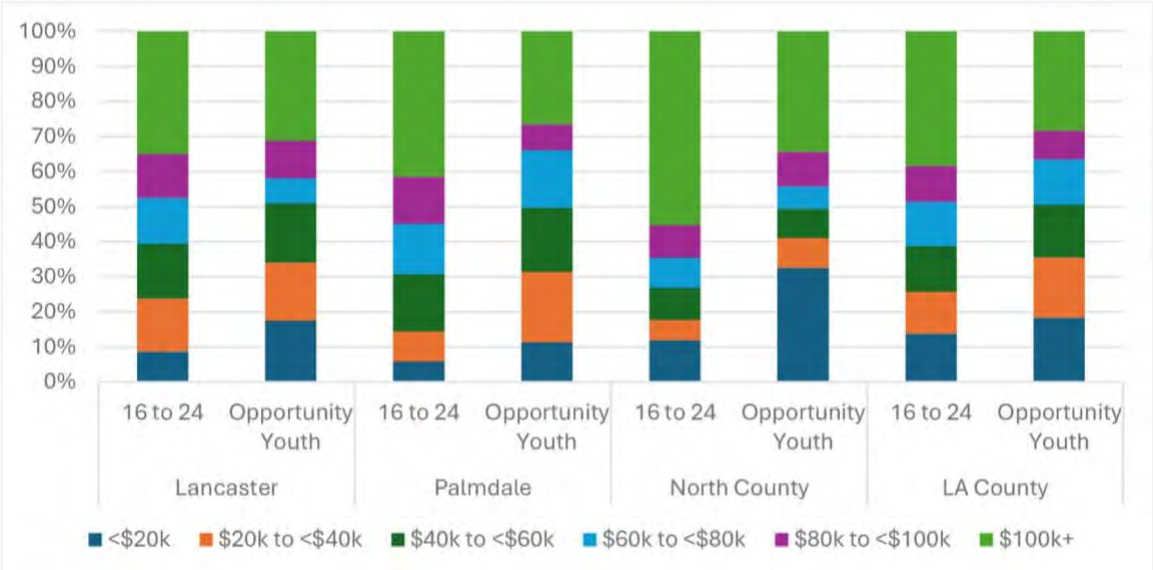


Figure 22. *Percent of Youth by Household Income Groups split by Age Group and Area (2023 5-yr ACS).*

Opportunity Youth by Relationship in Household

The relationship between Opportunity Youth and their household can significantly affect their lives. Most Opportunity Youth live in traditional households, classified as "All Other" in the chart (see Figure 23). However, the most at-risk group mainly comprises individuals in institutional group quarters, primarily 19- to 24-year-old males in North County and some 21- to 24-year-old males in Lancaster (see Figure 24). Grandchildren also experience a higher risk among 19- to 20-year-olds in Palmdale and 19- to 24-year-olds in LA County. Adopted 23- to 24-year-olds in Lancaster and Palmdale show a higher proportion, although the total numbers remain small (see Table 5).

Figure 23. *Opportunity Youth Counts by Household Relationship split by Area and Sex (2023 5-yr ACS).*

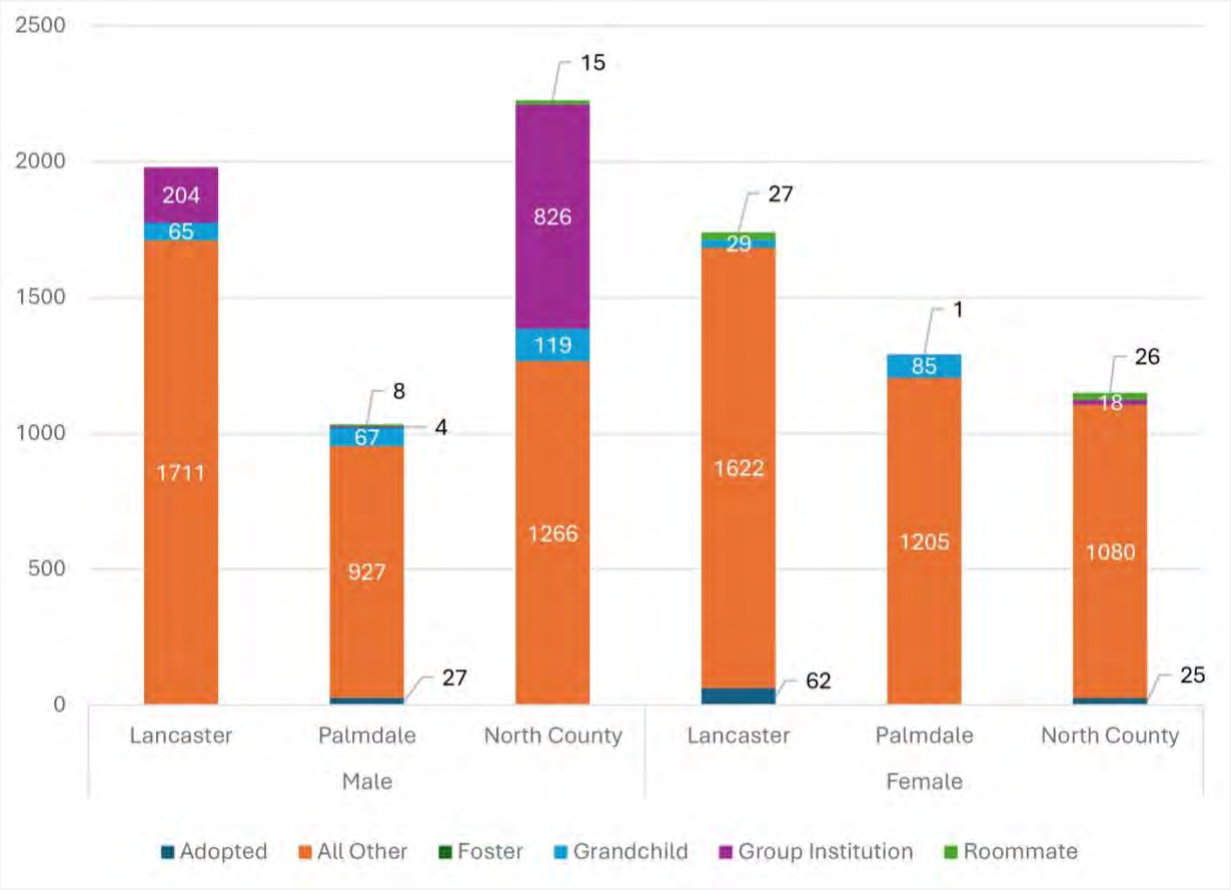


Figure 24. *Opportunity Youth Counts by Household Relationship split by Area and Age Groups (2023 5-yr ACS).*

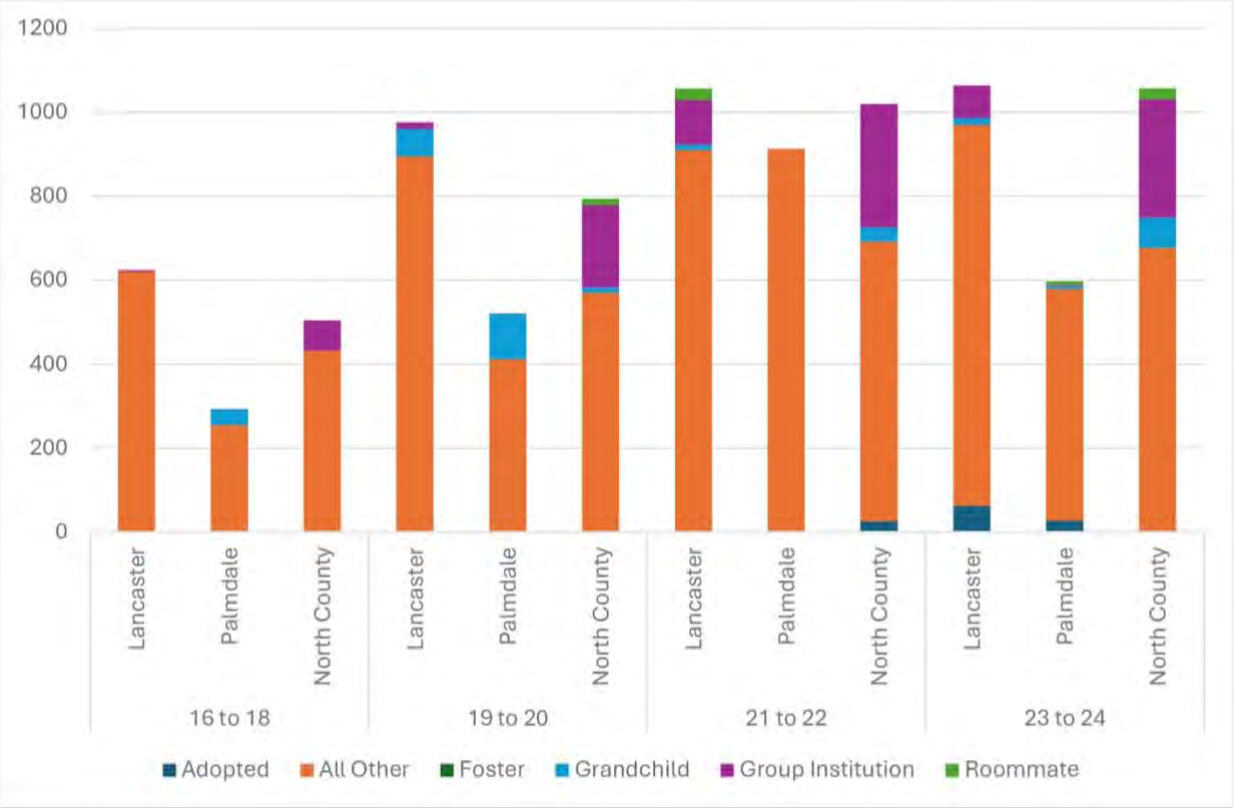


Figure 25. *Opportunity Youth Percent of all 16- to24-year-olds by Household Relationship split by Area (2023 5-yr ACS).*

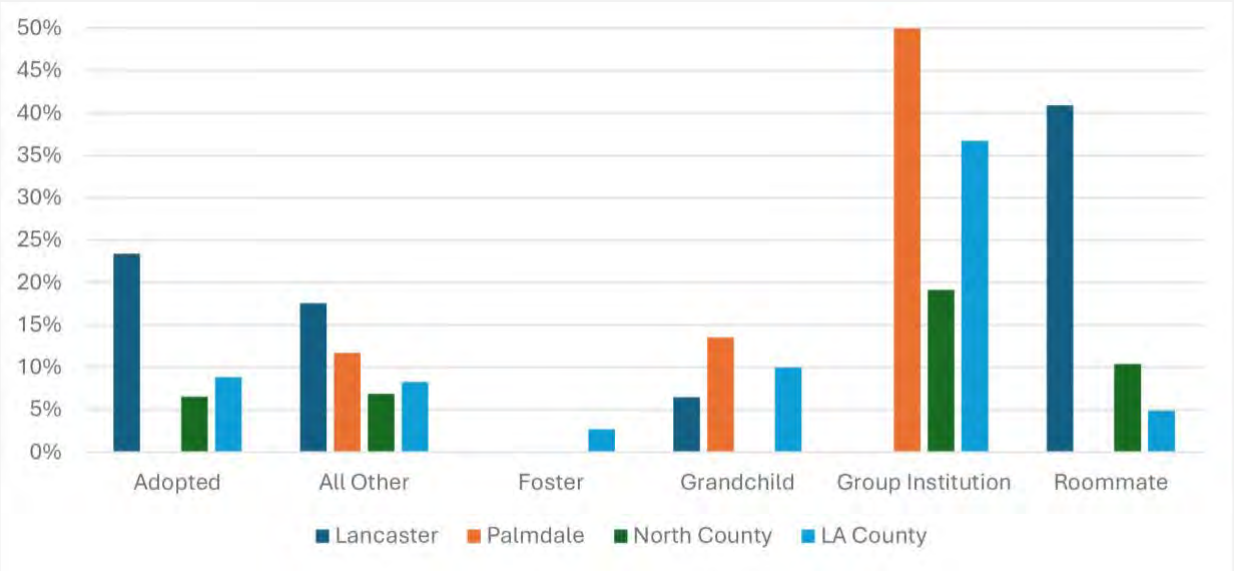


Table 5. *Opportunity Youth Percent of each age group by Household Relationship split by Area (2023 5-yr ACS)*

Relationship	Lancaster	Palmdale	North County	LA County	Lancaster	Palmdale	North County	LA County
	16 to 18				19 to 20			
Adopted	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	16.5%
All Other	8.4%	3.5%	3.3%	4.6%	20.8%	9.9%	7.5%	9.9%
Foster	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	56.7%
Grandchild	0.0%	4.8%	0.0%	5.4%	23.5%	49.5%	3.8%	15.0%
Group Institution	2.6%	50.0%	38.9%	16.6%	31.4%	25.0%	89.1%	59.2%
Roommate	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	6.9%	0.0%	0.0%	5.6%	4.0%
	21 to 22				23 to 24			
Adopted	0.0%	0.0%	13.9%	10.0%	79.5%	46.6%	0.0%	13.7%
All Other	25.2%	18.4%	9.8%	10.5%	22.1%	11.6%	11.6%	12.0%
Foster	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Grandchild	11.6%	0.0%	21.8%	15.2%	8.8%	4.6%	22.0%	15.3%
Group Institution	76.8%	0.0%	80.1%	84.1%	91.8%	100.0%	80.6%	78.6%
Roommate	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	5.5%	0.0%	25.0%	7.2%	5.5%

Experiences of Opportunity Youth

Many people have multiple arrests, which makes it difficult to obtain employment.

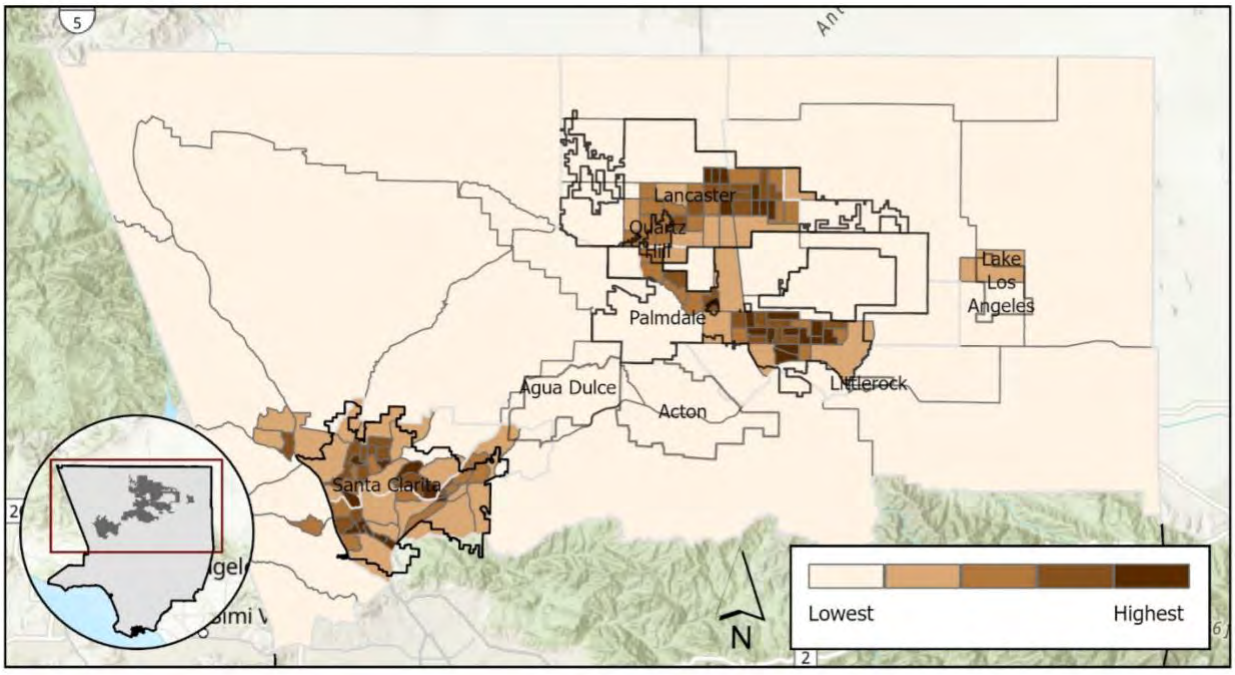
Location Analysis

This study presents a series of maps to visualize the distribution of Opportunity Youth in the Antelope Valley, with a focus on Lancaster and Palmdale. It also includes other sociodemographic variables such as population density, median household income, and population distribution by age, gender, and race and ethnicity. With support from the Antelope Valley Chamber of Commerce, this study geolocated existing businesses in the region to identify potential employment sources for Opportunity Youth and to visually estimate their accessibility to this group.

Results

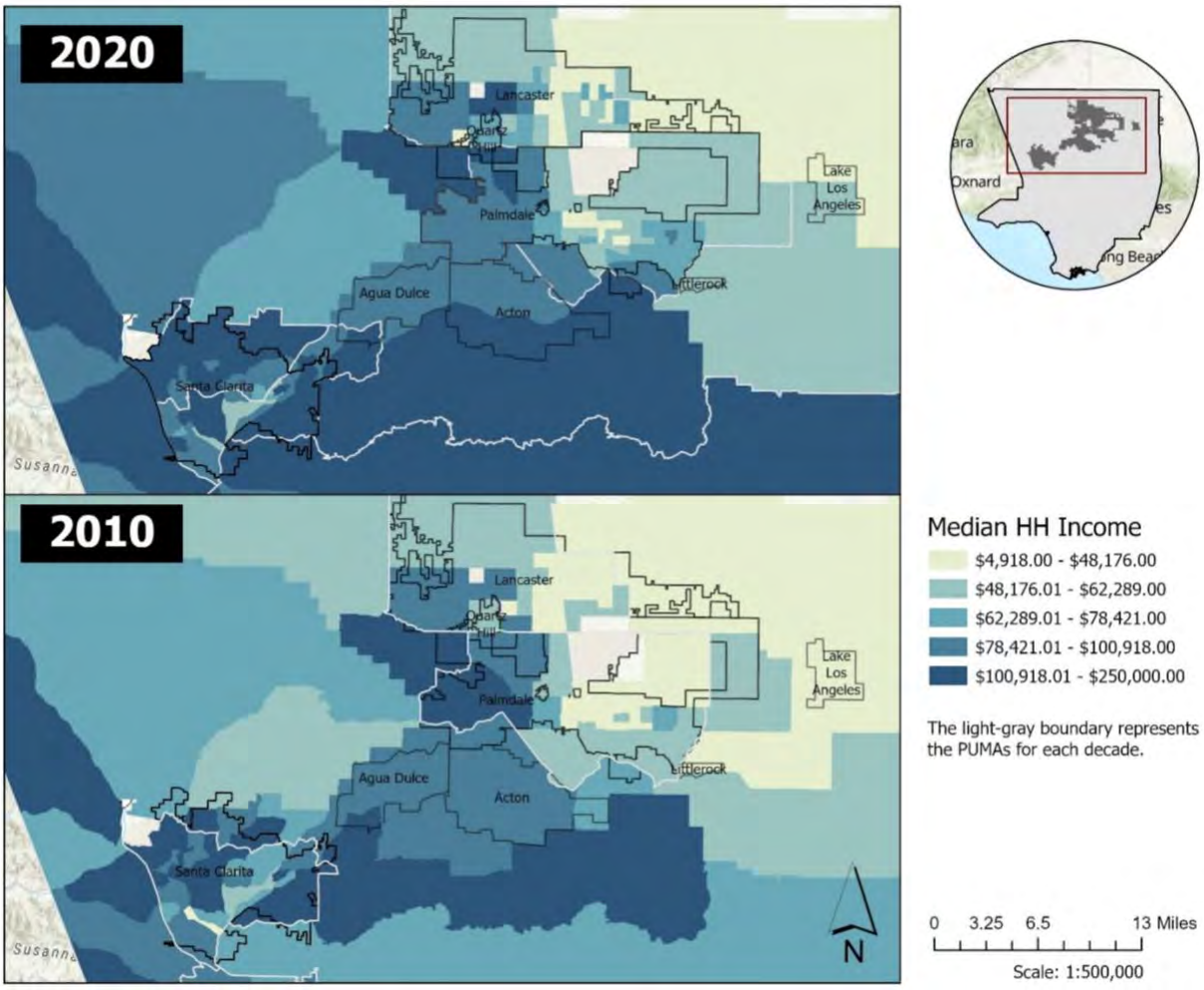
The first map (Figure 26) shows the population density of the northern county in 2020, with Lancaster, Palmdale, and Santa Clarita having the highest population densities. Some areas within Lancaster and Palmdale have lower population densities. In Palmdale, the Palmdale Regional Airport, and the open space at the southwestern end of the city have lower resident populations. For Lancaster, the northwestern area consists of natural open land, and the western end features large solar panel arrays, which also reduce the number of residents in these regions.

Figure 26. *Population Density in North County in 2020.*



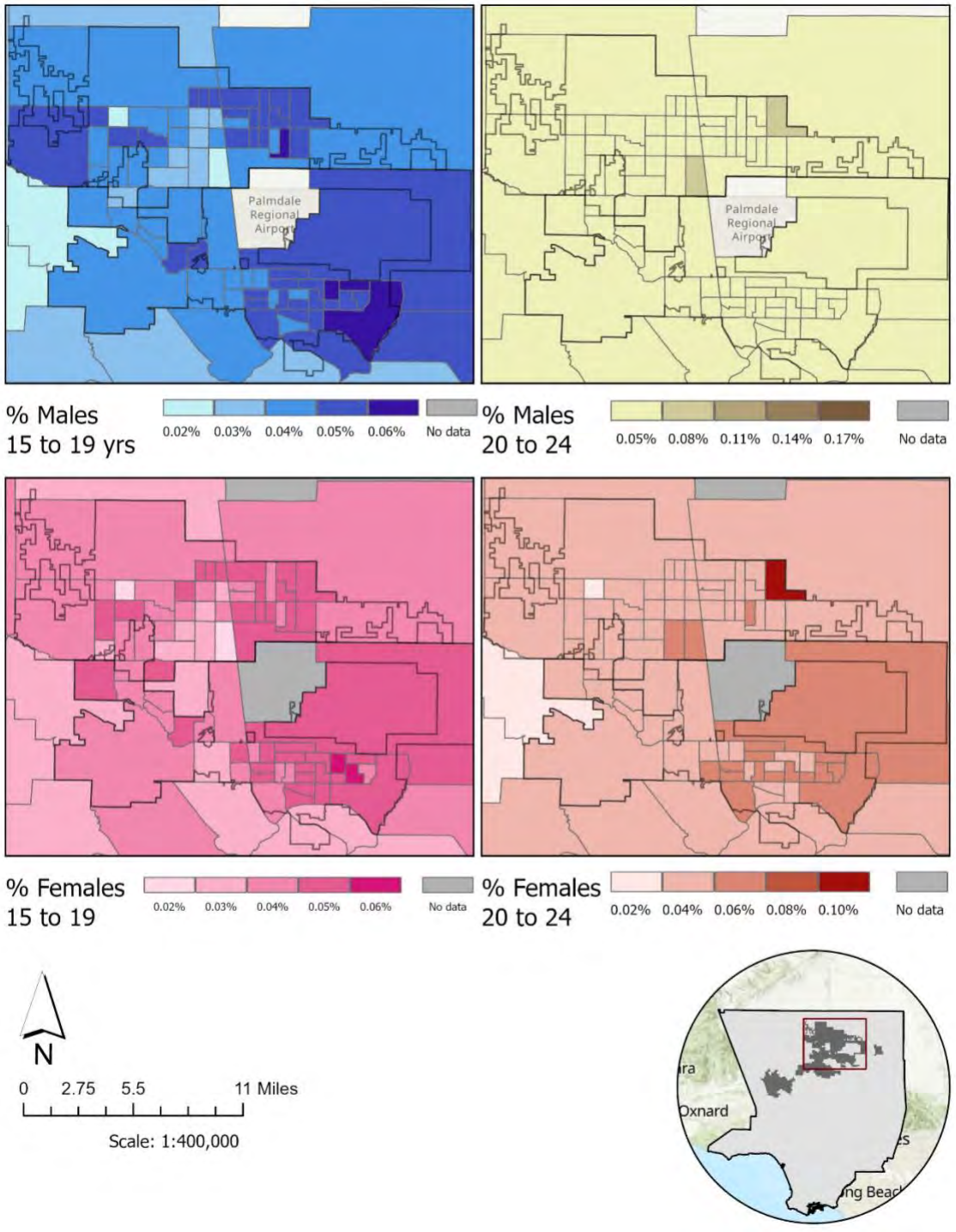
To better understand the sociodemographic conditions of the north county, this study mapped median household income for 2010 and 2020 (see Figure 27). Median household income remains stable over the decade, with higher incomes in the southern and western parts of the region, and significantly lower incomes in the northeastern area of the northern county. For comparison, the median household income in Los Angeles County in 2020 was about $75,000.

