

Structural Barriers and Youth Disconnection in the Antelope Valley

Summary



Prepared by CSU5 Reconnecting
Los Angeles Youth (ReLAY) Institute

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FORWARD

Los Angeles County is strengthened by committed community leaders, organizations and public partners working to expand opportunities and improve outcomes for youth and families. In the Antelope Valley, however, too many disconnected youth continue to face structural barriers that limit access to education, employment and supportive services. Geographic isolation, transportation challenges, economic hardship and limited youth programming contribute to rising rates of disconnection among youth who are neither in school nor working.

The ReLAY Institute advances a shared regional vision by identifying pathways to education, workforce development and long-term economic stability. Through research, collaboration and community partnerships, the ReLAY Institute highlights service gaps and addresses systemic barriers to help ensure equitable access to the resources and opportunities young people need to thrive. This report reflects a collective commitment to strengthening outcomes for youth and families across the Antelope Valley and greater Los Angeles region.



CSU5

The CSU5 is a collaboration among the five California State University campuses serving the greater Los Angeles region to support business, economic and community development:

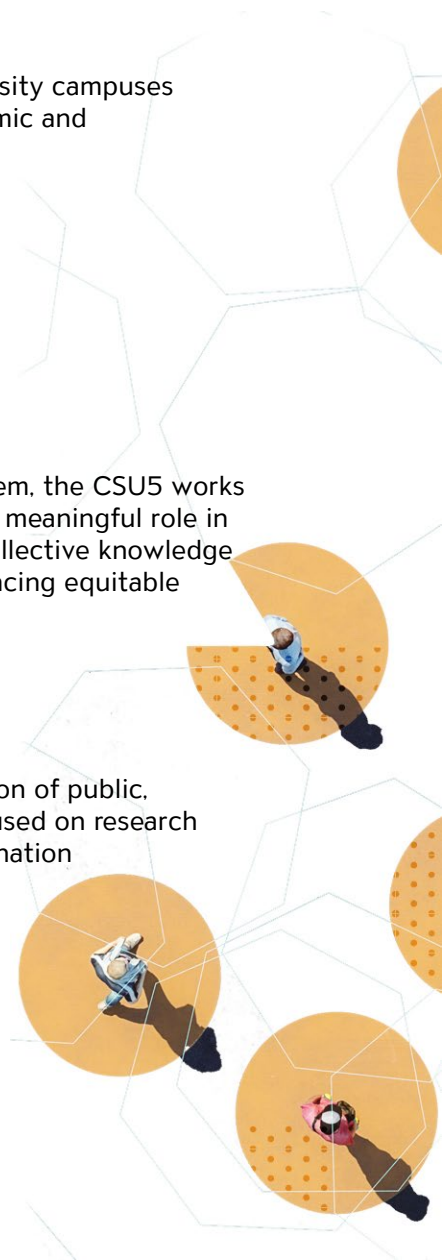
- California State University, Dominguez Hills
- California State University, Long Beach
- California State University, Los Angeles
- California State University, Northridge
- California State Polytechnic University, Pomona

Consistent with the mission of the California State University system, the CSU5 works to ensure that the CSU's educational and research strengths play a meaningful role in shaping the future of Greater Los Angeles. The CSU5 applies its collective knowledge and expertise to addressing complex regional challenges and advancing equitable community outcomes.



ReLAY Institute

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



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Structural Barriers and Youth Disconnection in the Antelope Valley

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.

INTRODUCTION

ReLAY Institute's report, [Structural Barriers and Youth Disconnection in the Antelope Valley](#), draws on community interviews, youth focus groups, survey findings and secondary data to examine the factors contributing to youth disconnection. The findings underscore the need for coordinated investments in housing, transportation, workforce development and youth-centered support to create more equitable pathways to opportunity and long-term success.

The results of this study suggest that youth disconnection is shaped by a combination of housing instability, transportation barriers, limited workforce opportunities, educational challenges and unmet mental health needs.