Figure 27. *Median Household Income in Antelope Valley, 2010 and 2020.*



The following maps (see Figure 28) show the locations of the younger population (aged 15 to 24) in Palmdale and Lancaster. In both cities, the percentage of 15- to 19-year-olds is less than 1% of the total population, with most of this group located in the eastern parts of each city. Among older males and females (20-24 years old), the percentages are also low. However, males are not concentrated in the eastern region, whereas females are.

Figure 28. *Location of male and female individuals, 15 to 19 years old and 20 to 24 years old.*



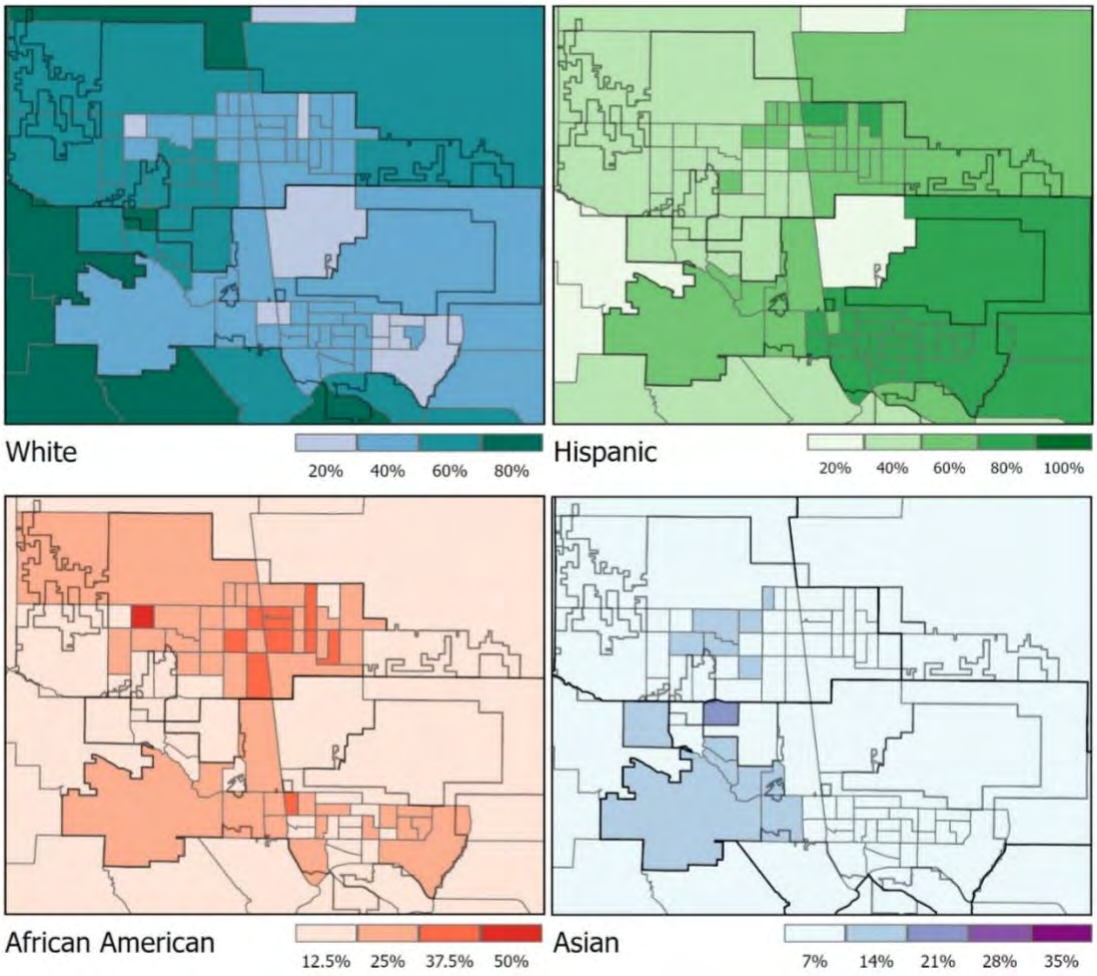
Regarding race and ethnicity, this study reveals distinct spatial patterns in the region (see Figure 29). The majority across all races are White and Hispanic, with Whites primarily clustered on the western side, while Hispanics are located on the opposite end. African Americans and Asians are less represented and also tend to be concentrated on the western side. American Indian and Alaskan Native, along with Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders, are evident minorities, each with percentages well below 1%. Although

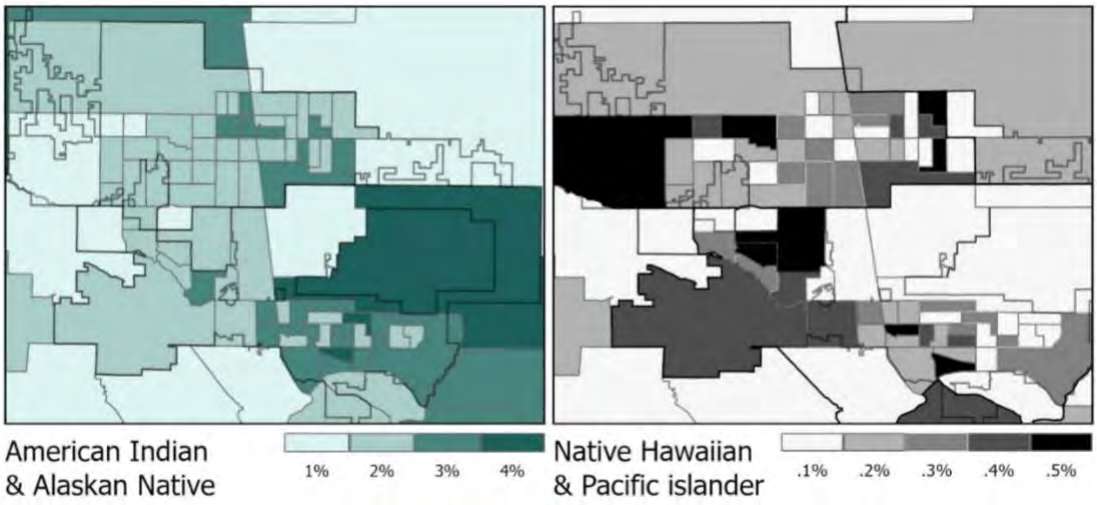
their percentages appear concentrated in certain areas, the small numbers of these groups preclude definitive identification of specific locations of concentration.

One limitation is that the Census data does not separate race and ethnicity by age and gender, so it is not possible to identify specific groups based on these variables.

Figure 29. *Population in the northern county by race and ethnicity.*

NOTE: The maps for race and ethnicity show the total population (all ages and genders) because the Census data do not disaggregate this information.





At-Risk Index

This study created an index that combines various factors affecting youth risk levels. Once mapped, the index visualizes the locations of groups labeled "at-risk" or "opportunity youth". The index was constructed by combining three variables: the percentage of youth (aged 18 to 24) without a high school diploma, the percentage of youth under 18 living below the poverty line, and the percentage of youth aged 16 to 24 who are unemployed (see Table 6). To combine these variables, the study recoded them into a standard format that could be summed.

Table 6. *Variables and values used to create the at-risk index*

Notes: This study excluded non-white individuals. Race has different outcomes depending on the location, for example, in Lancaster, more at-risk youth are female and white.

Code	Description	Range	Weight
Less HS	Percentage of the population between 18 and 24 years old with less than a high school diploma	0 to 100%	1
PovUnder18	Percentage of population under 18 below the poverty line	0 to 100%	1
Unemployed16to19	Percentage of the population aged 16 to 19 unemployed	0 to 100%	0.5
Unemployed20to24	Percentage of the population aged 20 to 24 unemployed	0 to 100%	0.5

Unemployment data are presented as a rate in the census. This study aimed to calculate the number of unemployed individuals for each age group; however, because the total population is available only for ages 15 to 19, the numbers do not align, rendering the calculation impossible. Therefore, this study used the unemployed population aged 16-19 and 20-24, assigning a 50% weight to each group in the index.

This study reclassified all values to single digits, applied weights to the unemployment figures, and then summed the values to single digits before assigning weights to the unemployment figures (see Table 7). The index scores range from 3 (lowest risk) to 15 (highest risk). When mapped, the lowest value in the north county was 3.5, and the highest was 10.

Table 7. *Configuration of the at-risk index*

Values for all variables	Population 18-24 with less than a high school diploma	The population under 18 is below the poverty level	The population aged 16 to 19 is unemployed	Population 20 to 24 unemployed
0 - 20%	1	1	1	1
21 - 40%	2	2	2	2
41 - 60%	3	3	3	3
61 - 80%	4	4	4	4
81 - 100%	5	5	5	5
Weight:	1	1	0.5	0.5

This study identified lower at-risk values in higher-income areas of the Antelope Valley, such as Santa Clarita, and the western sides of Palmdale and Lancaster (see Figure 30). However, higher at-risk values are present in the central parts of both Lancaster and Palmdale. Figure 31 provides a larger map of Lancaster and Palmdale, showing the at-risk index values.

Figure 30. *At-risk index of Antelope Valley youth (2020).*

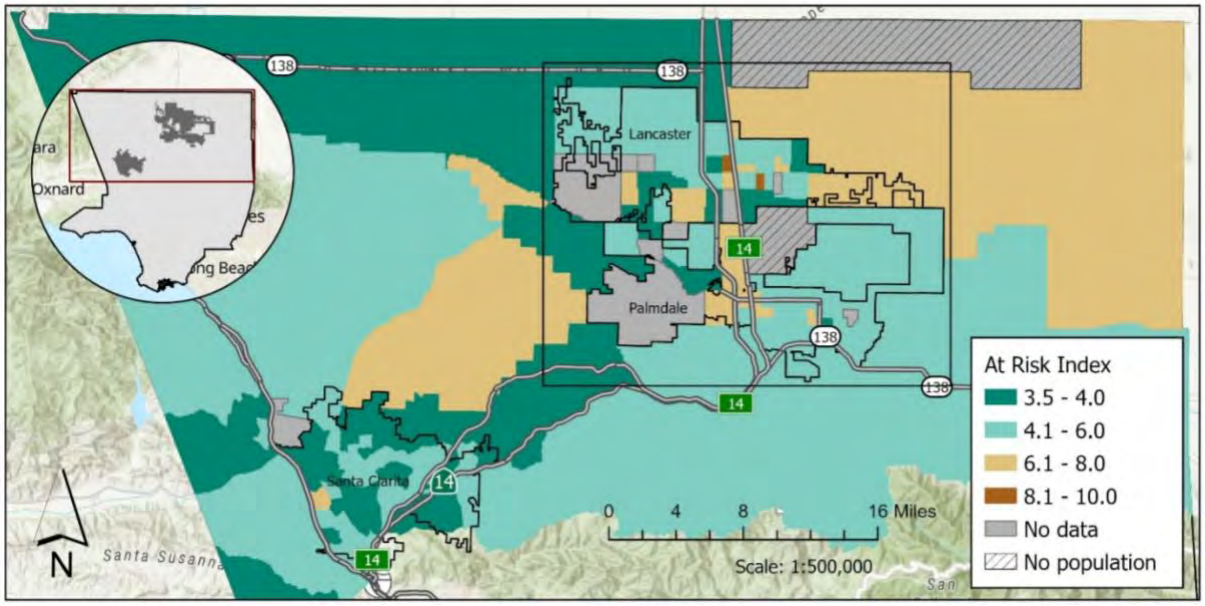
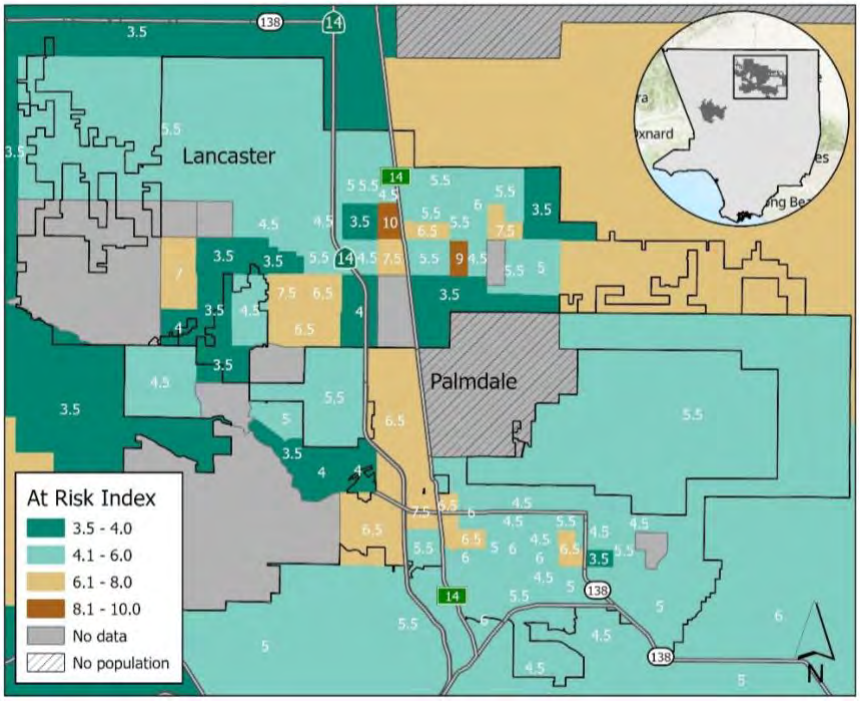


Figure 31. *At-risk index of Lancaster and Palmdale (2020).*



Areas with higher at-risk index values (6.1 to 10) should be flagged for attention because they include many young people with low educational levels, in poverty, and unemployed. In both Lancaster and Palmdale, the highest-risk areas are located in the older parts of the cities, between Highway 14 and Sierra Highway.

Limitations

As noted earlier, the main limitations of this analysis stem from the available data. The census does not include all the information needed to obtain a clearer picture of the current conditions, and such information is not available at the individual level. The census does not include all the information needed to obtain a clearer picture of the current conditions of opportunity youth or to identify them. However, the figures and maps presented here provide a reasonable approximation of existing conditions and can help identify areas for targeted support services.

In the following section, this study examines job and education opportunities in the region, the locations of existing and potential sources of employment, and how these opportunities align with the locations of the youth groups in question.

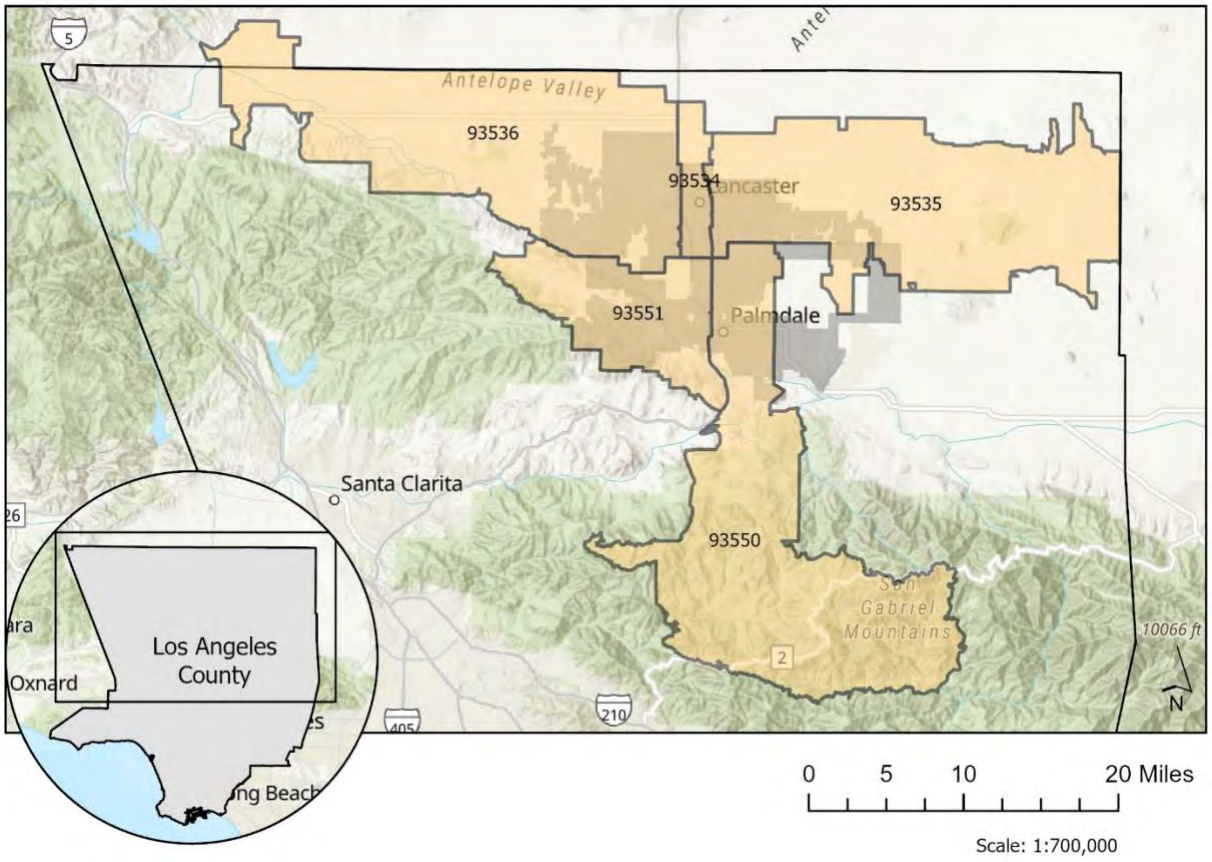
Job and Education Opportunities

Employment trends and the number of establishments show overall growth in the Antelope Valley from 2017 to 2022. Using ZIP Code Business Patterns data, the general trends in employment and industry are highlighted. Local business data from the Chamber of Commerce was used to determine whether establishments are near potential Opportunity Youth locations. The primary educational resource is Antelope Valley College. The quality of the Antelope Valley High District is also discussed.

ZIP Code Business Patterns

ZIP code business pattern data is compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau. It tracks the number of business establishments, the number of employees, and the payroll for those employees. Figure 32 shows the five main ZIP codes that contain most of the employment opportunities in the Antelope Valley.

Figure 32. *Five main employment ZIP codes in Antelope Valley.*



The total number of jobs in the Antelope Valley grew from about 67,000 in 2017 to 75,000 in 2022 (see Figure 33). Nearly 90% of these jobs are concentrated in five ZIP codes: 93534 (Lancaster), 93551 (Palmdale), 93550 (Palmdale), 93536 (Lancaster), and 93535 (Lancaster). Of the 7,200 new jobs, 86% are located within these same five ZIP codes. Figure 33 shows the job changes from 2017 to 2022. The "Other" category includes the remaining 13 ZIP codes in the region. ZIP code 93551 in Palmdale experienced the highest percentage growth at 22.1%. Conversely, ZIP codes 93550 in Palmdale and 93535 in Lancaster had the slowest growth at 4.5% and 0.2%, respectively. The other ZIP codes saw growth rates close to the overall Antelope Valley rate of 10.6% (see Table 8).

Figure 33. *Job trends for Antelope Valley.*

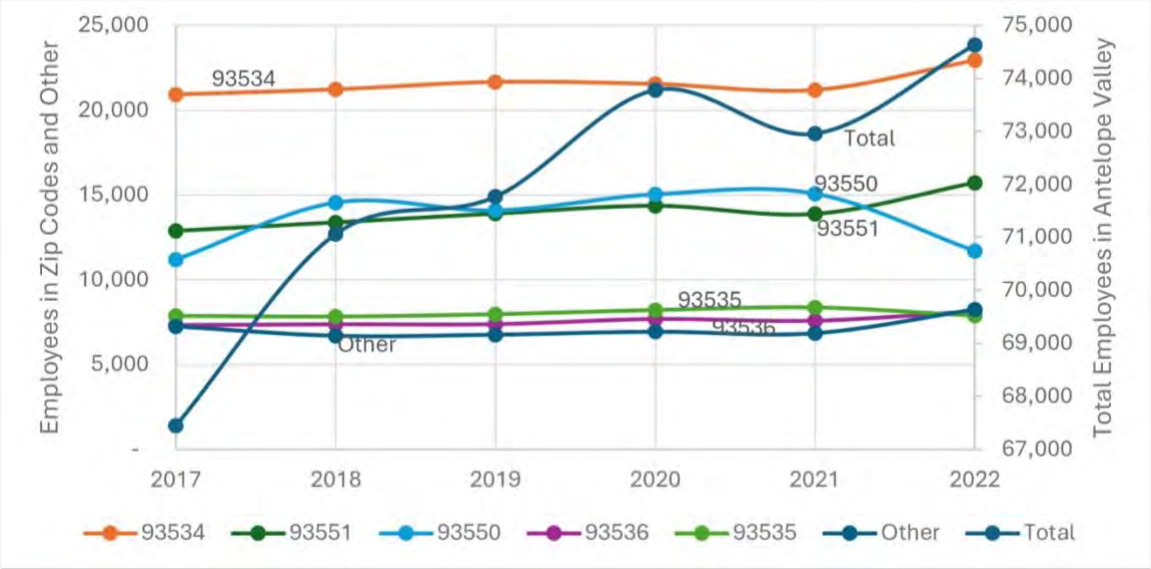


Table 8. *Total jobs and percent change for Antelope Valley and its ZIP Codes*

Area	2017	2022	Change
Antelope Valley	67,448	74,630	10.6%
93534	20,930	22,934	9.6%
93551	12,884	15,725	22.1%
93550	11,196	11,699	4.5%
93536	7,321	8,142	11.2%
93535	7,869	7,885	0.2%
Other	7,248	8,245	13.8%

This dataset does not disaggregate employment by industry type, but it reports the number of business establishments by industry (see Figure 34). This helps us understand the dominant industry composition. The five most common industries in the five largest ZIP codes in the Antelope Valley are Health Care and Social Assistance; Retail Trade; Accommodation and Food Services; Construction; and Other Services (except Public Administration). Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services ranks fifth in ZIP code 93534.

Figure 34. *Number of establishments by industry types for the 5 largest ZIP codes.*

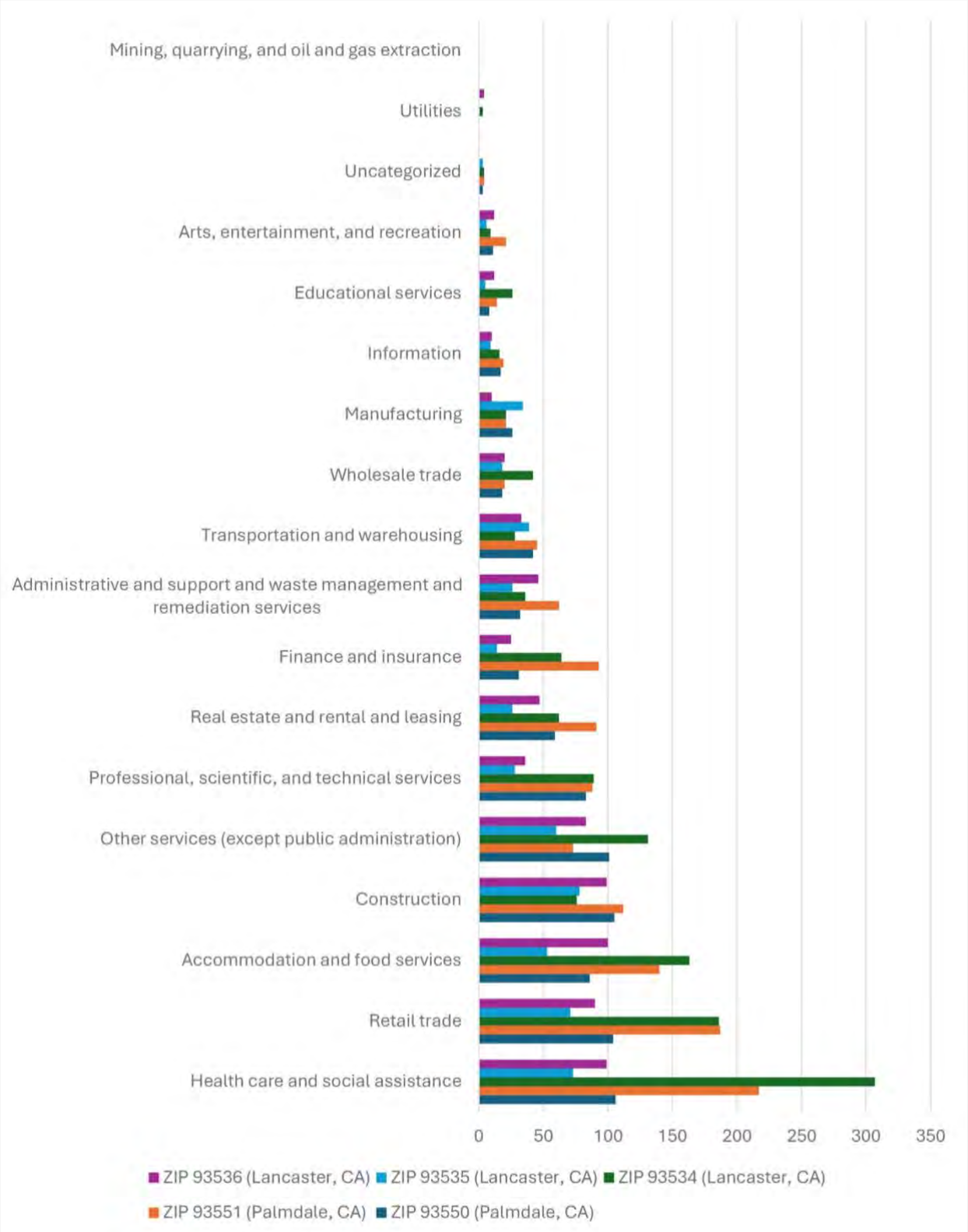


Figure 35. *Number of establishments by firm size for the 5 largest ZIP codes.*

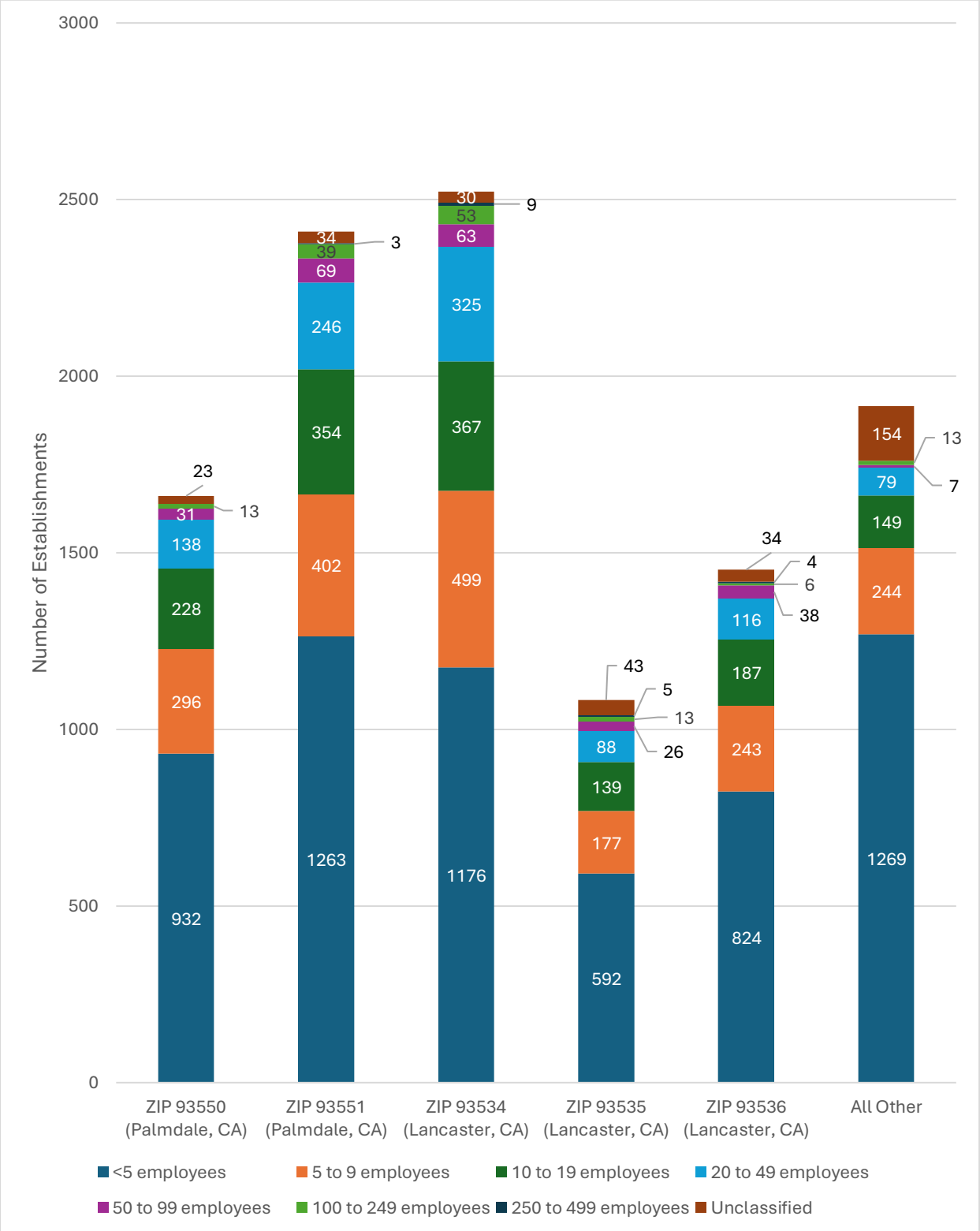


Table 9. *Change in the number of establishments between 2017 and 2022 by industry type*

	ZIP 93534 (Lancaster)	ZIP 93535 (Lancaster)	ZIP 93536 (Lancaster)	ZIP 93550 (Palmdale)	ZIP 93551 (Palmdale)	Grand Total
Health care and social assistance	-22	13	30	14	45	80
Retail trade	-11	12	-1	4	13	17
Accommodation and food services	15	9	28	-3	20	69
Construction	15	10	5	42	29	101
Other services (except public administration)	2	2	25	17	11	57
Professional, scientific, and technical services	-6	8	-12	-2	16	4
Real estate rental and leasing	-7	-2	8	2	28	29
Finance and insurance	-15	2	0	-14	49	22
Administrative and support, waste management, and remediation services	-5	4	-3	10	20	26
Transportation and warehousing	7	18	7	22	24	78
Wholesale trade	5	2	1	2	4	14
Manufacturing	2	-1	0	-1	2	2
Information	3	1	3	-3	5	9
Educational services	7	-2	1	-1	3	8
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	-2	3	4	5	10	20
Uncategorized	0	-1	0	1	1	1
Management of companies and enterprises	-4	0	0	0	0	-4
Utilities	3	0	0	0	0	3
Net Change	-13	78	96	95	280	536

The ZIP code business pattern data also shows the number of establishments by size (see Figure 35). More than half of the establishments have fewer than five employees, and 80% have fewer than 19 employees. There are only 21 establishments with 250 to 499 employees; nine are in 93534, five in 93535, four in 93536, and three in 93551. Large employers include Boeing, Northrop Grumman, Lockheed Martin, and two major call centers (https://laedc.org/thrive-in-la/regions-cities/antelope-valley/#:~:text=Doing%20Business%20in%20the%20Antelope,of%20their%20suppliers%20and%20subcontractors). These five ZIP codes experienced an increase of 536 establishments, with 280 of those in 93551, which aligns with the ZIP codes that saw the largest employment growth (see Table 9). Only 93534 in Lancaster saw a decline of 13 establishments, even though employment grew by 9.6%. Overall, the rise in jobs and establishments signals a growing region. The main employment sectors offer numerous entry-level opportunities that should be accessible to many Antelope Valley youth. Given that local businesses

and nonprofit organizations can serve as potential sources of employment for opportunity youth, this study mapped the locations of existing businesses in the Antelope Valley. The maps help us visually identify potential employment sources in relation to the overall spatial distribution of youth and opportunity youth specifically. As a result, this study can pinpoint areas of opportunity and areas that may need attention. This information could guide policies and programs that support Opportunity Youth by providing training, transportation, and mentorship to help them secure and maintain employment.

Table 10. *Categorization of businesses in Antelope Valley by the training required for an entry-level position*

I. Minimal Training or On-the-Job Training	II. Vocational Training or Certification Required
Cleaning	Electrician
Fast Food / Food service / Restaurant	HVAC
Retail	Construction
Day Care (assistants)	Contractors
Pest Control	Restoration and Reconstruction
Pet Services	Flooring
Vending Machines	Automotive (mechanic roles)
Dry Cleaning	Dental Assistants
Landscaping (basic roles)	Health and Wellness (e.g., certified trainers)
Traffic Control	Hair/Nail Technicians (licensed)
Storage	Security
Transportation (non-commercial driver)	Senior Living (care aides)
Upholstery (entry-level)	Pest Control (licensed)
Wine and Paint (facilitator roles)	Appliance Repair
Consignment	Real Estate (licensed agents)
Beauty (non-licensed roles, e.g., sales)	Mortuary
Trophies and Plaques	Dry Cleaning (management or specialized roles)
Recreation (e.g., park attendants)	

III. Associate's Degree or Some College Typically Required	IV. Bachelor's Degree Typically Required
	Education / Education non-profit / Education
Assisted Living (e.g., LVNs)	Government
Healthcare (e.g., medical assistants, techs)	Accounting
Dental Hygienist	Advertising
Library Services (technicians)	Business Consultant
Corporate Training (entry roles)	Marketing
Early Childhood Education (teachers)	Financial Services
	Legal Services (e.g., non-attorney roles,
Legal Services (paralegals)	management)
Tourism (management)	Corporate Training
Photography	Government (most civil service roles)
Event Planning	Information Technology
Music (performers or teachers, non-formal)	Hotel Management
Printing	Non-Profit Administration
Cleaning (managerial roles)	Housing (policy roles)
	Radio (production roles)
	Arts & Culture (program directors)
	Music (education/admin roles)
	Chamber of Commerce
	Military/Non-Profit (administration roles)

V. Advanced Degrees or Specialized Licenses Required
Higher Education (professors, administrators)
Legal Services (attorneys)
Healthcare (physicians, RNs, specialists)
Mental Health / Non-Profit (therapists, counselors)
Education (admin roles, curriculum designers)
Engineering (Aerospace roles)
Architecture or Real Estate Development (some Housing roles)
Government (policy makers, analysts)
Technology (developers, IT security, analysts)

In Lancaster, this study identified 198 businesses (see figure 36). Approximately 45% require minimal or vocational training for entry-level positions, whereas the remainder require higher levels of training, such as an associate or bachelor's degree (see Table 11). Only 25.3% of these businesses are non-profit.

Table 11. *Percentage of jobs available in Lancaster by type of training needed for entry-level positions*

Percentage	Type of training required
19.2%	Minimal training
23.7	Vocational training
13.6	Associate degree
37.4	Bachelor's degree
6.1	Advanced degree

Figure 36. *Location of potential employers by level of training required for an entry-level position in Lancaster.*

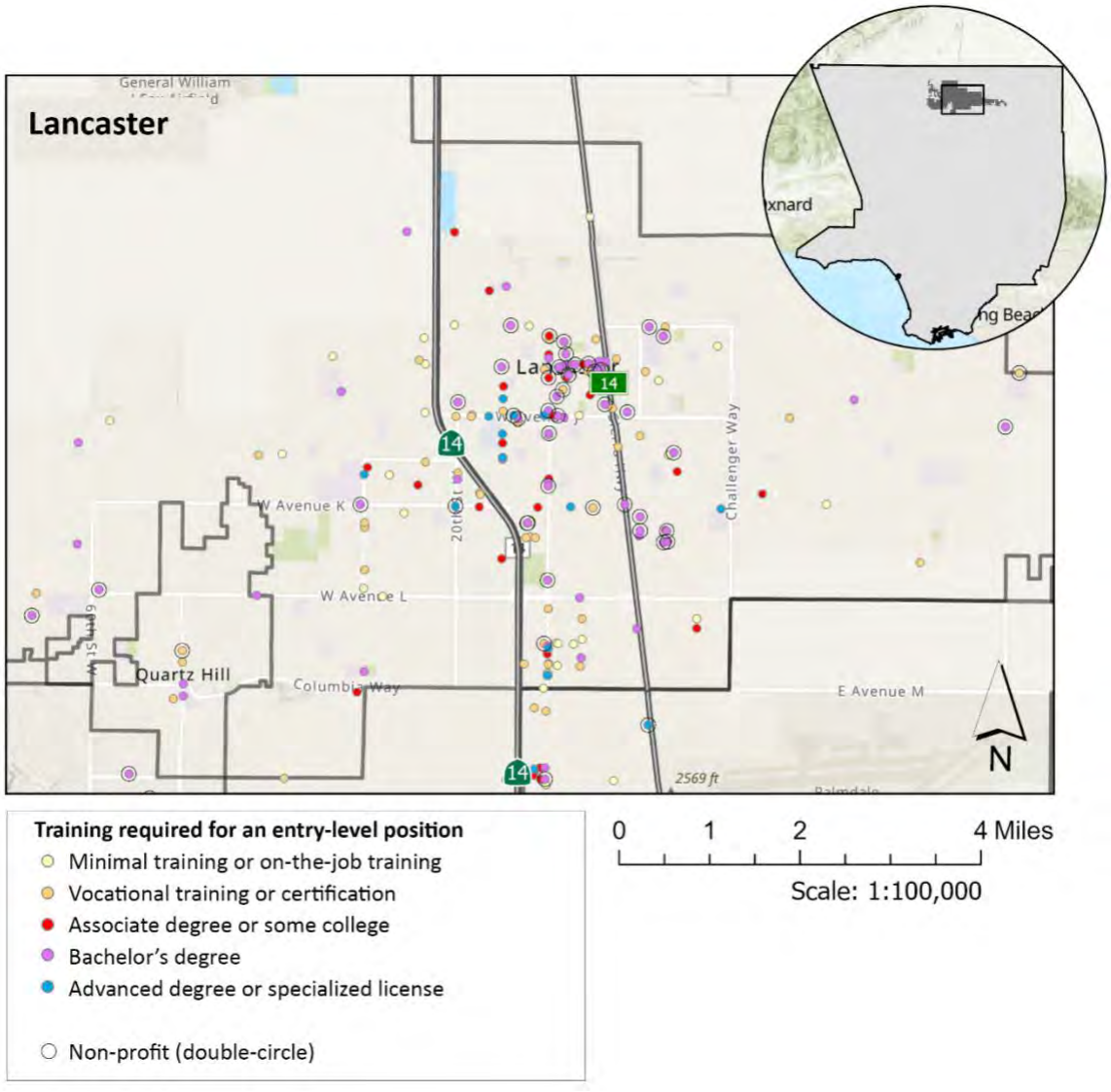
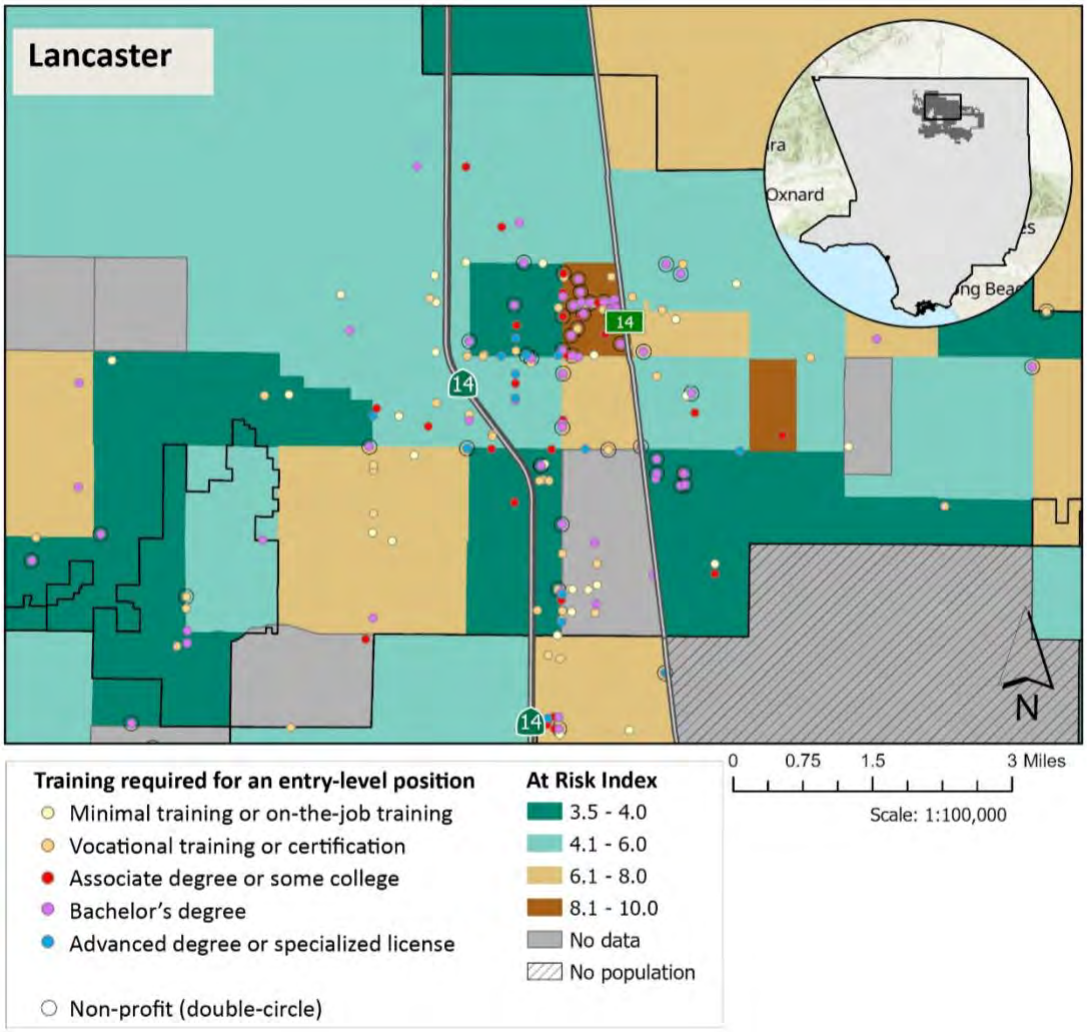


Figure 37 below shows the locations of the businesses overlaid on the risk-index categories for Lancaster. This study finds that many businesses are located in higher-risk areas (darker brown on the map), many require higher levels of training for entry-level positions (associate degree or bachelor's degree), and many are nonprofit organizations. The study also identified two census tracts with higher-risk indices (on the eastern side) that lack access to potential employers.

Figure 37. *Locations of potential employers by level of training required for an entry-level position, superimposed on the risk index in Lancaster.*



In Palmdale, this study identified 114 businesses (see Figure 38). About 51% require minimal or vocational training for entry-level positions, while the rest need higher levels of training, such as an associate or bachelor's degree (see Table 12). Only 13.2% of these businesses are non-profit.