► Full report can be found at publications.relayinstitute.org

METHODOLOGY

The Antelope Valley opportunity youth study used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data with qualitative insights. Quantitative data included U.S. Census statistics, local business information from the Chamber of Commerce, and enrollment records from regional K–12 schools and the community college system, providing a detailed picture of opportunity youth across geography, gender, race/ethnicity, income and household structure. To add context, the study also drew on qualitative data from interviews with local stakeholders and service providers in public agencies and nonprofits, along with in-person focus groups and an online survey of opportunity youth. Together, these methods helped capture the perspectives of young people and those working directly with them, offering a clearer view of their lived experiences and the systems meant to support them.

U.S. Census Data

- Used U.S. Census data at the PUMA (Public Use Microdata Area) level
- Applied specific census variable codes to identify opportunity youth
- Disaggregated data by sex, race, ethnicity, household income and household relationship to better understand subgroup differences

Opportunity Youth Definition

- Ages 16–24
- No school attendance in the past 3 months
- Worked 0 weeks in the past year

Location Analysis

- Used 2020 U.S. Census data to map opportunity youth distribution in Lancaster and Palmdale, including income, population density, age, race and ethnicity
- Geocoded Chamber of Commerce business and nonprofit data to identify employment opportunities and accessibility for opportunity youth; final GIS analysis included 361 verified locations
- Reviewed Antelope Valley College enrollment/workforce programs and local school district graduation and college/career readiness data

Organization Interviews

- Semi-structured, confidential interviews with open-ended questions were conducted via video conferencing
- Data analyzed concurrently to identify themes and determine when saturation was reached

Participants

- 56 representatives from 31 nonprofit organizations and public agencies serving opportunity youth in the Antelope Valley

Youth Focus Groups & Survey

- Focus groups in the cities of Lancaster and Palmdale; semi-structured with open-ended questions; pseudonyms were used for confidentiality
- Survey was administered anonymously via an online survey platform, mixed methods design with quantitative and qualitative questions

Participants

- Opportunity youth ages 18–24 residing in the Antelope Valley, recruited via nonprofit organizations and public agencies
- Focus groups: 21 participants
- Survey: 65 eligible participants

OPPORTUNITY YOUTH TRENDS

AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY (ACS) 5-YEAR DATA FINDINGS

This analysis uses American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) data collected at the geographic level of Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs) to examine opportunity youth trends across Los Angeles County from 2017–23. For this study, the data are organized into four geographic areas: Lancaster, Palmdale, North County and Los Angeles County. All Los Angeles County PUMAs were included to provide a countywide comparison.

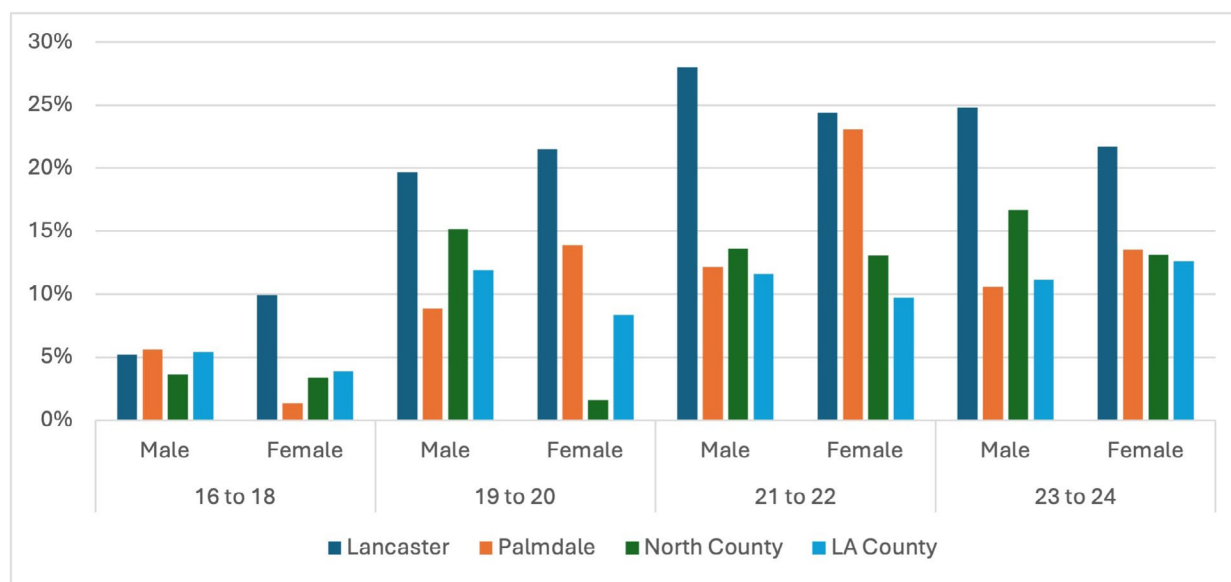
Key Results

- Opportunity youth rates increased after COVID-19 but generally declined by 2023 toward pre-pandemic levels.
- Lancaster had the highest rates across all regions, while Palmdale was close to the Los Angeles County average and North County had the lowest rates.
- Older youth are at the greatest risk of becoming disconnected from school and work.
- Rates are lowest among 16–18-year-olds, likely because many are still in high school, and increase significantly after age 20.
- The highest levels are among youth ages 21–24, especially in Lancaster and Palmdale.

Patterns Differ by Gender and Age

- Males generally have higher opportunity youth rates at younger ages.
- Females become more represented in older age groups.

■ Figure 6. Opportunity youth by age group and sex (2023 5-year ACS).*



*Figure numbers are nonsequential and match the original report to assist in locating specific sections of the data.

Trends Vary Across Communities

- In Lancaster, females have higher opportunity youth rates at younger ages but lower rates among older youth.
- In Palmdale, female rates increase sharply around ages 19–20, especially among 21–22-year-olds.
- In North County, males consistently have higher rates overall.

Figure 16. Percent of Lancaster groups who are opportunity youth (2023 5-year ACS).

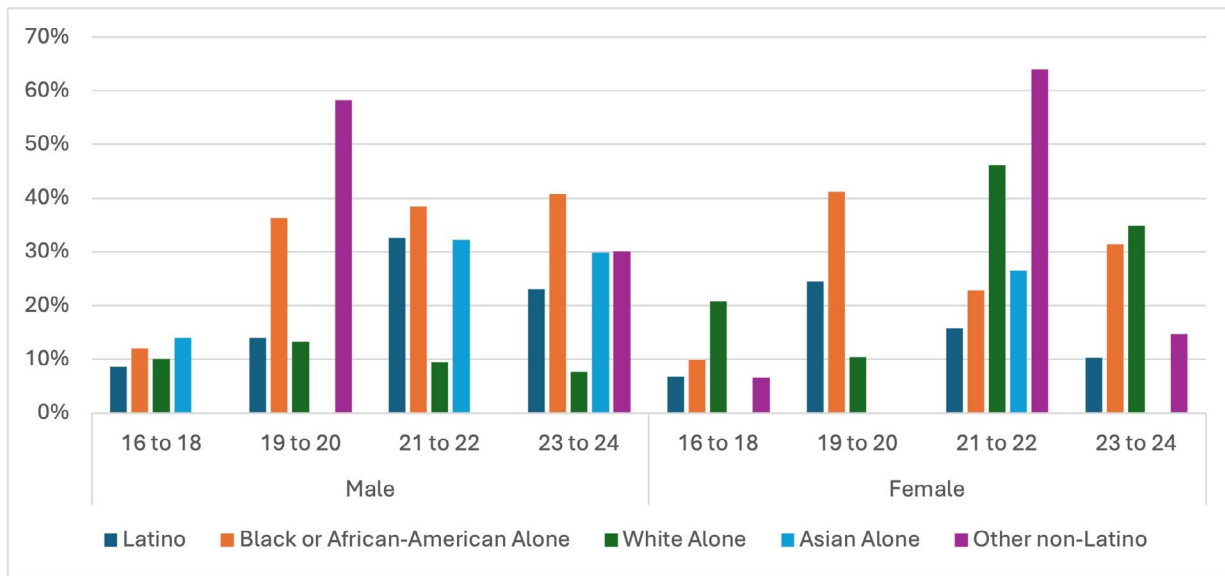
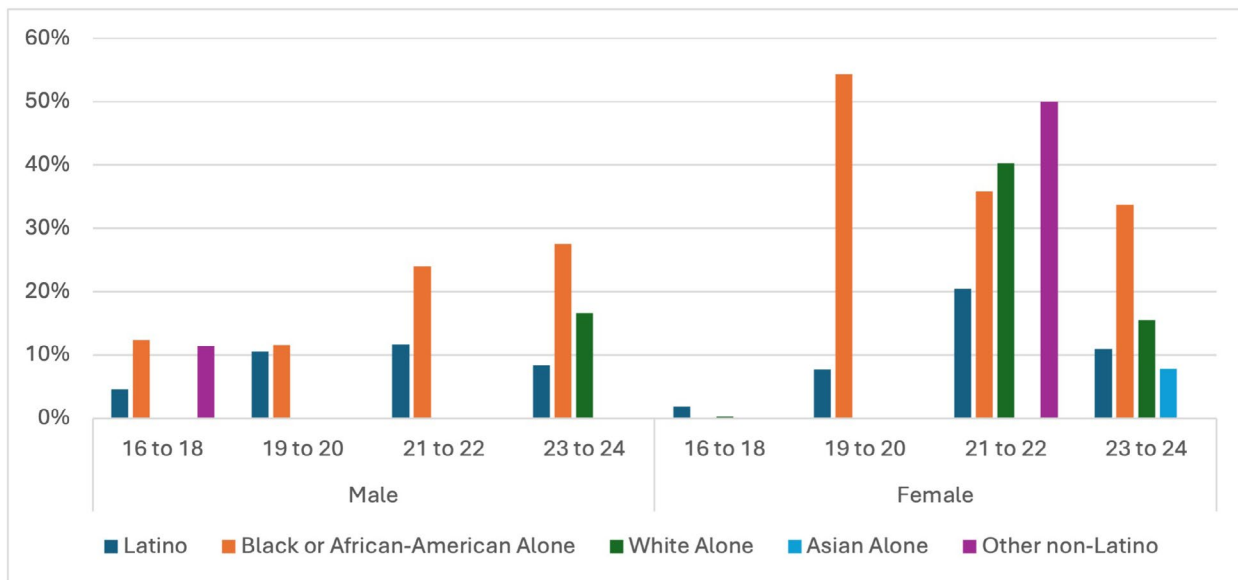