Figure 38. *Location of potential employers by level of training required for an entry-level position in Palmdale.*

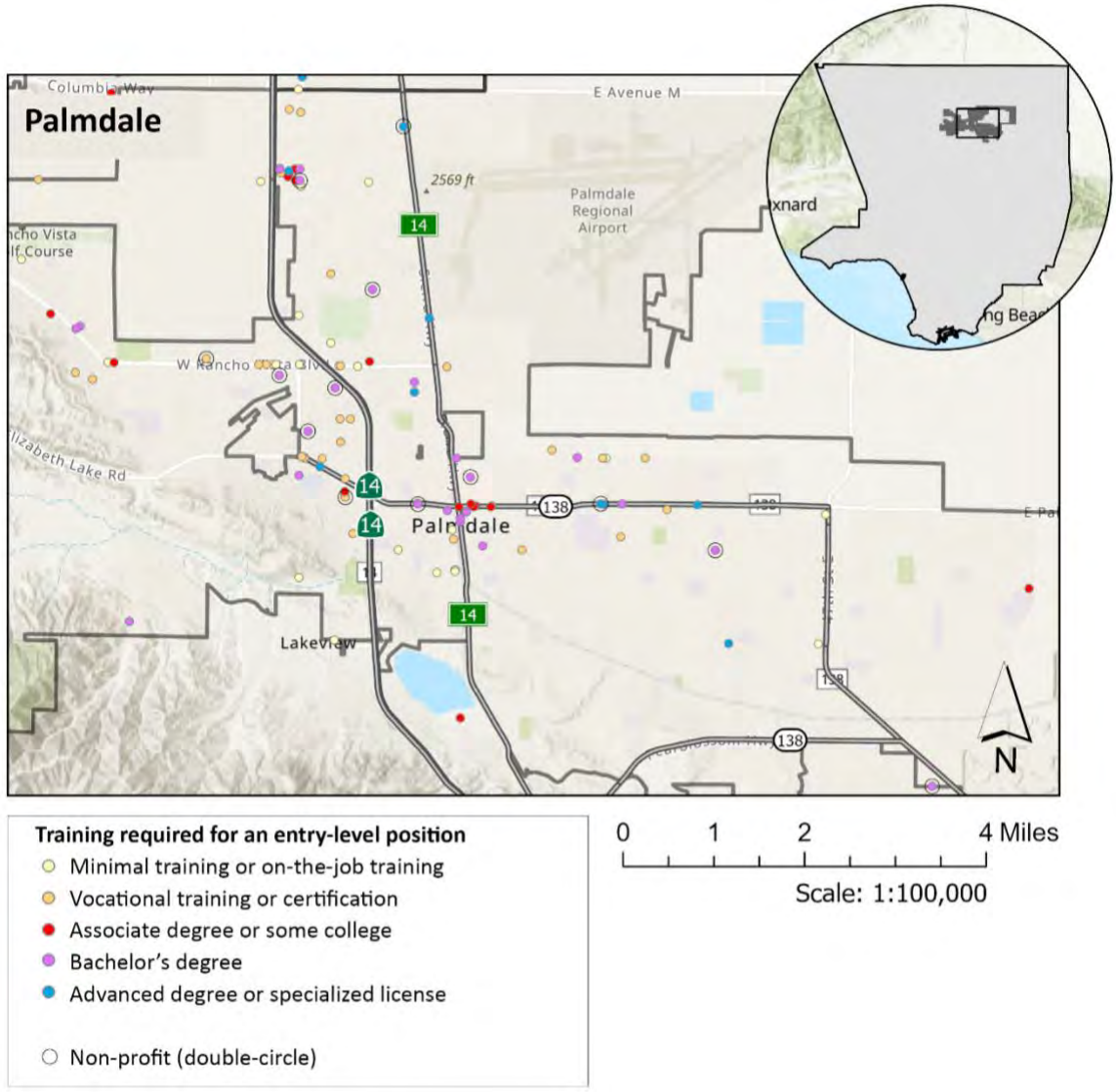
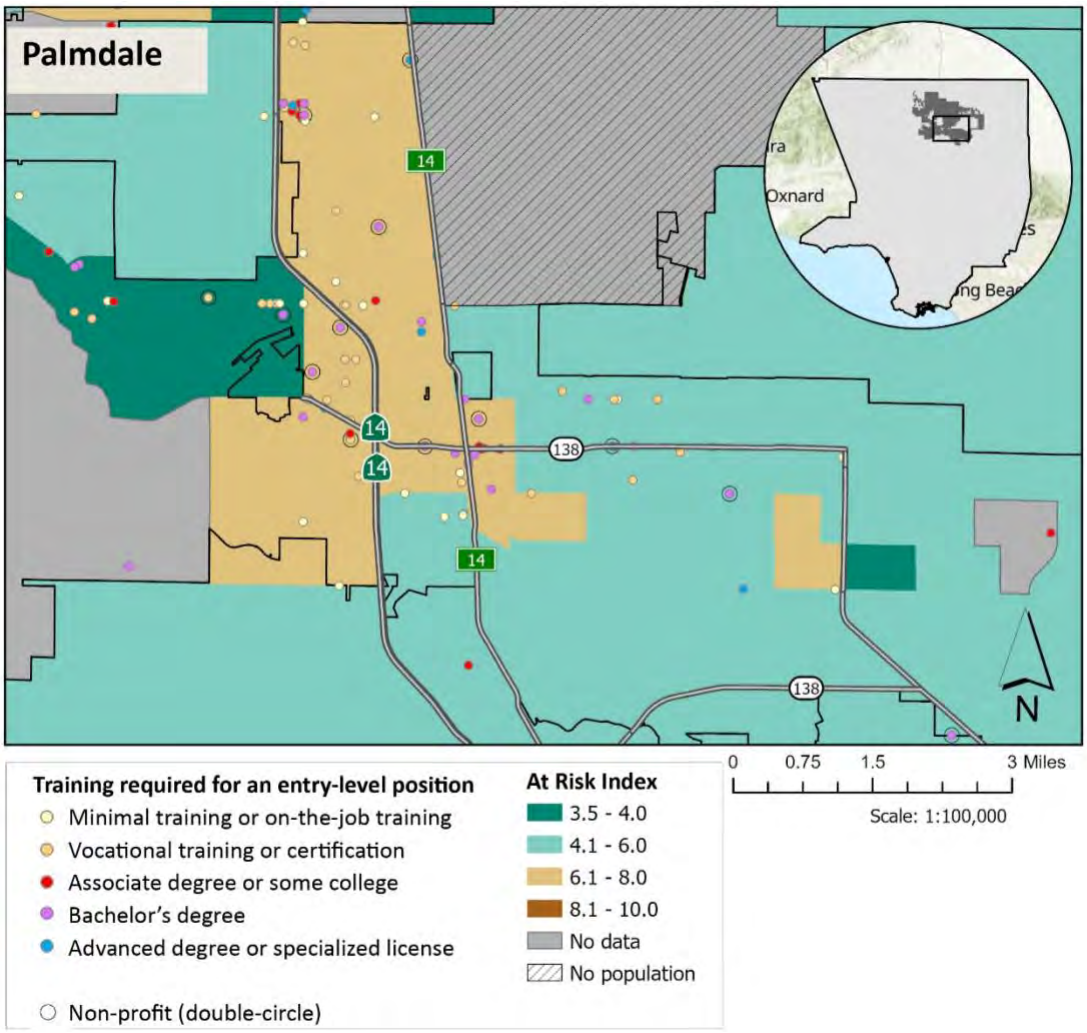


Table 12. *Percentage of jobs available in Palmdale by type of training required for an entry-level position*

Percentage	Type of training required
21.1	Minimal training
30.7	Vocational training
14.0	Associate degree
26.3	Bachelor's degree
7.9	Advanced degree

Compared to Lancaster, Palmdale faces a more challenging situation because most businesses are located outside the higher-risk census tracts. However, Palmdale has many businesses that require minimal training near the higher-risk areas (see Figure 39).

Figure 39. *Location of potential employers by level of training required for an entry-level position, superimposed on the risk index in Palmdale.*



This study also examined the spatial distribution of the younger population (ages 15-19 and 20-24) relative to potential employers. See the following figures for this analysis.

Figure 40. *Locations of businesses in the Antelope Valley, by youth location (15-19 years old; male and female combined).*

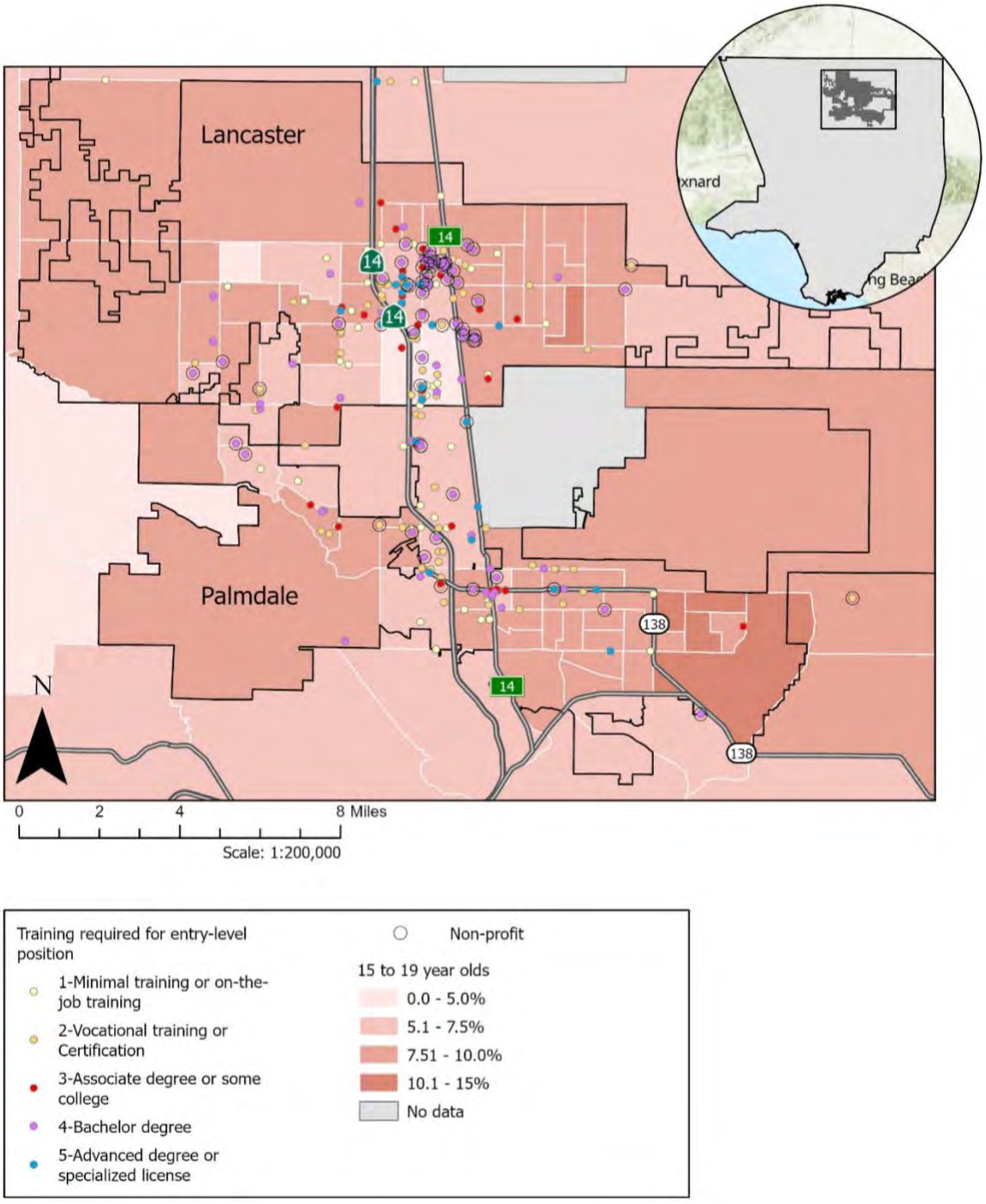
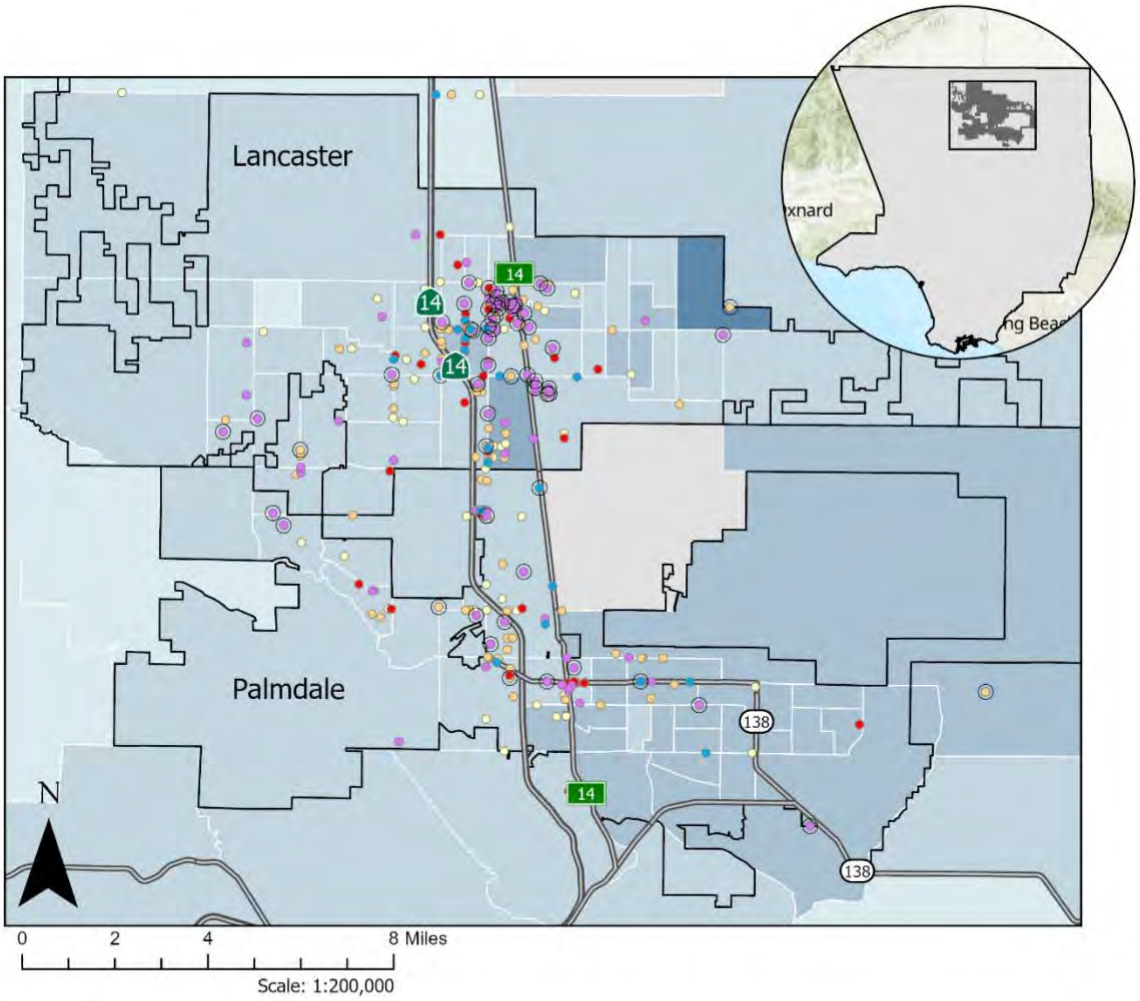


Figure 41. *Location of businesses in the Antelope Valley with location of youth, 20 to 24 years old (male and female combined).*

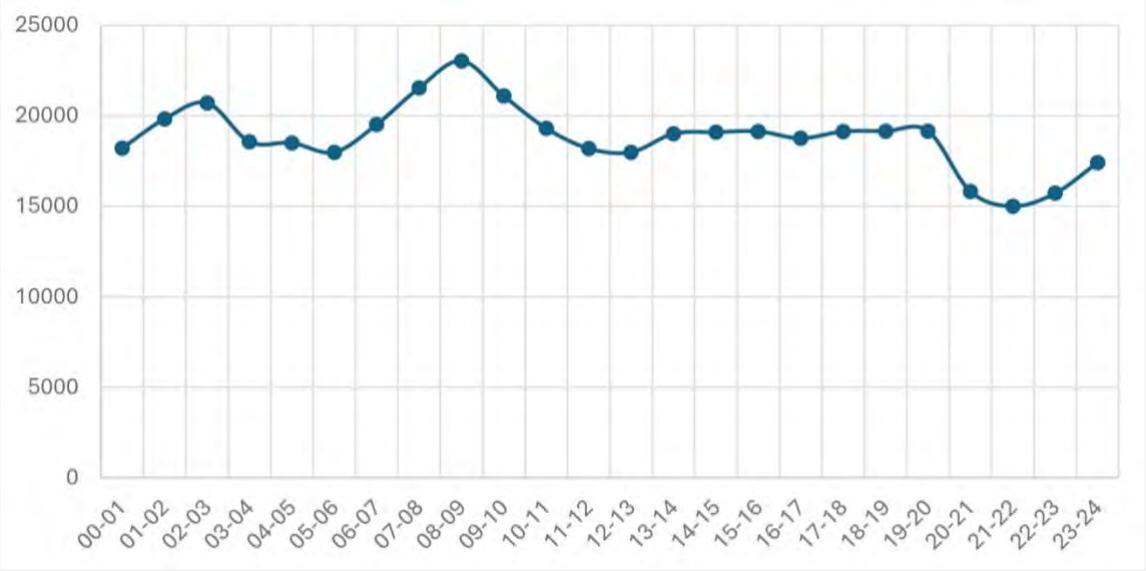


Antelope Valley College Enrollment Trends

Antelope Valley has one community college, Antelope Valley College, and a branch of California State University, Bakersfield, on the Antelope Valley College campus, which has roughly 600 students. From 1997 to 2024, the University of Antelope Valley, a private for-profit university, offered several degree programs and enrolled approximately 1,000 students. It closed in 2024 due to declines in enrollment, accreditation issues, and financial constraints.

Antelope Valley College reports enrollment using two methods: annual headcount and FTES (full-time equivalent students). The annual headcount data dates back to the 2000-2001 academic year, showing an increase from 18,000 to nearly 21,000 in 2008-2009. See Figure 42. It then stabilized the COVID-19 pandemic at approximately 15,000. Enrollment finally rose to 17,000 in 2023-2024.

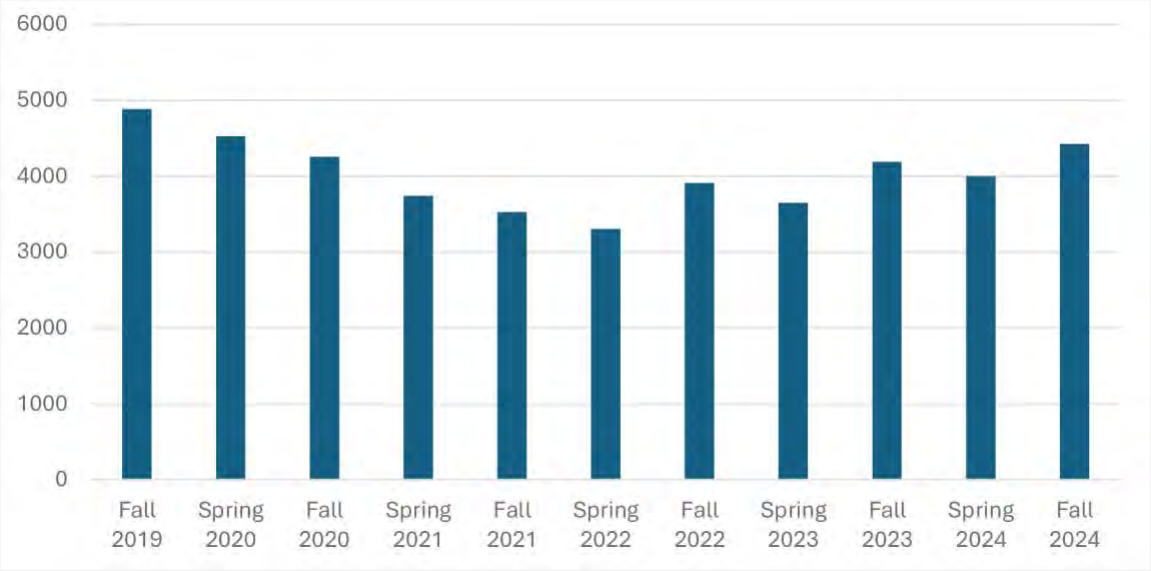
Figure 42. *Annual headcount at Antelope Valley College.*



https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/avcierp/viz/AVCAnnualHeadcount/AnnualHeadcount

The FTES also shows a similar decline from about 4,600 in 2019-2020 to 3,400 in 2020-2022 (see Figure 43). By 2023-2024, the number increases back to around 4,100. These trends suggest that college-age youth are less likely to attend college or school and more likely to be Opportunity Youth during the 2020 to 2022 period. The rise in enrollments means the proportion of Opportunity Youth will be smaller after 2023.

Figure 43. *Full-time equivalent students (FTES) at Antelope Valley College.*



https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/avcierp/viz/FTESTrends_17405429801630/AttnMethods

Antelope Valley College offers many programs with high job placement rates in technology, health, and vocational fields. These programs open opportunities for well-paying careers, often with employers in the Antelope Valley. See Figure 44.

Figure 44. *Antelope Valley College employment and licensure pass rates.*

CTE Job Placement and Licensure Exam Pass Rates

Career Technical Education Employment Rates - *Results only shown if student count is 10 or greater. Data shown is by Cohort Year.*

	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Electronics And Electric Technology		93%	73%	85%	57%
Industrial Electronics		67%	71%		
Environmental Control Technology	77%		93%		
Automotive Technology		81%			
Automotive Collision Repair	85%				
Aeronautical And Aviation Technology			94%	93%	94%
Aviation Airframe Mechanics		92%	70%		
Aviation Powerplant Mechanics	80%				
Aircraft Fabrication	90%	85%	87%	89%	85%
Electrical	89%	81%	88%	86%	72%
Manufacturing And Industrial Technology			100%		100%
Welding Technology				83%	78%
Clinical Medical Assisting		72%	69%		
Respiratory Care/Therapy	86%	72%	100%	100%	65%
Radiologic Technology	91%		100%		
Registered Nursing	93%	97%	88%	97%	95%
Licensed Vocational Nursing		55%	80%	94%	85%

Licensure Exam Pass Rates

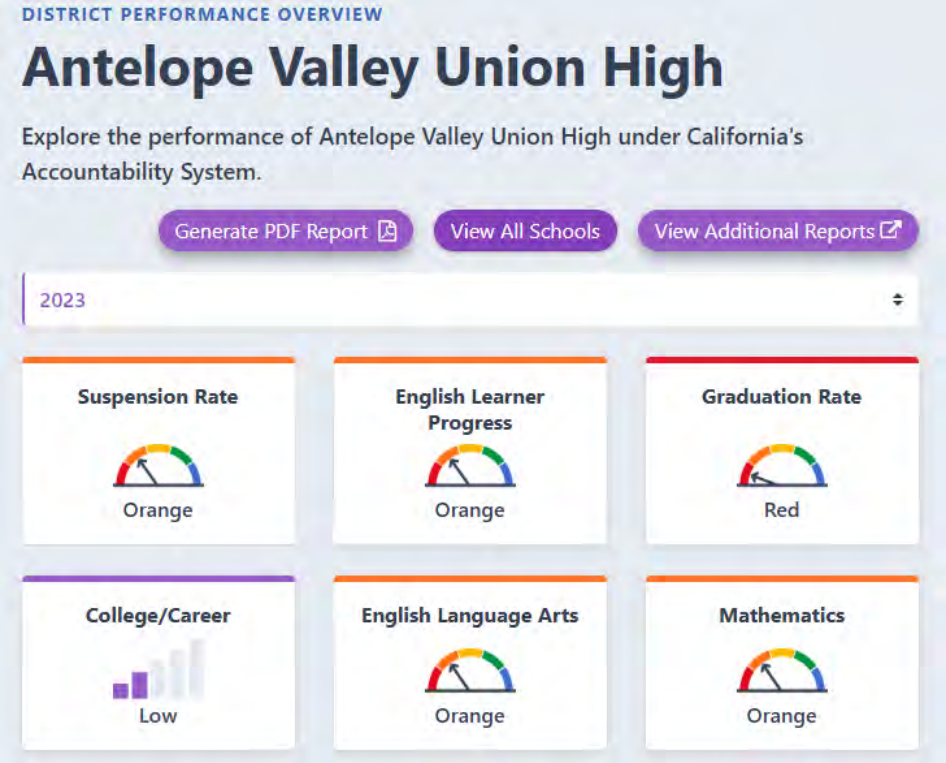
	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Vocational Nursing	100%	92%	84%	100%	
Radiologic Technology	100%	90%	88%	80%	
Registered Nursing	94%	94%	91%	93%	96%
EMT	100%	36%	63%		60%

https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/avcierp/viz/2025Institution-SetStandards/Institution-SetStandards

Local School Districts

The Antelope Valley Union High District serves Lancaster and Palmdale. Several elementary school districts feed into it. It generally has a poor performance record. See Figure 45. Data shown is from the California School Dashboard (https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/19642460000000/2023#college-career-card). 2023 data is being reported.

Figure 45. *Antelope Valley Union High School performance data.*



The lowest ranking was in graduation rate, with 78.7% graduating compared to 87.4% for the state. Only 22.2% are prepared for college or a career, compared with 43.9% in the state. Focusing on improving the school district's performance could lead to significant economic benefits for Antelope Valley youth.

Qualitative Findings

Organization Interviews

Across interviews with nonprofit organizations and public systems serving Opportunity Youth in the Antelope Valley region, the following themes kept recurring—and mutually reinforced each other:

Distance and transportation define access.

Interviews with nonprofit organizations and public systems serving Opportunity Youth in the Antelope Valley consistently identified transportation and distance as major barriers to access, highlighting additional challenges youth face. The region's wide geographic area and limited public transit make it difficult for young people to reach schools, courts, housing services, employment programs, and support

resources. Traveling to these essential destinations can take one to two hours each way, greatly reducing participation and retention in programs.

Service providers report that transportation is often the most used form of support, with organizations purchasing rides or coordinating travel to fill gaps caused by inadequate transit infrastructure. However, these efforts are limited in scope and cannot fully meet the demand. Families and caregivers also face long work hours and unreliable transit, which further limits youth participation in educational and enrichment programs.

Community violence and safety issues compound transportation challenges. Youth often must cross multiple gang territories to access services, which breeds fear and discourages participation when safe passage or support isn't available. As a result, even be unable to use them because travel routes are unsafe or difficult to traverse.

Overall, transportation challenges in the Antelope Valley are more than just logistical issues; they create a structural barrier that hinders access to education, justice, housing, employment, and basic needs. Without reliable, safe, and affordable transportation, Opportunity Youth remain disconnected from essential pathways to stability and long-term success.

Getting to school, court, housing, and programs often takes hours, and purchasing rides remains limited. Community violence was also cited as a barrier, and safe passage is another service that organizations try to offer for youth.

Direct quotes from organizations interviewed – anonymous:

- “Our kids are not able to get to where they need to be.
- “Our bus system out here isn't the best... It can take an hour or two just to get from Lancaster to our campus.
- “We went from, like, 100 students enrolled to averaging about 5 or 10 that come… Parents said they simply cannot get from work to the school to pick up their kids to our center… By the time you get here, you stay for an hour, and then you have to get back on the bus and go back home.

Housing scarcity—with voucher fragility—keeps youth unstable.

Interviews with service providers in the Antelope Valley highlighted that stable housing is a vital need for Opportunity Youth and a key factor in preventing disconnection when unmet. Organizations consistently reported a severe shortage of age-appropriate youth housing, with homelessness recognized as one of the region’s most urgent issues. Even when housing is secured, maintaining stability remains difficult without reliable employment, trapping young people in a cycle of instability.

Providers also expressed concern about federal policy changes that have disrupted housing programs. Shifts in grant requirements have forced organizations to modify program models in ways they describe as impractical, unsafe, or ethically challenging—such as shared-housing mandates across genders and age

groups. These changes strain service delivery and reduce the effectiveness of youth-specific housing supports.

A major concern is the potential termination of the Emergency Housing Voucher (EHV) program in 2026, which could displace youth who rely on vouchers for stability. Organizations reported that young people have already received notices indicating that their housing support might end, causing uncertainty and stress that hinder their progress in education or employment.

Overall, the lack of stable, suitable housing in the Antelope Valley acts as a significant structural barrier for Opportunity Youth. Providers highlighted the need for policy-level solutions that prioritize youth-specific housing, safeguard existing voucher programs, and align funding requirements with the actual safety and developmental needs of young people. Tackling housing stability is crucial for reducing youth disconnection and promoting long-term success.

Direct quotes from organizations interviewed – anonymous:

> “I really, really want to put emphasis just on the housing and stability. There is no… housing.

> “Federal grants have changed: housing must be shared between boys and girls. Shelter should be for minors, but you can also accept up to 22. Maternity housing states you have to accept males. It's unethical, unrealistic, and unsafe.

Program design issues and capacity stress—systems serve the “most servable.”

Service providers in the Antelope Valley identified funding and capacity limitations that hinder effective support for Opportunity Youth, especially those with greater needs. Outcome-focused funding models often motivate programs to prioritize youth closest to employment or education success, creating a “most servable” bias that leaves youth with more complex needs underserved. As a result, young people who depend heavily on the safety net may experience longer wait times, fragmented referrals, or complete disengagement from services.

Organizations also reported significant capacity challenges, such as service deserts, insufficient staffing ratios, and high staff turnover. Providers are often expected to deliver intensive support without enough resources or formal case management roles, which reduces continuity and follow-through. In particular, mental health services were described as volatile, with providers frequently entering and exiting the region, disrupting care and trust-building with youth.

Frequent funding and policy changes further weaken service continuity. Shifts in federal, state, and local funding—such as the loss or uncertainty of AmeriCorps funding, community violence intervention (CVI) dollars, and potential impacts from Proposition 36 (Cal. Prop. 36, 2024) on programs funded through Proposition 47 (Cal. Prop. 47, 2014)—cause instability for both organizations and the youth they serve. Short-term grants often come with restrictive or unrealistic requirements that providers find ethically concerning and misaligned with actual community needs.

Overall, providers emphasized that while programs can provide temporary solutions, fragmented funding and misaligned incentives hinder sustained impact. Long-term, flexible, and equity-centered funding approaches are necessary to ensure continuity of services and meaningful support for Opportunity Youth in the Antelope Valley.

Direct quotes from organizations interviewed – anonymous:

- “Even following up with these referrals, it is difficult to get people engaged… And I have been told many times that I am not a case manager.
- “There is no continuity, no consistency… Mental health support providers… come and go.
- “So, we’re able to put band-aids on some of those kinds of things, but grants… don’t last forever.

Mental health access is uneven, but peer/early intervention hubs show promise.

Service providers in the Antelope Valley reported significant delays in accessing mental health services, with wait times ranging from 14 to 90 days, creating critical gaps for youth and families seeking timely support. Many organizations are not equipped or funded to serve youth with serious mental illness and instead operate as navigators rather than case managers, which limits their ability to provide sustained, intensive care.

Despite these limitations, some organizations have created innovative stopgap solutions to meet unmet needs. These include peer respite services and free, short-term, peer-supported care models that offer immediate support while youth await formal treatment. These methods help prevent crisis escalation and provide accessible entry points into care.

Providers also highlighted the significance of prevention and early intervention, especially through youth and family education. Educational programs assist families in recognizing and understanding emerging mental health conditions, which often appear during young adulthood, and help reduce stigma that can hinder help-seeking. School-based strategies, such as mental health clubs, were considered effective means of reaching youth early and fostering open conversations about mental health.

Emergency response delays further worsen access issues. Providers noted that even when families are told to seek immediate help, Mental Evaluation Teams can take hours to respond, increasing risk during crises.

Direct quotes from organizations interviewed – anonymous:

- “We're told to call for help, but it takes two hours for a MET team (Mental Evaluation Team) to show up.

Overall, the mental health service system in the Antelope Valley features long waits, limited capacity, and fragmented care, highlighting the need for expanded crisis response, peer-based models, and increased investment in prevention, education, and timely access to youth-appropriate mental health services.

Workforce mismatch and paid pipelines

Service providers in the Antelope Valley highlighted a significant mismatch between local labor market opportunities and the skill levels of Opportunity Youth. While the region is highly industrialized, dominant sectors such as aerospace require advanced technical skills, security clearances, and stringent entry requirements, making these jobs inaccessible to many young people. As a result, youth face intense competition for limited entry-level positions or are compelled to commute long distances to Los Angeles to find work.

Providers highlighted that existing hiring screens—such as background checks, drug testing, and other eligibility criteria—can unfairly exclude youth who have experienced system involvement or instability. These further limit access to local employment opportunities and deepen disconnection.

To overcome these barriers, organizations implemented paid, bias-aware workforce pipelines that matched youth readiness to regional needs. Promising pathways include emergency medical services (EMS) corps, construction, career technical education (CTE), and wildland fire programs. Providers also emphasized the importance of "smart buyer" public procurement practices that prioritize inclusive hiring and workforce development outcomes in contracting with employers.

Direct quotes from organizations interviewed – anonymous:

- "Many people have to compete very, very hard to get into the workforce.
- "Antelope Valley is highly industrialized, but the leading industry is aerospace, and that requires a high skill level. And there's a big mismatch between the general workforce and the available jobs out there.
- "There's a big mismatch between the skill sets of the population that we're trying to serve and the available jobs out there.
- "The feel I get is that they have to go elsewhere; that they have to go 'down below' [i.e., Los Angeles] …that's where the opportunities are at.

Overall, without intentional alignment between workforce development systems and the realities of youth skill levels and lived experiences, the Antelope Valley's job market will continue to exclude Opportunity Youth. Expanding accessible, paid training pathways and rethinking hiring practices are essential for improving employment outcomes and reducing youth disconnection in the region.

Location and isolation – resource desert

Service providers noted that the geography and isolation of the Antelope Valley significantly affect residents' daily lives and limit opportunities for personal and professional growth. Extreme desert weather—characterized by very hot summers and very cold winters—continues to pose challenges,

particularly for youth experiencing housing instability, for whom basic survival often requires substantial time and energy.

Geographic isolation also contributes to resource scarcity, with providers describing the region as a "resource desert." Limited access to reliable, affordable internet and technology further restricts participation in education, job searches, and remote services, thereby exacerbating digital inequities among low-income youth.

The lack of mobility intensifies these challenges. Many residents are effectively "stuck" in the region due to limited transportation options and financial constraints, reducing access to broader employment and educational opportunities outside the Antelope Valley.

Concerns about public safety and service capacity add to the instability. Providers reported that local law enforcement and emergency response systems are overwhelmed, with staffing shortages and rising crime rates affecting community safety and trust. Together, environmental extremes, isolation, digital inequities, and strained public systems create structural conditions that increase vulnerability and impede youth's ability to achieve stability and long-term success in the Antelope Valley.

Direct quotes from organizations interviewed – anonymous:

- "We are a resource desert.
- "People are going to be stuck here because they have no means to leave.

Place, belonging and equity.

Service providers pointed out a lack of youth-friendly spaces and peer gathering places in the Antelope Valley as a major factor in youth disengagement and disconnection. With limited recreational, cultural, or drop-in options, many young people feel bored and isolated, leading to negative interactions with systems rather than positive community involvement. The absence of youth shelters and accessible drop-in centers increases feelings of exclusion and a sense of not belonging.

As a result, many young people plan to leave the region as soon as they turn 18, seeing Antelope Valley as a place with few opportunities and little reason to reinvest in their community. This mindset of leaving weakens long-term community bonds and leadership development.

Civic disengagement among adults and families compounds these challenges. Antelope Valley's identity as a commuter region means many caregivers lack the time or energy to get involved in school boards, community meetings, or local decision-making, which decreases advocacy for youth-focused investments.

Providers also identified the political and social climate as a structural obstacle. A conservative culture, combined with rapidly shifting racial and economic demographics, has resulted in resource gatekeeping and encounters with racism. Organizations described intentional or systemic exclusion that limits access to services and opportunities for Black and Latino youth and low-income families.

Together, the lack of inclusive youth spaces, widespread civic disengagement, and social and racial inequities create an environment in which Opportunity Youth feel disconnected, undervalued, and unsupported, thereby exacerbating challenges to engagement and long-term stability in the Antelope Valley.

Direct quotes from organizations interviewed – anonymous:

- “There's no youth shelters or drop-in centers. So, if a kid needs something and they can't get their needs met, then of course they're not going to feel like they belong.
- “There’s a significant amount of racism in the Antelope Valley.
- “It is very conservative… they'll tell you to pick yourself up by your own bootstraps but won't provide any boots or straps.

Prevalence (which codes surfaced most)

In the coded transcripts, the focus codes “Access & Basic Needs” and “Program Design & Capacity” are tied for the highest frequency, followed by “Housing & Stability.” The most common open code is “Transportation Deserts & Long Commutes”, followed by “Staffing Turnover & Continuity”, “Funding/Policy Shifts”, “Navigators vs. Case Managers”, “Basic Needs”, and “Safe Passage”—each with multiple examples. “Health & Mental Health” also stands out, with strong representation in terms of frequency.

Youth Voices: Focus Groups and Survey

Across focus groups and an online survey of Opportunity Youth in the Antelope Valley, the following themes recurred:

Structural Conditions and Scarcity

Youth participants in focus groups described intersecting structural pressures that shape daily decisions and limit opportunities for stability in the Antelope Valley. Unstable jobs, limited local employment options, housing insecurity, exposure to violence or aggression, and ongoing mental health issues were repeatedly highlighted as interconnected challenges. Together, these conditions heighten risk awareness, leading youth to carefully weigh opportunities that may seem unstable, short-term, or unlikely to ensure long-term security.

Youth highlighted intense competition and scarcity in the local labor market, noting that many positions require prior experience, offer only temporary placements, or do not lead to permanent employment. Even when youth find work, opportunities often end suddenly, weakening their progress and financial stability. Participants also reported that many available jobs require moving outside the Antelope Valley, creating extra barriers related to transportation, costs, and separation from support networks. See Table 13.

Table 13: *Current employment status of survey respondents*

Employment Status	Respondents	Percentage
Employed, full-time	4	6%
Employed, part-time	16	25%
Employed, casually or as needed	6	9%
Unemployed	35	54%
(No Response)	4	6%
Total	65	

> “It’s very hard to find jobs out here in the Antelope Valley. [I was] placed at [a grocery store] for two and a half months. Then they didn’t have any open positions… couldn’t extend.
>
> -Mocha

Housing barriers further hinder progress. Youth described strict screening practices—including income requirements of two to three times the monthly rent, no-pet policies, and delayed or no callbacks—that make securing stable housing very difficult, even for motivated and employed young people. These obstacles increase stress and slow the transition to independence.

Overall, youth experiences support earlier findings from service providers by explaining how structural barriers operate in practice. Even when motivation is high, ongoing market constraints and administrative hurdles impede youth advancement, leading to frustration, disengagement, and prolonged instability in the Antelope Valley.

Support Systems and Self-Reliance as Survival Infrastructure

Youth participants mainly depended on informal, relational support networks rather than formal systems. Their such as therapists or youth pastors, close friends, and family members. Many youth described healthy peer relationships characterized by mutual understanding, emotional safety, and nonjudgmental support, which played a vital role in helping them cope with stress and instability.

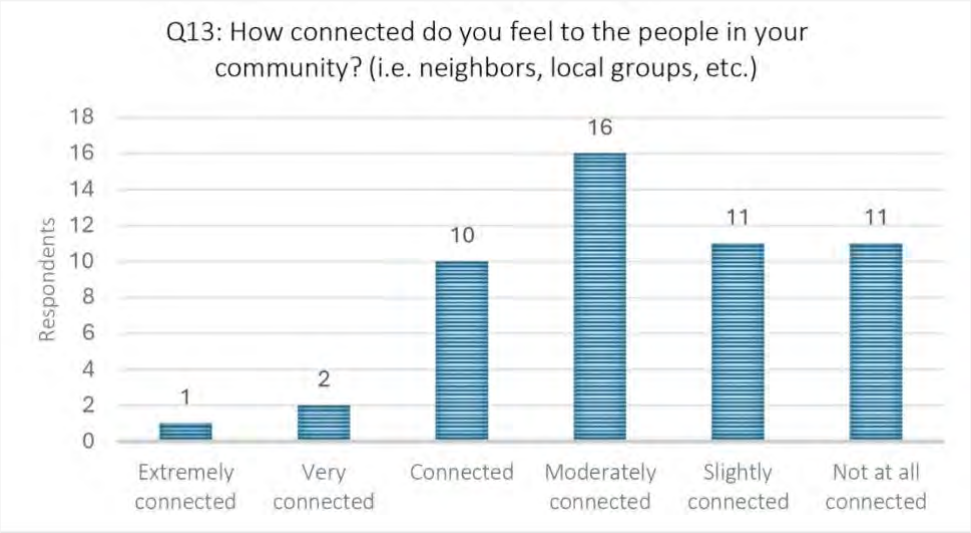
Family support, particularly material help such as housing, food, or transportation, was often available but inconsistent and not always emotionally supportive. As a result, while families provided essential temporary resources, they were not always a dependable foundation for long-term stability or guidance.

Despite strong peer connections, youth highlighted self-reliance as their most trusted form of support. Many described personal discipline, motivation, and self-regulation as crucial strategies for navigating uncertain systems and limited opportunities. Some youth intentionally limited their social circles or distanced themselves from peers they saw as hindering progress, reflecting careful boundary-setting rather than social disengagement.

These findings reinforce earlier interview data, showing that youth independence is often an adaptive response to unreliable or fragmented systems, rather than a lack of interest in connection or support. Youth deeply value relationships but have learned to rely on themselves when formal services, institutions, or even family networks fail to provide consistent or trustworthy help.

> “Sometimes you got a friend… but they don’t choose… the best steps. You just got to… be away from them, because… You don't want to fall, too. You just got to… cut those friendships… because they're not going to… help you out, and they're not going to bring anything financial, and they're not going to be supportive.
>
> -Bart

Figure 46. *Survey responses on young adults’ sense of connection to their community.*



Service Experiences: Access, Responsiveness, and Feeling Valued

Across interviews and focus groups, workforce and social service programs were consistently identified as key entry points, but were not considered sufficient as long-term solutions for Opportunity Youth. Youth appreciated these programs for offering temporary jobs, initial income, structure, and exposure to new opportunities, often describing them as helpful for “getting on their feet.” However, these benefits were usually short-term and rarely led to stable, permanent outcomes.

Youth voiced frustration over slow or inconsistent communication, unclear follow-through, and limited opportunities to convert temporary placements into permanent roles. Delayed callbacks, broken promises without follow-up, and sudden program cancellations—often caused by funding instability—undermined trust in service providers.

> “I applied; didn’t get a callback for months. They said, ‘next week,’ over and over.
> -Peter
>
> “There’s a lot of fakeness: greeted with a smile but not genuine help.
> -Eddie

Importantly, focus group participants redefined responsiveness as a sign of respect and trust rather than as a matter of convenience. A lack of timely communication, empty offices, and perceived staff disengagement were seen as signals that youth were not valued. These interactions fostered skepticism about institutional intentions, even when services were technically available.

Youth distinguish between superficial professionalism and genuine support, describing encounters that seemed performative rather than truly helpful. This loss of trust explains why youth might disengage from programs even when they are motivated and in need. See Figure 47.

Figure 47. *Survey responses on the perceived effectiveness of local support services for young adults.*

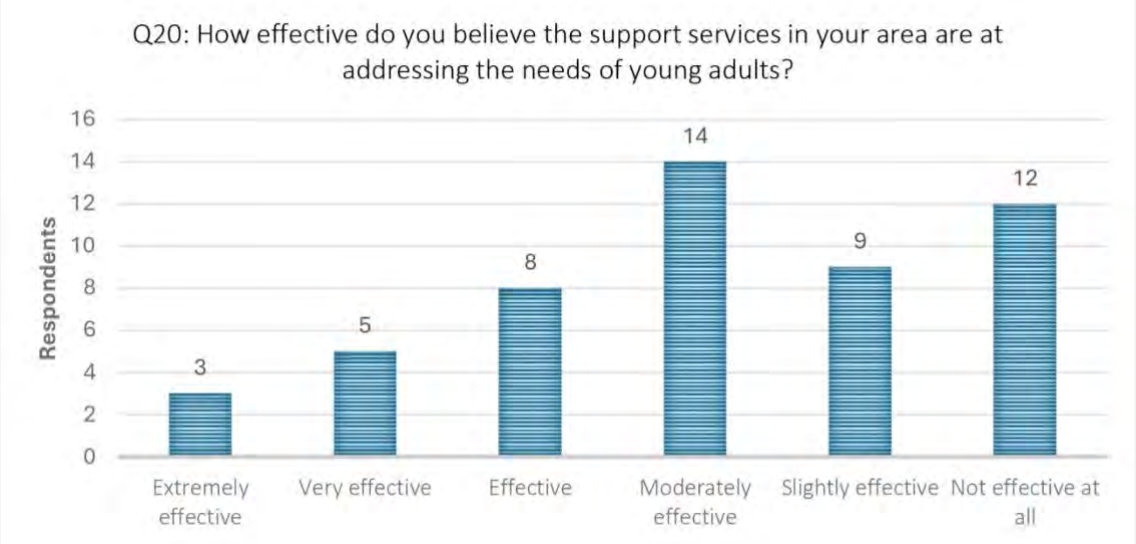
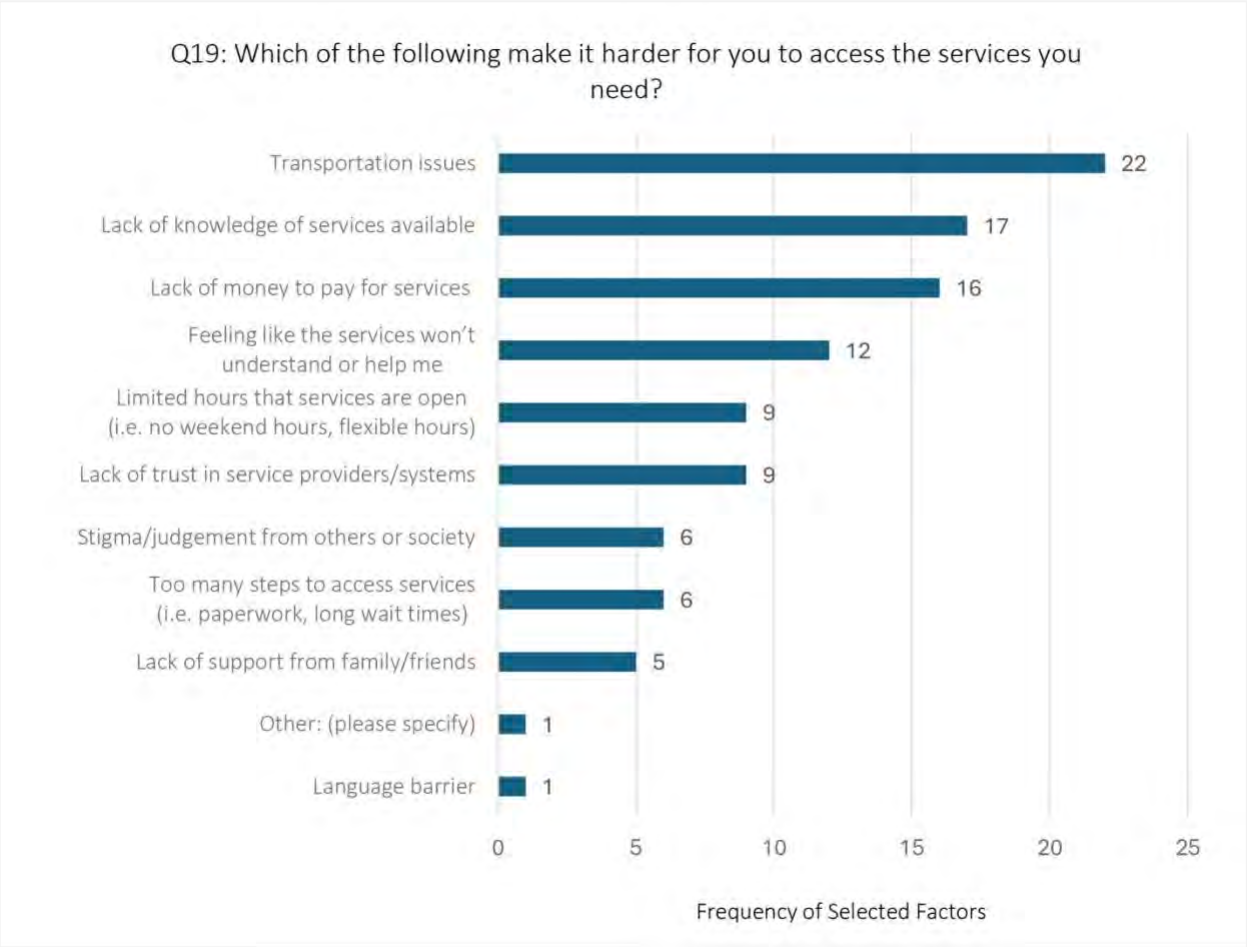