Figure 18. Percent of Palmdale groups who are opportunity youth (2023 5-year ACS).



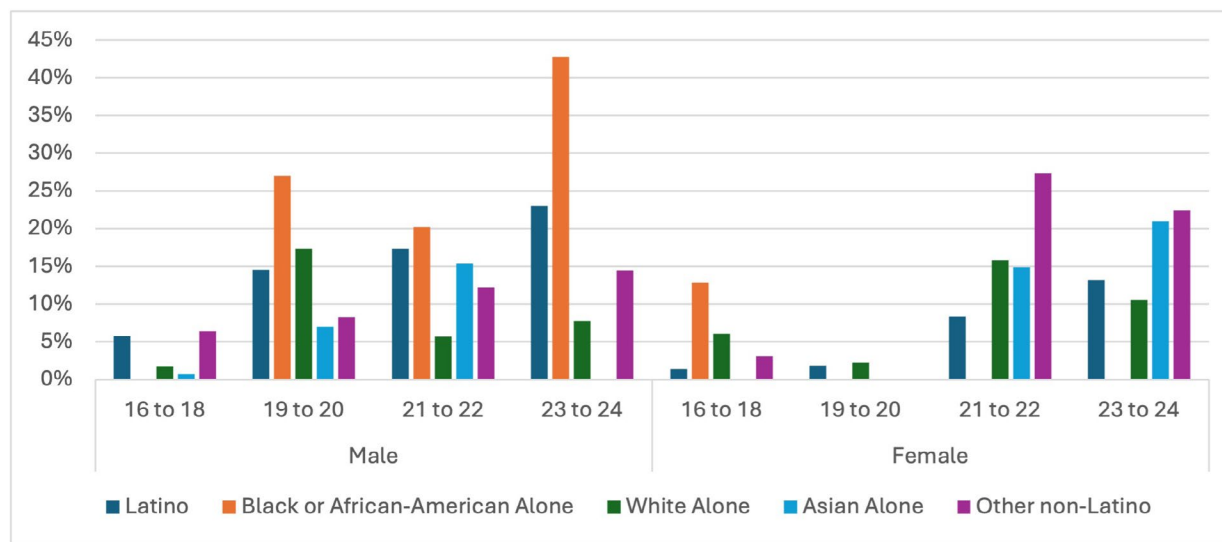
Large Racial and Ethnic Disparities

- Black youth—especially Black males—experience the highest opportunity youth rates, ranging from 20% to more than 40% among ages 19–24.
- Latino youth make up the largest number of opportunity youth overall, particularly among males in Lancaster and Palmdale.
- White youth are more represented in some older age groups, especially among females in North County and Palmdale.

Each Region Faces Different Challenges

- Lancaster has the highest overall concentration of opportunity youth, especially among Black and Latino males ages 19–24.
- Palmdale shows large increases among young women ages 19–22, particularly Latina and Black females.
- North County has lower overall rates but still shows concerning disparities among Black males and older Latino males.

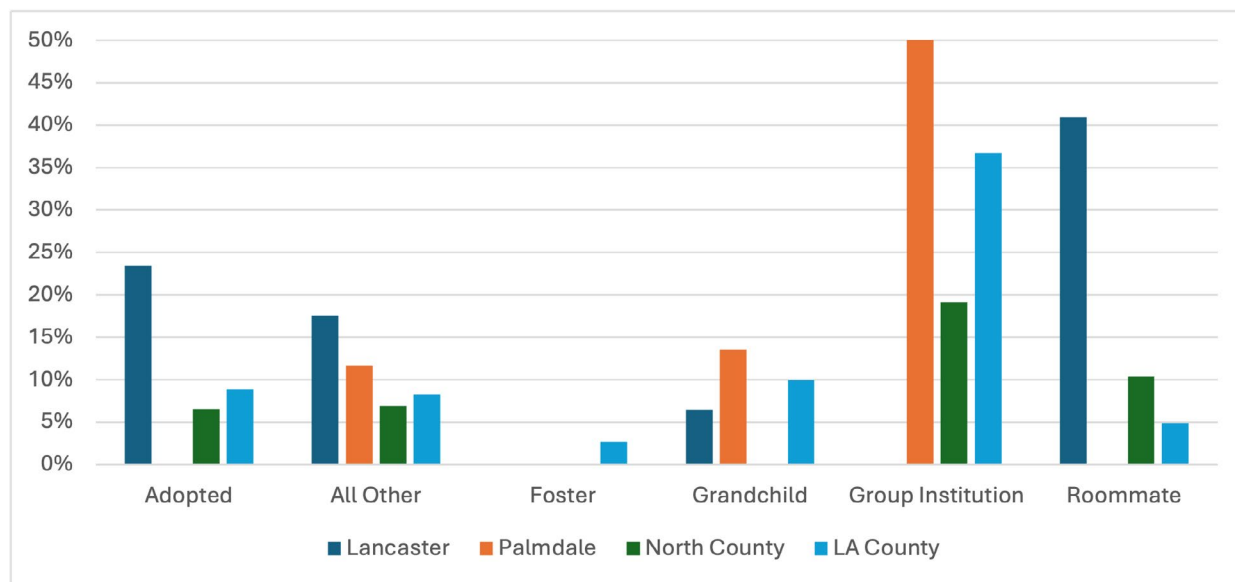
Figure 20. Percent of North County groups who are opportunity youth (2023 5-year ACS).



Family and Living Situations appear to Affect Opportunity Youth Outcomes

- Most opportunity youth live in traditional family households, but some of the highest-risk are young people living in institutional group settings, particularly males ages 19–24 in North County and all genders ages 21–24 in Lancaster.
- Higher rates are also seen among youth living with grandparents in Palmdale and Los Angeles County.
- Although the total numbers are small, adopted youth ages 23–24 in Lancaster and Palmdale also show elevated rates.

Figure 25. Opportunity youth percentage of all 16- to 24-year-olds by household relationship split by area (2023 5-year ACS).