Figure 48. *Survey responses identifying barriers to accessing services.*

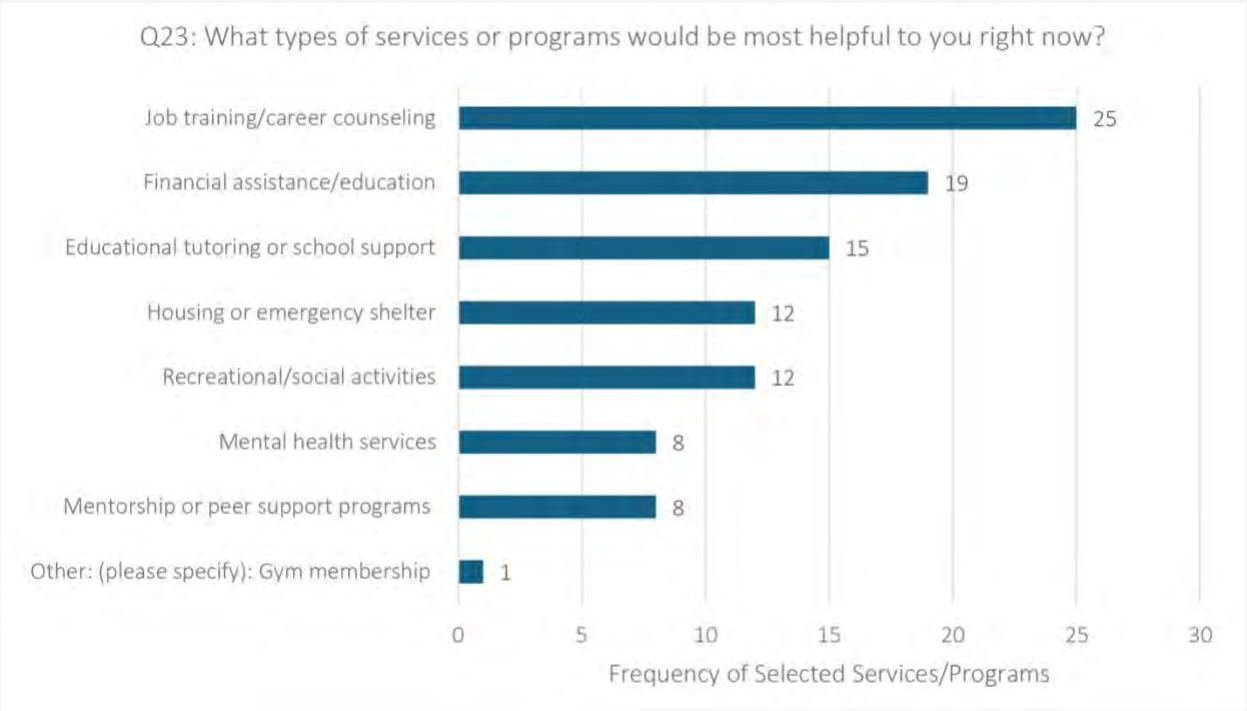
Note: Total count exceeds 100%: respondents could select multiple options.



Overall, the findings indicate that while workforce and social service programs are essential for initial engagement, long-term success depends on greater reliability, transparency, and accountability. Improving responsiveness, communication, and pathways to lasting outcomes is crucial for maintaining youth trust and functioning as true bridges to long-term stability rather than merely short-term fixes.

Figure 49. *Survey responses identifying services or programs perceived as most helpful*

Note: Total count exceeds 100%: respondents could select multiple options.



Education, Work, and the Experience Paradox

Across the focus groups and survey, youth primarily viewed education and training pragmatically. College was described as one option among many, often weighed against cost, stress, and uncertain returns. Many youths expressed concerns that the stress and debt associated with college do not guarantee secure employment. Trades, certificates, and networking were frequently framed as more realistic pathways, "equivalent to college in some ways" (Frank).

> "I don't think college is…reliable, secure… full time plus a job… you're going to be stressed out.
>
> -Oreo

Employment barriers centered on the experience paradox, an impossible loop in which entry-level jobs demand prior experience, while job seekers need a job in order to gain experience, compounded by temporary jobs that did not convert to permanent positions. Focus group participants provided repeated, concrete examples of being placed, performing well, and then being released due to "no openings," reinforcing interview findings that youth ambition is constrained by structural gatekeeping rather than by a lack of effort or motivation.

Focus group participants shared detailed examples of employers requiring one to two years of experience or proof of previous work, even for entry-level jobs. This creates a cycle in which youth are rejected for failing to meet requirements they have no chance to meet. Overall, youth narratives indicate that ambition and a willingness to work are evident, but pathways to stable employment and career advancement are constrained by systemic hiring practices and limited opportunities for growth.

> “ Even a starting job needs a year or two of experience… It’s landing the job that’s almost impossible.
>
> -Peter
>
> “ Even if you have that degree… it doesn’t give you a chance because you don’t have experience.
>
> -Scully

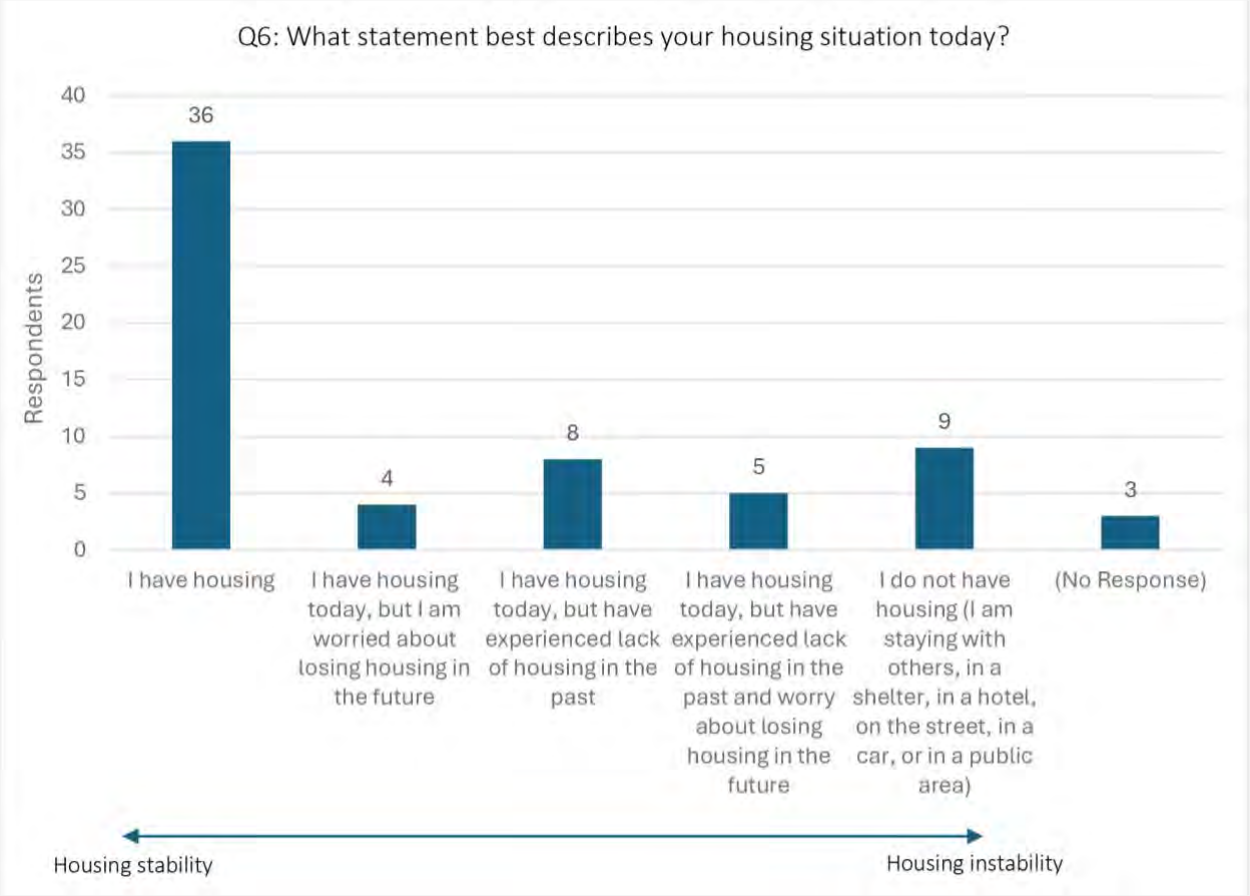
Table 14. *The highest level of education of the survey respondents*

Highest Level of Education	Respondents	Percentage
Master’s Degree	1	2%
Bachelor’s Degree	2	3%
Attended College/University/trade school	2	3%
High school or equivalent	23	35%
Less than High school/dropped out	34	52%
(No Response)	3	5%
Total	65	

Housing Insecurity

Housing insecurity emerged as a major and ongoing source of stress in interviews and focus groups, affecting youth stability and decision-making in the Antelope Valley. Many participants relied on living with family, friends, or shelters after leaving foster care or home, highlighting limited access to independent, affordable housing.

Figure 50. *Current housing situation of survey respondents.*



Youth identified major market barriers to successful housing changes, including the need for income at least two to three times the monthly rent, pet restrictions, competition from higher-income renters, and moving costs. These obstacles often exclude young people, even when they are motivated and employed, thereby reinforcing cycles of instability.

Focus group discussions also revealed peer-to-peer knowledge sharing as a key coping strategy. Youth exchanged information about nonprofits that assist with moving costs or housing navigation, illustrating how they compensate for the complexity and fragmentation of these systems through informal networks. This adaptive self-navigation highlights youth resilience but also emphasizes gaps in formal housing support.

Young people who age out of foster care face sudden shifts into unstable housing situations, often with little support or options beyond couch surfing or short-term solutions. Calls for housing assistance programs, including Section 8 vouchers, underscore the urgent need for stable, affordable housing.

Overall, research indicates that housing insecurity is driven more by structural market problems and a lack of youth-specific support than by individual effort. Improving access to affordable housing, reducing screening barriers, and providing transition supports are crucial for increasing youth stability and decreasing disconnection.

> I got out of the foster care system since I was in most of my life. And once I turned 18 and I was told that I could go live with a friend or family member or just find an apartment.
>
> -Oreo

> Renters require 2 to 3 times the income you're bringing in.
>
> -Mocha

> The problem that I see is not having enough financial power because if you do find a house you're interested in or think would work out for you, other people when they try to get the house, they'll probably outbid you.
>
> -Luke

> I need some Section 8 because it's hard to get a house, an apartment, anything.
>
> -Nelly

Mental Health: Value, Stigma, and Safety Concerns

Mental health struggles were widely mentioned in interviews and focus groups, and most youth strongly believe in the benefits of therapy. Many shared experiences of personal gains from counseling, such as improved self-understanding and coping skills. However, stigma—especially within families and among male relatives—remains a significant barrier, with mental health issues often dismissed as weakness, laziness, or just a passing phase. This stigma leads some youth to internalize their distress or deal with it alone instead of seeking help.

> Amongst friends, they hold mental health in a very high regard... I know friends are, like, very on top of... trying to keep their mental health stable.
>
> -Shiny

> I would say... my family... don't [sic] really understand. When I was diagnosed with... depression, anxiety and... PTSD, and my family, basically... told me to get over it like it's a phase lazy.
>
> -Jezebel

> I did have… a lot of anger issues around the time… a couple of my friends had just died… My dad was just really angry with me over the fact that I was failing school and that I wasn't motivated. And I would try to explain to him, but he didn't get it… But that's kind of like the stigma I've experienced… the male people in my family just kind of see it as you being weak or you being lazy.
>
> -Armando

Youth also hesitated to use mental health services because of previous negative experiences. These included feeling disrespected or misunderstood by providers, encountering unprofessional behavior, incompatible therapy matches, and referrals that didn't lead to actual services. Cost and affordability issues also limited ongoing participation, even when therapy was effective.

Trust became a significant concern. Youth providers' motivations, viewing some services as transactional rather than genuinely caring. Many highlighted the need for higher-quality, better-trained providers instead of simply increasing the number of services.

Fear of consequences also impacted engagement. Youth expressed concern about mandatory reporting and how disclosing might lead to system involvement or life-changing outcomes. Therefore, disengagement often resulted from risk management rather than resistance to care. Youth requested clearer communication about reporting thresholds and more listening-focused, nonjudgmental spaces where they could be heard without immediate escalation.

Overall, findings indicate that enhancing mental health requires reducing stigma, improving service quality and access, and rebuilding trust through transparency, respect, and youth-centered approaches.

> I used to go to therapy, but I stopped because I've had, like, really bad experiences with people. They're very unprofessional.
>
> -Jezebel

> I tried to go to therapy one time… and when they gave us the referral to go to… a therapist office, we got to the office… and it was an empty office building for lease. So, I couldn't even get, like, the resources that I was trying to get to.
>
> -Armando

> I wasn't able to open up… it would have to be mandated reported… worried how fast it would change my life… I wish…one session where all the mandated [reporting] could just go away… I just want somebody to listen.
>
> -Mocha

Community Climate, Belonging, and Pro-Social Hubs

In interviews and focus groups, youth described the Antelope Valley community as fragmented and sometimes unsafe, characterized by social distance, limited neighborly connections, and exposure to aggression and violence. Participants pointed out weak social cohesion, the act of avoiding places, and a lack of collective problem-solving, with some youth saying that normalized aggression, entitlement, and the visibility of gang aesthetics shape daily interactions and perceptions of safety. Experiences of violence, including physical attacks, boost fear and mistrust and lead to withdrawal from public spaces.

At the same time, youth clearly identified pro-social hubs that foster connection, safety, and belonging. Structured activities such as sports, school events, volunteer opportunities, church gatherings, nonprofit programs, and focus groups were described as meaningful spaces for sharing, mutual understanding, and positive identity development. These settings provided opportunities to express emotions, build supportive relationships, and engage in purposeful roles.

Notably, youth highlighted that community belonging isn't automatic or linked to a specific location. Instead, it is driven by activities and fostered through trusted spaces and relationships. Youth actively create environments where they feel validated, safe, and respected, often avoiding geographic areas that seem hostile or unsafe. Many also find purpose in engaging with and serving as role models for younger children, strengthening intergenerational bonds and positive norms.

Overall, findings suggest that enhancing community for Opportunity Youth in the Antelope Valley involves investing in safe, inclusive, and youth-focused spaces and activities that build trust, shared purpose, and social bonds. Belonging comes not from proximity, but from deliberate chances to connect and contribute.

The convergence of findings emphasizes that community belonging is activity-based and mediated, not assumed by geography. Youth actively create environments that feel safe, meaningful, and supportive. They also enjoy engaging with and serving as role models for younger children.

> “One of the weaknesses [about my community]-- aggression… a look turns into an argument… We need more humanity.
>
> -Oreo

> “I like the events that they sometimes throw here [at the school]. Because a lot of times… a lot of students here are parents, and they'll sometimes bring their children. And I feel like we can sometimes spread, like, good values and positivity at some of these events. And you're not just influencing us and the students here, but, like, the next generation [that] is going to come after that, too.
>
> -Armando

Coping, Resilience, and Turning Points

Coping and resilience emerged as the most prominent themes in the focus groups, aligning closely with the interview data. Youth shared examples of personal growth through trauma recovery and practical achievements in their careers. They described a variety of activities, such as creative expression, physical movement, reflection, faith practices, and the celebration of milestone accomplishments (e.g., licenses, expungement, graduation), as ways to self-regulate and stay on track.

Notably, parenting emerged as a strong organizing force for meaning and behavior change, expanding upon earlier interview findings on discipline and future orientation.

Limitations

The youth survey and focus groups were designed to recruit a representative sample of opportunity youth in the Antelope Valley; however, the study is subject to potential selection bias. Participants were recruited through organizations that serve youth; therefore, the number of participants was dependent upon which organizations agreed to share materials. Additionally, the participants were already connected to educational or employment support services and, by definition, may no longer be considered disconnected.

Furthermore, the focus group approach requires a small group size to encourage meaningful discussion. As a result, each focus group was limited to 10 participants, resulting in a relatively small qualitative sample. Focus groups also have natural limitations: participants must feel comfortable sharing personal experiences and perspectives in a group setting, which can influence the openness and depth of their responses.

The online survey included both quantitative and open-ended questions; however, the low response rate to the open-ended items highlights limitations in the data collection method. Open-ended questions require more time and mental effort, which participants may be less willing to provide, especially in an online setting. Future versions of the survey could benefit from redesigned strategies to boost engagement and response rates.

Participant selection for organizational interviews was also limited by factors like scheduling conflicts, communication issues, and staff turnover. Additionally, interview participants were a self-selected group of individuals willing and able to participate, which may limit the extent to which organizational perspectives reflect the broader population.

Integration With Quantitative Findings

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to examine the scope, distribution, and lived experiences of Opportunity Youth in the Antelope Valley. Quantitative analyses identified where youth disconnection is most prevalent and which groups are most affected, while qualitative data provides insight into how structural factors, service design, and daily choices interact to sustain disconnection. Findings are organized thematically, with emphasis on consistency across data sources.

1. Youth Disconnection Is Disproportionately Concentrated in Lancaster and Among Older Youth

Quantitative analysis indicates that youth disconnection rates in the Antelope Valley exceed county and state averages, with Lancaster having the highest rate in Los Angeles County. Opportunity Youth are most common among young adults aged 21–24, who are particularly vulnerable after completing mandatory schooling and structured youth programs. This pattern is similar across race and gender groups, although disparities are most pronounced among Black youth and certain subpopulations by age and location.

Qualitative findings reinforce this trend. Both youth and service providers described a sharp drop in support after high school, especially for youth aging out of foster care, involved in juvenile justice, or participating in school-based programs. Participants consistently described this transition as a critical turning point at which instability increases.

2. Geography and Transportation Function as Structural Barriers to Access

Spatial analysis demonstrated that Opportunity Youth are primarily located in lower-income, older neighborhoods in Lancaster and Palmdale, many of which are distant from job centers, schools, and services. High-risk index scores tend to cluster in areas with limited transit connections.

Interviews and focus groups identified transportation as a major barrier impacting access across different areas. Youth consistently reported travel times of one to two hours to reach school, court, housing services, or programs. Providers reported that transportation was their most frequently used support, yet it remains insufficient to meet demand. Safety concerns, such as community violence and the need to cross gang territories, further restrict youth mobility. Overall, these findings indicate that distance and transportation constitute compounding barriers rather than isolated obstacles.

3. Housing Instability Is the Foundational Driver of Disconnection

Survey data show that many young people experience housing instability, such as homelessness, prior housing loss, or fear of losing their homes. Youth leaving foster care or institutional settings are particularly vulnerable.

Qualitative findings identify housing instability as the primary factor that undermines progress in education, employment, and mental health. Youth described relying on family co-residence, shelters, or couch surfing, with market barriers such as income requirements, pet restrictions, competitive rental markets, and moving costs. Providers highlighted the scarcity of housing options suitable for their age and the fragility of voucher-based support, particularly the risk of losing Emergency Housing Vouchers. Across datasets, housing is both a basic need and a prerequisite for effective engagement with other systems.

4. Employment Growth Does Not Translate into Access for Opportunity Youth

Quantitative labor market analysis indicates overall job growth in the Antelope Valley; however, most surveyed youth were unemployed at the time of data collection. A mapping of businesses, particularly in Lancaster, shows that entry-level jobs are unevenly distributed relative to high-risk youth populations.

Qualitative data clarify this mismatch. Youth consistently described the “experience paradox,” in which even entry-level jobs require prior experience that they cannot obtain without being hired. Temporary

placements that didn't turn into permanent roles further eroded trust. Providers highlighted additional gatekeeping mechanisms, including background checks, drug testing, and procurement practices that exclude youth affected by the system. Both datasets indicate that employment barriers are structurally created rather than attributable to a lack of motivation.

5. Education and Training Pathways Are Evaluated Pragmatically

Survey results indicate low educational achievement among respondents, with more than half having less than a high school diploma. Community college enrollment trends during the COVID-19 pandemic show some signs of recovery.

Qualitative findings reveal that youth view education pragmatically, considering factors such as cost, stress, time, and potential benefits. College is often perceived as financially risky and difficult to balance with work, while trades, certificates, and networking are seen as more feasible options. Youth stories indicate that educational choices are driven by limited opportunities rather than a lack of interest in learning.

6. Mental Health Needs Are High, While Access and Trust Are Limited

Quantitative indicators show a strong connection between Opportunity Youth status and involvement with the justice system or foster care—both associated with higher mental health needs.

Qualitative data reveal widespread mental health distress along with strong conceptual support for therapy. However, stigma within families, especially among male relatives, discourages disclosure. Youth also report disengagement stemming from long wait times, affordability issues, unprofessional interactions with providers, fear of mandated reporting, and unclear confidentiality policies. Providers confirm access gaps but highlight promising innovations, such as peer respite and brief-care models. Throughout the data, disengagement from mental health services indicates risk management rather than resistance to care.

7. Selective Engagement Reflects Structural Constraint, Not Apathy

Quantitative data indicate underutilization of services despite high demand. Qualitative findings explain this pattern: youth described selective engagement as a logical response to repeated experiences of delayed communication, unclear follow-up, and perceived disrespect. Responsiveness was viewed as a sign of being valued.

Providers recognized that outcome-driven funding, staffing shortages, and high turnover encourage the placement of youth who are easiest to place, creating a “most servable” bias. This creates a systemic mismatch in which both youth and organizations act selectively in times of scarcity, leading to exclusion without explicit rejection.

8. Community Belonging Is Activity-Based and Mediated

Youth described the Antelope Valley community as fragmented and, at times, unsafe, marked by social distance, aggression, and avoidance of certain areas. Spatial patterns of risk support these perceptions. Meanwhile, youth viewed pro-social hubs—such as schools, sports, churches, volunteering, and nonprofit

programs—as important sources of connection. Belonging was not assumed based on location but was actively constructed through trusted spaces and intentional roles. Many youth expressed plans to leave the region upon becoming adults, citing limited perceived opportunities and a sense of attachment.

Summary and Recommendations

Policy and Funding Recommendations

Findings from this study show that youth disconnection in the Antelope Valley is primarily attributable to structural barriers rather than personal disengagement. Opportunity Youth consistently display motivation, resilience, and strategic decision-making, yet they face increasing difficulties related to housing instability, geographic separation, labor market barriers, service fragmentation, and mistrust of institutions. Effective solutions, therefore, need place-based, cross-sector policy actions aligned with funding structures that prioritize stability, access, and long-term capacity over short-term results.

The recommendations below are organized by policy area and aligned with existing federal, state, and local funding sources. They present a coordinated approach to reducing youth disconnection by adjusting systems to reflect better the lived experiences of Opportunity Youth in the Antelope Valley.

1. Stabilize Youth Housing as a Primary Intervention

Relevant Policy and Funding Frameworks

- HUD Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program (YHDP)
- Emergency Housing Voucher (EHV) Program
- California Homeless Housing, Assistance and Prevention (HHAP) Program

Policy Recommendations

Stable, age-appropriate housing should be regarded as a basic intervention rather than a downstream service that depends on employment or program compliance. County and state agencies should allocate youth-specific housing within existing housing programs, emphasizing non-congregate, developmentally suitable units for youths aged 18–24. These units must accommodate young parents, pets, and diverse household types, reflecting the realities observed in this study.

Given the documented fragility of current housing support, policymakers should urgently advocate for extending or replacing the Emergency Housing Voucher (EHV) program beyond its current 2026 expiration date. Any extension should include automatic transition pathways for youth aging out of foster care, probation, or congregate systems to minimize administrative cliffs that destabilize housing. When federal action is delayed, the state should consider bridge subsidies or state-funded voucher replacements to prevent displacement.

Funding agencies should also revise grant compliance rules that inadvertently threaten youth safety. Strict requirements regarding gender mixing, age ranges, or shared housing models should be replaced with

flexible standards that allow providers to prioritize safety, trauma-informed care, and developmental appropriateness. Programs should not be forced into unethical or unsafe arrangements to maintain funding.

Rationale

Both quantitative and qualitative results indicate that housing instability is the primary barrier to success in other areas. Youth without stable housing find it difficult to keep jobs, pursue education, or access mental health services. Viewing housing as a necessity—rather than a reward—creates the conditions necessary for consistent engagement and long-term positive outcomes.

2. Invest in Transportation as Workforce and Service Infrastructure

Relevant Policy and Funding Frameworks

- California Transit and Intercity Rail Capital Program
- Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)
- Los Angeles County Measure M / Measure R Transportation Funds

Policy Recommendations

Transportation must be recognized as an essential component of the workforce and service infrastructure, particularly in geographically dispersed areas such as the Antelope Valley. State and local agencies should explicitly permit youth transportation stipends, shuttle services, and ride-share partnerships as eligible expenses under workforce, housing, and supportive service funding streams, including WIOA and CalAIM.

Transit planning should prioritize strengthening connections between high-risk census tracts and major destinations, such as employment centers, Antelope Valley College, courts, housing resources, and health services. This may include expanding route coverage, boosting service frequency, or exploring demand-responsive transit options tailored to youth schedules.

In neighborhoods affected by violence or gang territories, transportation investments should be combined with safe-passage initiatives, such as community-based interventionists, escorts, and coordinated safety strategies. Mobility planning must consider not only distance but also perceived and actual safety, which deeply influences youths' willingness to travel.

Rationale

Transportation deserts consistently limit access to education, employment, housing, and services. Youth often hours. They report one- to two-hour commutes that hinder participation and retention. Without reliable and safe transportation, investments in other areas underperform. Transportation is cross-sectoral impacts.

3. Reform Workforce Funding to Support Paid, Bias-Aware Pipelines

Relevant Policy and Funding Frameworks

- Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Youth and Young Adult Programs
- California High Road Training Partnerships
- AmeriCorps (work-based service models)

Policy Recommendations

Workforce funding should focus less on short-term placement results and more on retention, conversion, and wage growth. State and local workforce boards should update performance metrics to reward programs that demonstrate sustained employment, successful transitions from temporary to permanent roles, and income growth over time.

Public and philanthropic funders need to increase investment in paid, bias-aware workforce pathways that align with youth readiness and regional needs. Promising sectors highlighted in this study include emergency medical services (EMS Corps), construction and career technical education (CTE), wildland firefighting, and other fields that serve the public or are related to infrastructure. Paid participation is essential to reducing risks for youth facing housing and income instability.

Local governments should integrate inclusive hiring and training standards into public procurement through "smart buyer" policies. County and city contracts can include requirements for paid internships or apprenticeship positions, or prioritize hiring Opportunity Youth, particularly those affected by the foster care or justice systems.

Rationale

Both quantitative and qualitative data show that job growth alone does not guarantee access. Dominant regional industries require credentials and screenings that systematically exclude Opportunity Youth. Paid, bias-aware pipelines counteract experience-based gatekeeping and provide true on-ramps to stable employment.

4. Expand Low-Barrier, Youth-Centered Mental Health Models

Relevant Policy and Funding Frameworks

- California Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI)
- Medi-Cal CalAIM
- Community Mental Health Services Act (MHSA / Proposition 63)

Policy Recommendations

Mental health systems need to go beyond traditional clinical models by including accessible, trust-building approaches. State and county agencies should expand peer respite, brief-care, and peer-augmented models as reimbursable services under Medi-Cal and MHSA. These models provide immediate support, help prevent crisis escalation, and align with youth preferences for relational care.

Youth-serving systems should require clear, standardized disclosure of mandatory reporting thresholds, paired with listening-first protocols that prioritize de-escalation and obtaining consent. Transparency is essential for rebuilding trust and decreasing fear-driven disengagement. Investment should also focus on school- and community-based prevention hubs, including mental health clubs, family education programs, and youth-led wellness initiatives. Early intervention reduces stigma, supports families, and lowers long-term costs for the system.

Rationale

Youth value mental health care but often disengage due to stigma, fear of consequences, long waits, and negative experiences with providers. Trust-based, peer-supported models align better with how youth handle risk and are more likely to keep engaged.

5. Address "Most Servable" Bias Through Flexible Funding Design

Relevant Policy and Funding Frameworks

- State and federal discretionary grants
- County service contracts
- Outcomes-based funding models

Policy Recommendations

Funding structures must explicitly address the "most servable" bias identified across systems. Grantmakers and agencies should enable tiered service intensity and extended engagement timelines for youth with higher needs, recognizing stabilization as a legitimate and necessary outcome. Programs should be funded to provide navigation-plus-light case management hybrids, rather than enforcing strict distinctions between navigators and case managers. This flexibility allows for continuity without overburdening staff or excluding youth who require moderate but ongoing support. Finally, policymakers should reduce reliance on short-term grant cycles that destabilize staffing, erode trust, and disrupt services. Multi-year funding commitments are essential for workforce stability, relationship-building, and institutional learning.

Rationale

Outcome-driven incentives now prioritize speed over equity, leaving youth with complex needs behind. Flexible funding focused on stabilization and continuity is crucial for aligning systems with real-world conditions.

6. Invest in Youth-Friendly Spaces and Civic Infrastructure

Relevant Policy and Funding Frameworks

- California Parks and Recreation Grants
- Youth Development Block Grants

- Local general funds and philanthropic place-based initiatives

Policy Recommendations

Local governments and funders should invest in youth-friendly physical and social infrastructure, such as drop-in centers, youth shelters, and multipurpose youth hubs in high-risk areas. These spaces should combine employment support, wellness services, and community-building activities. Programming should emphasize leadership development, volunteering, and intergenerational connection, recognizing youth's desire for a sense of purpose and contribution. Youth should be compensated for participating in planning, governance, and peer leadership roles. Civic infrastructure investments should intentionally promote equity, ensuring youth of color and low-income youth have access to welcoming, affirming spaces.

Rationale

Belonging is something you do, not something that happens automatically. Youth-friendly spaces help reduce loneliness, foster connections, and counter the tendency to leave the area after reaching adulthood.

Cross-Cutting Recommendation: Shift from Engagement to Alignment

Across all domains, findings show that both youth and institutions engage selectively when resources are limited. Youth do so to manage risk and conserve energy; institutions do so to manage capacity and outcomes. Policy responses should therefore focus on aligning systems with how youth navigate instability, rather than expecting youth to adapt to fragmented systems. Sustained reductions in youth disconnection will require integrated, place-based investments that treat housing stability, mobility, trust, and access as core outcomes—not just additional supports. Coordination across housing, transportation, workforce development, mental health, and civic infrastructure offers the most viable path to lasting engagement and long-term success for Opportunity Youth in the Antelope Valley.

Information Needs

Data is crucial for locating Opportunity Youth and understanding how to support them. The U.S. Census data protects individual privacy, making it difficult to identify Opportunity Youth directly. Although substantial data are available at the Census tract level, they are insufficient to identify Opportunity Youth accurately. Accessing individual-level data is nearly impossible, so estimates are used instead. While it would be helpful to have employment data by business, job type, and industry at the Census tract level, the best available data are at the ZIP code level. The Chamber of Commerce collects data on its members' locations but lacks detailed information on employment levels, entry-level positions, or the training required for these roles.

Helping the Opportunity Youth

The goal of this study is to identify who and where Opportunity Youth are, to inform how they can be supported. The younger Opportunity Youth (16- to 18-year-olds) constitute a smaller share of their groups because they are still in high school. After that, the rates increase. Improving the quality of high schools in the Antelope Valley is one way to boost graduation rates. It is essential to identify high school students

who are at risk of graduating and becoming Opportunity Youth while they are still in school. During high school, students have more opportunities to pursue internships, entry-level positions, and higher education. The Chamber of Commerce and high schools can collaborate to identify local small businesses that offer training and prepare students for careers. This might include encouraging students to enroll in Antelope Valley College's successful technical education programs. When analyzing who Opportunity Youth are, two major groups stand out as potential beneficiaries of culturally tailored approaches. In terms of overall numbers, Latinos have the highest percentages but not the highest counts. By percentage, Black individuals have the highest percentages and relatively large counts. The North County also includes many institutionalized males aged 19 to 24, who are another group that should be addressed.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions for Opportunity Youth-Supporting Organizations

1. Please share with us how your organization interacts with/serves Opportunity Youth (OY).
    a. What services or support do you offer, either directly or through referrals?
2. What do you see as the greatest challenges that OY faces in the Antelope Valley?
3. Do you have any best practices to share from your organization or any areas in which you think your organization or partner organizations are effectively engaging with OY?
4. Do you see any gaps in service coverage or other barriers in your work with OY, such as policy issues or programmatic needs, that you think need to be addressed? Do you have any suggestions or ideas to address these issues?
5. While working with OY in the Antelope Valley, do you feel there is a sense of place/belonging to the region that can be cultivated/supported? What support is needed, and what does quality support look like?
6. What type of employment opportunities exist in the Antelope Valley for OY, and where are they located? Does your organization assist in training OY for these positions?
7. Do you engage OY directly as you identify pressing needs and create new programs and policies?
    a. If so, how do you go about engaging with OY (i.e., focus groups, surveys), and what are some significant barriers/needs that they have voiced?
        i. Have OY voiced needs/wants in relation to employment pathways? Are they seeking local opportunities, or do they prefer to leave the Antelope Valley if given the option?

Appendix B: Opportunity Youth Focus Group Questions

The focus group will touch on several themes outlined below, with prompting questions to be used as needed to guide the conversation to ensure key topics are covered.

Support Systems

- Who do you feel supports you the most? How do they help you?
- Are there any programs or services you rely on? What do you like about them?
- Are there any services that you wish you had access to?

Education and Workforce

- What are your thoughts about higher education/training? What do you enjoy or dislike?
- What are your dreams for the future? What steps do you think you need to take to get there?
- How do you feel about your current education or training? What do you like or dislike?
- Do you currently have a job? If yes, doing what? If not, what kind of job would you like to have?
- What are some of the challenges you have faced in accessing jobs?
- What skills do you think are essential for living independently? Are there certain topics (finance, resume building, etc.) that would be helpful?

Housing

- Can you describe your current living situation? How did you get there?
- What challenges do you face in finding stable housing?
- What programs and services do you turn to for help?

Mental Health

- Have you or someone close to you sought professional help (like therapy or counseling)? What was that experience like?
- What barriers, if any, have you faced in accessing mental health resources?
- How do you think mental health is viewed by your peers and in your community?
- Have you experienced stigma related to mental health? How did it affect you?
- Do you feel you have enough information about mental health? What topics would you like to learn more about?
- How can schools or communities better support youth mental health awareness?

Social Relationships

- How do you feel about your friendships? Do you feel supported by your peers?
- What do you think contributes to positive or negative relationships in your life?

Community and Belonging

- How do you feel about your community? What are its strengths and weaknesses?
- What changes would you like to see in your neighborhood or community?
- How connected do you feel to your community? What does community mean to you?
- What activities or groups help you feel a sense of belonging?
- Do you find community connection within cultural or religious groups or events, such as attending religious services or events celebrating your cultural identity?

Coping and Resilience

- When you face challenges, how do you usually cope?
- Are there any specific tools or resources that you find helpful?
- Can you share a time when you felt really proud of overcoming something?

Closing Thoughts

- If you could change one thing about how services are provided to youth like you, what would it be?
- Is there anything else you would like to share that we haven't covered?

Appendix C: Opportunity Youth Online Survey Questions

Introduction

Welcome to CSU5 ReLAY's North County Young Adult Survey.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in our survey focused on young adult experiences with supportive services in the Antelope Valley. Your feedback is incredibly valuable to us and will highlight young adult voices, help shape future programs, and improve services offered in your community. We appreciate your input and look forward to hearing from you!

The survey will take approximately. 15-20 minutes to complete, and all responses will remain confidential. To ensure privacy, we recommend participants find a private location to complete the survey where answers cannot be easily observed.

Please read through the consent form attached prior to completing the survey. Your choice below indicates that you have read the information in the consent form and have had a chance to ask any questions that you have about the study.

(*) I agree to participate in the study.

(*) I do not agree to participate in the study.

Survey Questions

Section 1: Qualification for survey

Q1: Are at least 18 years of age and not older than 26 years of age:
- Yes
- No (skipped to the end of survey)

Q2: Do you consider yourself a resident of the Antelope Valley?
- Yes
- No (skipped to the end of survey)

Section 2: Demographics

Q3: Gender: How do you identify?
- Man
- Woman
- Transgender
- Non-binary or gender-fluid
- Rather not say

Q4: Ethnicity: Which of the following best describes you:

- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino/a/x
- Native American
- White or Caucasian
- Multiracial or Biracial
- A race/ethnicity not listed here
- Rather not say

Q5: Which of the following best describes your highest level of education:

- Less than High school/dropped out
- High school or equivilant
- Attended College/University/trade school
- Completed trade school program
- Associates Degree
- Bachelors Degree
- Masters Degree
- Doctorate

Q6: What statement best describes your housing situation today?

- I do not have housing (I am staying with others, in a shelter, in a hotel, on the street, in a car, or in a public area)
- I have housing today, but have experienced lack of housing in the past
- I have housing today, but have experienced a lack of housing in the past, and worry about losing housing in the future
- I have housing today, but I am worried about losing housing in the future
- I have housing

Q7: Which of the following best describes your current employment?

- Employed, full-time
- Employed, part-time
- Employed, casually, or as needed
- Unemployed

Q8: Have you ever spent time in jail, prison, or a juvenile detention center?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

Q9: Have you ever spent time in the foster-care system?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

<u>Section 3: Support Systems and Belonging</u>

Q10: How supported do you feel in your life by the following: [6-point Likert scale]

Your family
Your friends or people your own age
Your community (i.e., neighborhood, local organizations, community groups in the Antelope Valley)
Your faith community (if not applicable, please skip)
Your school or educational environment (if not applicable, please skip)
Any mentors, counselors, or other professional support systems

Q11: How often do you reach out to one of these groups when you need support? [6-point Likert scale]

Q12: When you face challenges, how often do you use tools or resources to cope in a healthy way? (for example, exercising, self-care, asking for support, meditation/deep breathing, writing/speaking it out) [6-point Likert scale]

Q13: How connected do you feel to the people in your community (i.e., neighbors, local groups, etc.)? [6-point Likert scale]

Q14: How often do you engage with your community (i.e., attending local events, volunteering, participating in group activities) [6-point Likert scale]

Q15: Have you ever felt excluded or isolated from your community?

Yes, often
Yes, sometimes
Rarely
No, not really
Never

Q16: If you have ever felt excluded, what do you think contributed to that feeling? (check all that apply)

Cultural or social differences
Lack of shared interests
Discrimination or bias
Lack of opportunities for connections
Not enough support or encouragement
Other (please specify)
I have never felt excluded from my community

Q17: In order to help create a sense of belonging, especially for young adults in the Antelope Valley, how important are the following aspects of community to you? [6-point Likert scale]

- Social events/opportunities
- Sporting events/opportunities
- Shared values and interests
- Access to communities of faith
- Public spaces (i.e., community centers, parks)
- Community events and activities
- Support networks (community organizations and programs)
- Open dialogue with community leaders (open forums, etc.)
- Cultural or regional pride/celebrations

- Other: (fill in)

Section 4: Service Usage and Access

Q18: How often do you use the following services: [6-point Likert scale]

Housing/emergency shelter support services
Food support services
Mental health/counseling services
Peer support groups
Mentorship programs
Educational support services
Employment readiness/job training services

Q19: Which of the following make it harder for you access the services you need (check all that apply):

- Transportation
- Lack of knowledge of services available
- Stigma/judgement from others or society
- Lack of trust in service providers/systems
- Too many steps to access services (i.e., paperwork, long wait times)
- Limited hours that services are open (i.e., no weekend hours, flexible hours)
- Lack of money to pay for services
- Language barrier
- Lack of disability access
- Lack of support from family/friends
- Feeling like the services won't understand or help me
- Other:

Q20: How effective do you believe the support services in your area are at addressing the needs of young adults? [6-point Likert scale]

Q21: Do you feel that the support service you have accessed has helped you achieve your personal goals?

Yes
No
I do not use support services

Q22: Which of the following would help you feel more comfortable seeking support? (check all that apply)

- Having someone who understands my situation
- More youth-friendly/relatable staff
- More consistent staff
- Online/app support
- More opportunities for peer-to-peer support
- Less paperwork/steps to services
- Transportation
- Having a trusted adult to guide me through the process
- Other:

Q23: What types of services or programs would be most helpful to you right now? (check all that apply)

- Job training/career counseling
- Mental health services
- Housing or emergency shelter
- Mentorship or peer support programs
- Educational tutoring or school support
- Financial assistance/education
- Recreational/social activities
- Other:

Q24: What topics/life skills would be most helpful for you to learn, if offered in a group session? (check all that apply)

- Job readiness (i.e., interview skills, resume help, etc.)
- Financial management/budgeting
- Time management
- Stress management/coping skills
- Health and wellness (i.e., healthy eating, exercise, self-care)
- Social skills (i.e., active listening and communication, conflict management)
- Other:

Q25: What do you feel is the best way to receive information about services: (check all that apply)

- In person
- Over the phone
- Text/social media
- Printer flyers
- Online (emails/websites)
- Other:

Q26: Is there anything else you would like to share that we haven't covered?

Appendix D: Geography Codes for Los Angeles County Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs)

The 2010 PUMA geography codes extracted for Los Angeles County: 03701, 03702, 03703, 03704, 03705, 03706, 03707, 03708, 03709, 03710, 03711, 03712, 03713, 03714, 03715, 03716, 03717, 03718, 03719, 03720, 03721, 03722, 03723, 03724, 03725, 03726, 03727, 03728, 03729, 03730, 03731, 03732, 03733, 03734, 03735, 03736, 03737, 03738, 03739, 03740, 03741, 03742, 03743, 03744, 03745, 03746, 03747, 03748, 03749, 03750, 03751, 03752, 03753, 03754, 03755, 03756, 03757, 03758, 03759, 03760, 03761, 03762, 03763, 03764, 03765, 03766, 03767, 03768, 03769.

The 2020 PUMA geography codes extracted for Los Angeles County: 03703, 03704, 03705, 03706, 03707, 03708, 03709, 03710, 03711, 03712, 03713, 03714, 03715, 03716, 03717, 03718, 03719, 03720, 03721, 03722, 03723, 03724, 03725, 03728, 03730, 03731, 03732, 03733, 03734, 03735, 03736, 03737, 03738, 03739, 03740, 03741, 03742, 03743, 03744, 03745, 03746, 03747, 03748, 03750, 03751, 03752, 03753, 03754, 03757, 03758, 03759, 03760, 03761, 03762, 03763, 03764, 03766, 03767, 03768, 03770, 03771, 03772, 03773, 03774, 03775, 03776, 03778, 03779, 03780, 03781, 03782.

Appendix E: Opportunity Youth Online Survey Results

Respondent Demographics

Table E1. *Demographic characteristics of survey respondents by gender and ethnicity*

Ethnicity	Gender				
	Man	Non-binary / gender-fluid	Woman	No Response	Total
Hispanic or Latino/a/x	22		15		**37**
Black or African American	8	1	9		**18**
Multiracial or Biracial			3		**3**
Native American	1		1		**2**
White or Caucasian			1		**1**
Rather not say	1				**1**
No response				3	**3**
Total	**32**	**1**	**29**	**3**	**65**

Table E2. *Justice system-impacted and foster care system-impacted status of respondents*

	Q8: Have you ever spent time in jail, prison, or a juvenile detention center?	Q9: Have you ever spent time in the foster-care system
Yes	13 (20%)	7 (11%)
No	44 (68%)	52 (80%)
Prefer not to answer / (No Response)	8 (12%)	6 (9%)
Grand Total	65	65

Table E3. *The highest level of education of the survey respondents*

Highest Level of Education	Respondents	Percentage
Masters Degree	1	2%
Bachelors Degree	2	3%
Attended College/University/trade school	2	3%
High school or equivalent	23	35%
Less than High school/dropped out	34	52%
(No Response)	3	5%
Grand Total	65	

Table E4. *Current employment status of survey respondents*

Employment Status	Respondents	Percentage
Employed, full-time	4	6%
Employed, part-time	16	25%
Employed, casually, or as needed	6	9%
Unemployed	35	54%
(No Response)	4	6%
Grand Total	65	

Table E5. *Current housing situation of survey respondents*

	What statement best describes your housing situation today?	Respondents
Housing stability	I have housing	36
	I have housing today, but I am worried about losing housing in the future	4
	I have housing today, but have experienced a lack of housing in the past	8
	I have housing today, but have experienced a lack of housing in the past, and worry about losing housing in the future	5
Housing instability	I do not have housing (I am staying with others, in a shelter, in a hotel, on the street, in a car, or in a public area)	9
	(No Response)	3
	Total	**65**

Support Systems and Belonging

Figure E1. *Survey respondents' self-reported levels of support by source.*

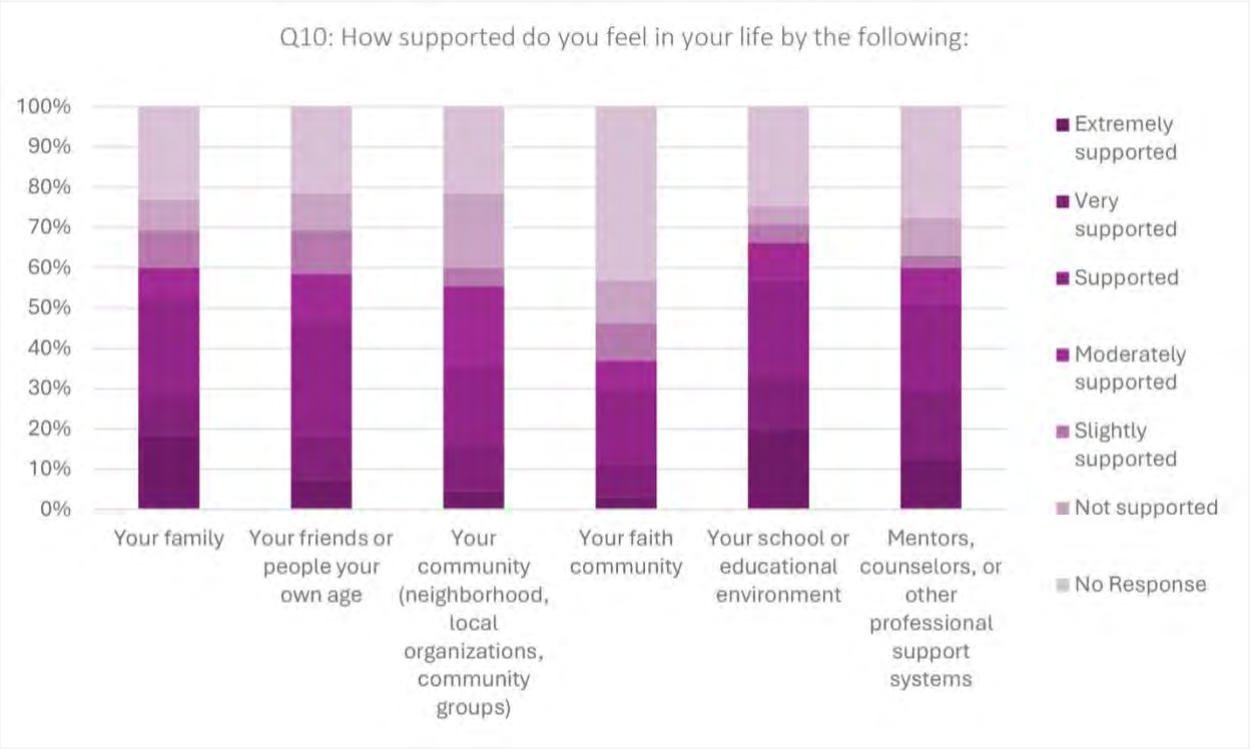


Figure E2. *Survey responses on young adults' sense of connection to their community.*

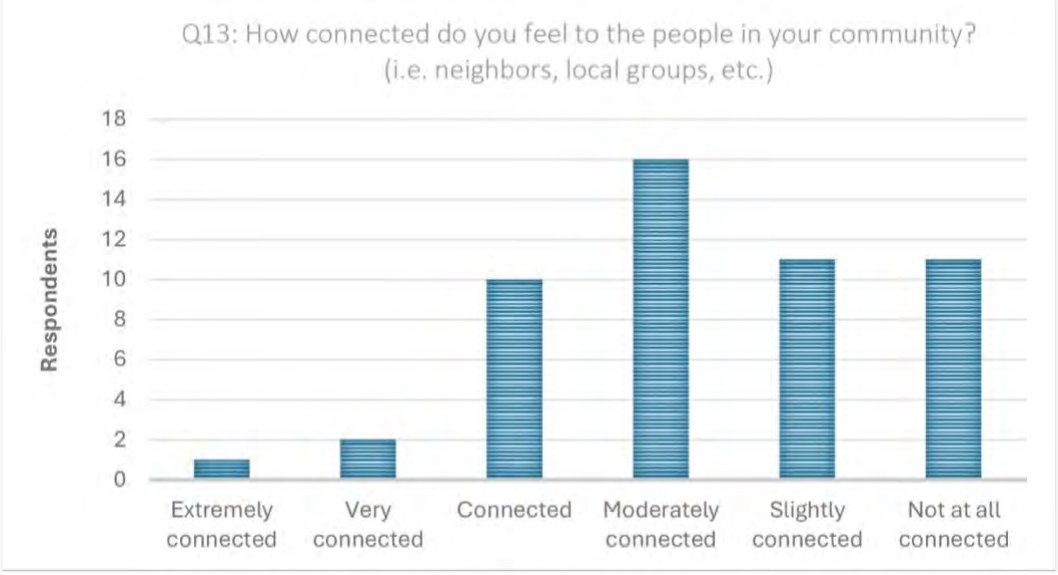
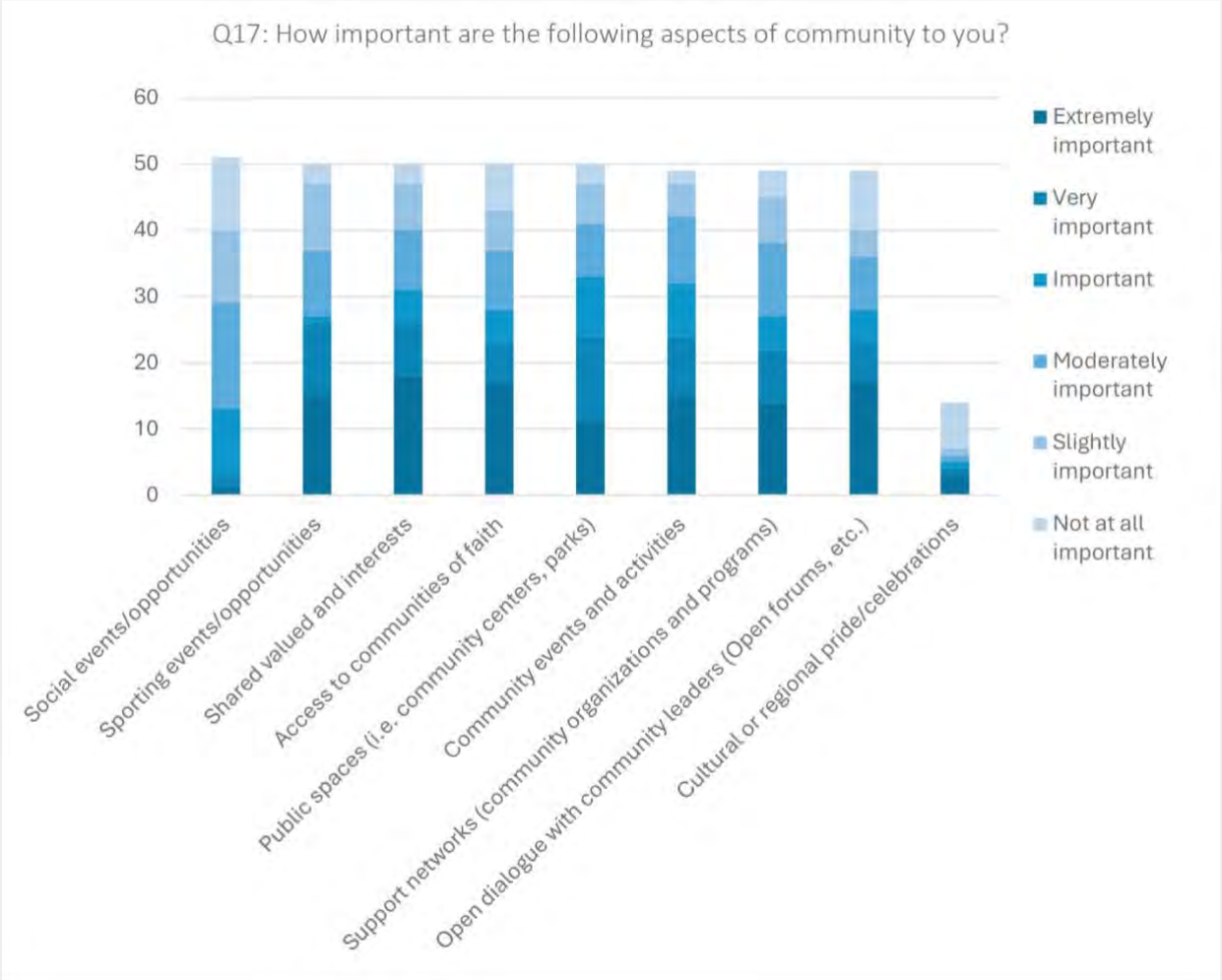


Figure E3. *Survey responses on the perceived importance of the community aspect.*



Service Usage and Access

Figure E4. *Survey respondents' self-reported frequency of use across service types.*

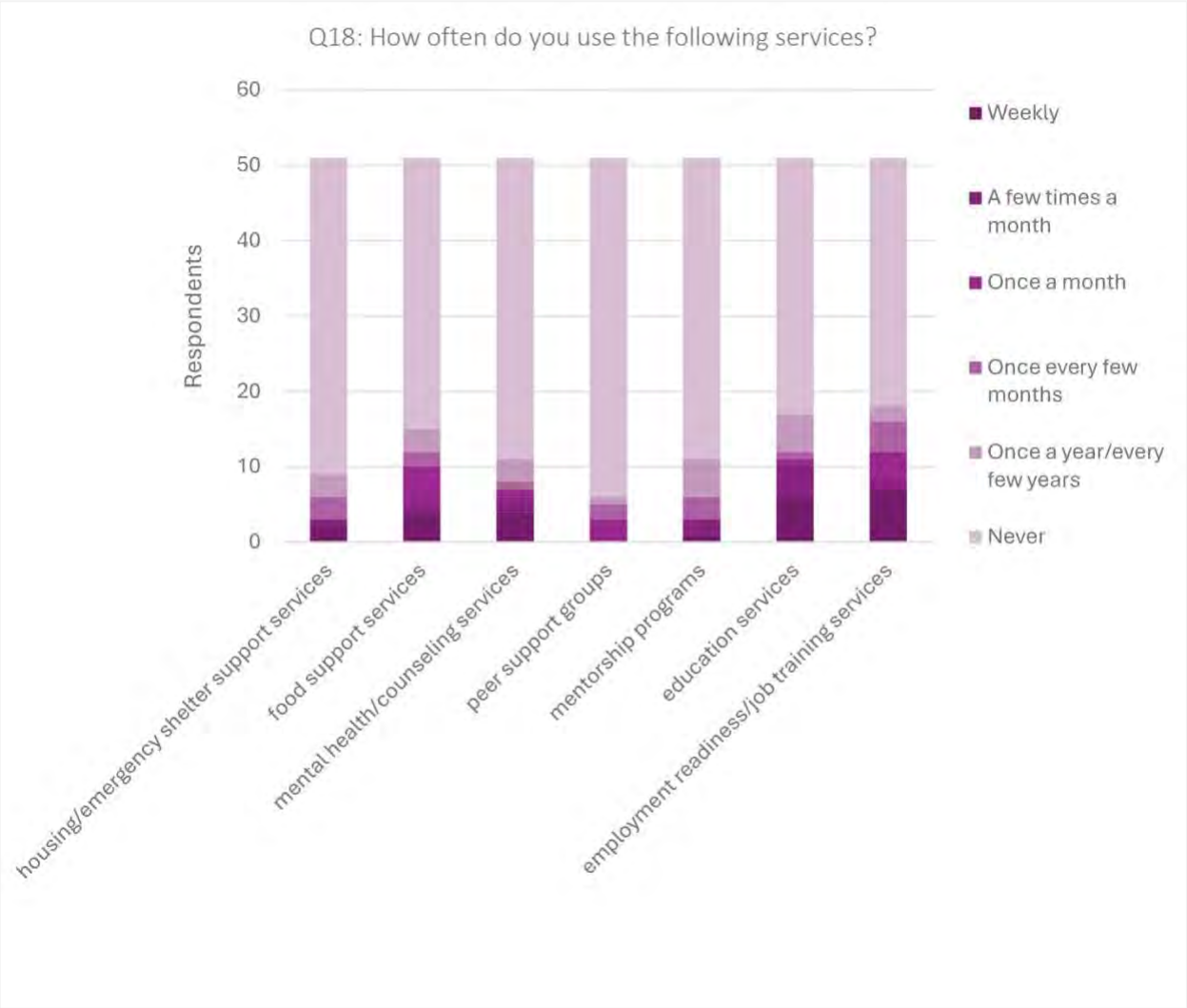


Figure E5. *Survey responses identifying barriers to accessing services.*

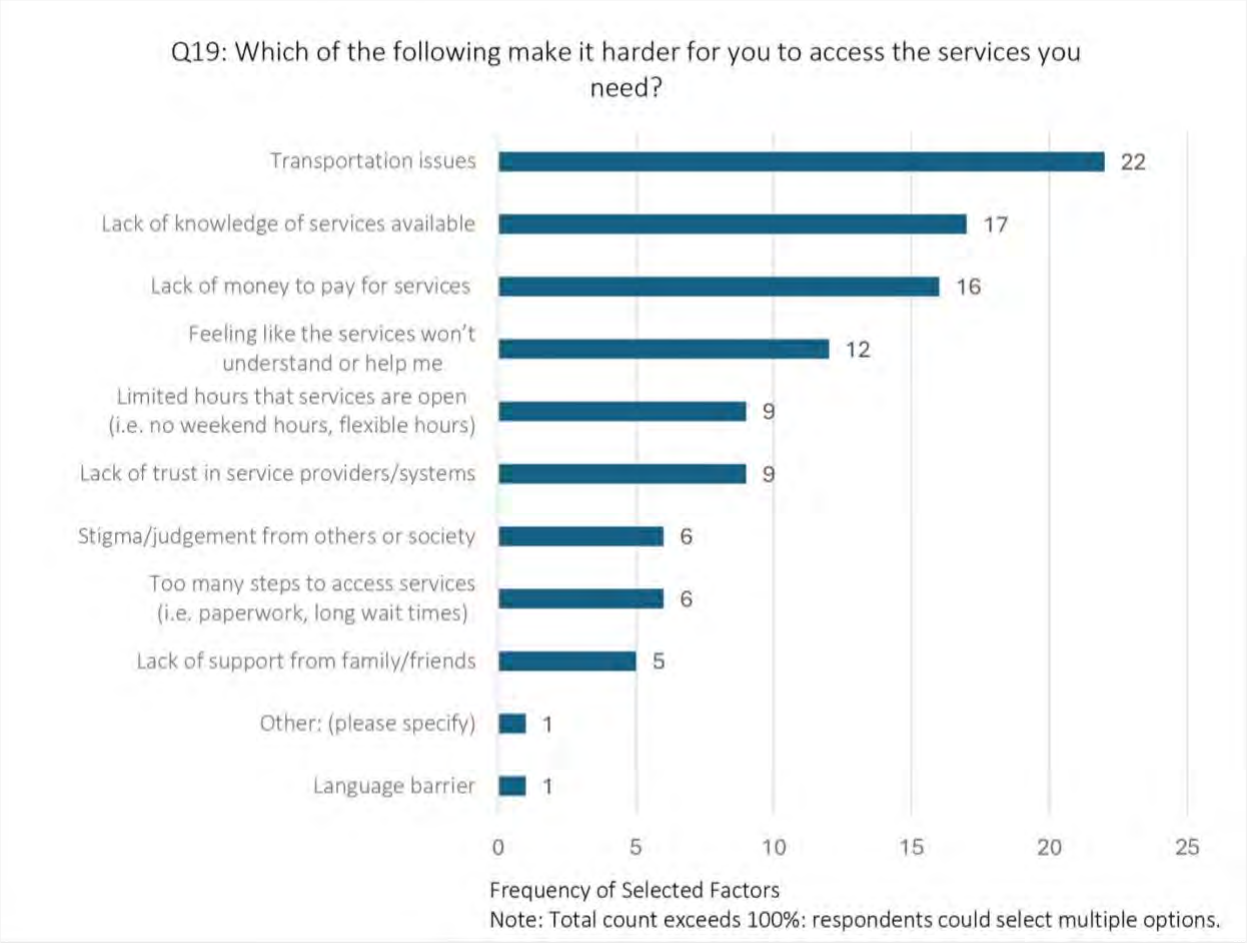


Figure E6. *Survey responses on the perceived effectiveness of local support services for young adults.*

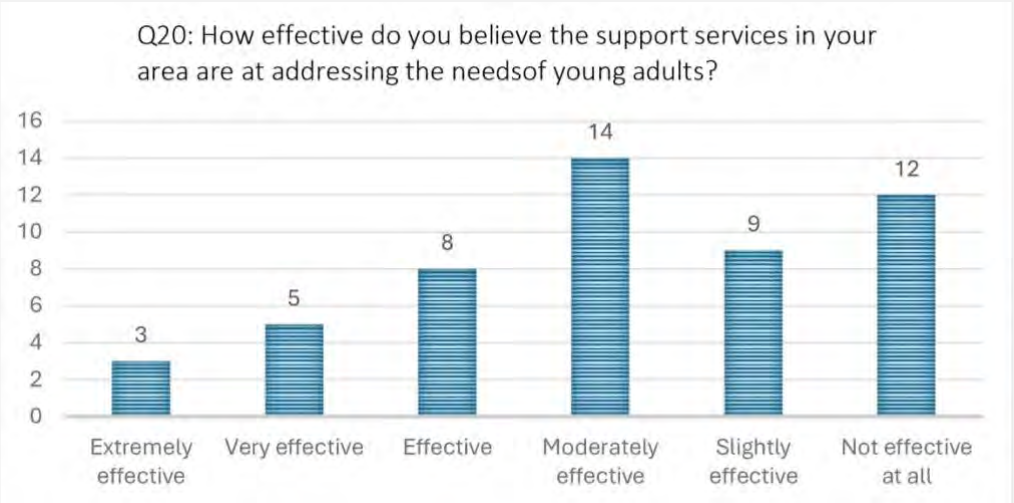


Figure E7. *Survey responses identifying factors that would enhance comfort in seeking support.*

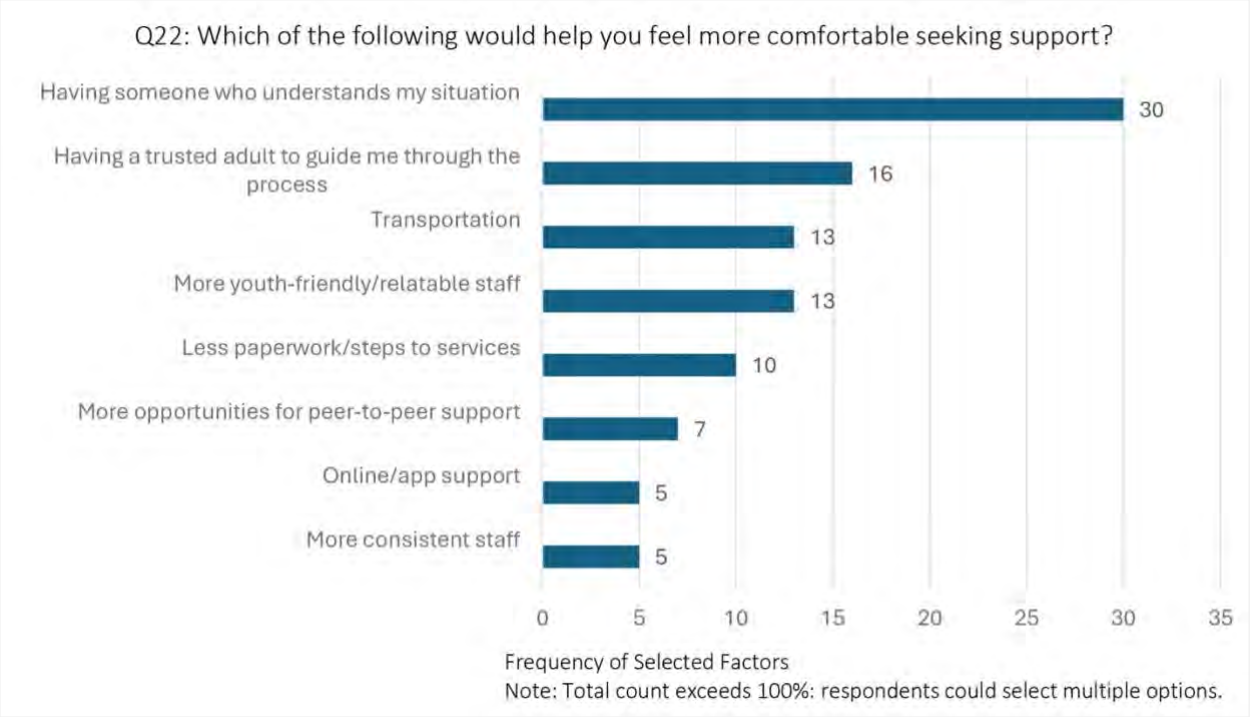


Figure E8. *Survey responses identifying services or programs perceived as most helpful.*

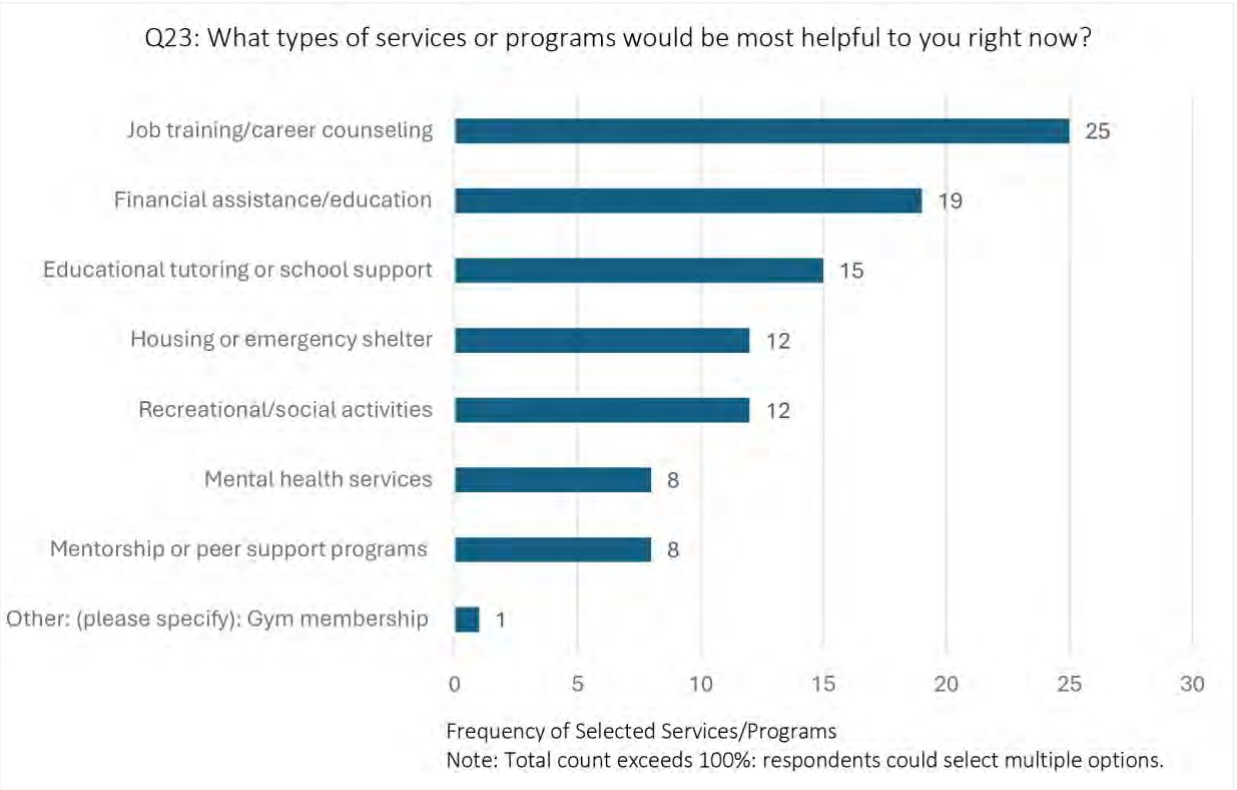


Figure E9. *Survey respondents' preferences for life skills development topics.*