Groups Needing Targeted Support, Based on Findings

- Older transition-age youth (ages 21–24)
- Black and Latino youth
- Youth in higher-risk living situations

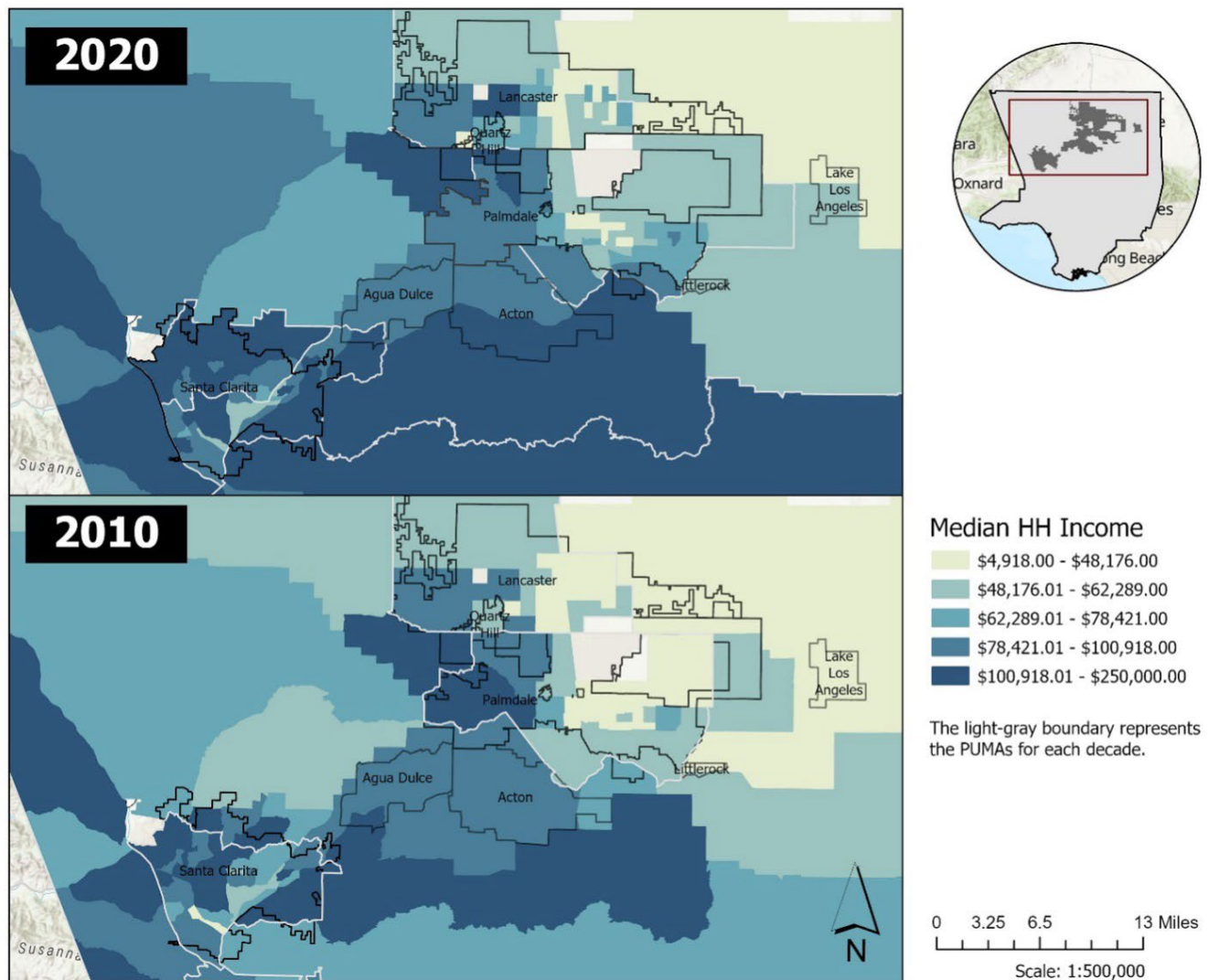
LOCATION ANALYSIS

The location analysis maps help show where opportunity youth live in the Antelope Valley and how local social and economic conditions may affect them. The maps highlight clear differences across Lancaster and Palmdale in income levels, age groups and racial and ethnic makeup. These patterns help identify areas where youth may face greater challenges with housing, jobs, transportation and access to services. The findings also show that opportunities and resources are not evenly distributed across the region, pointing to the need for support strategies tailored to specific communities.

Household Income Patterns

Median household income patterns stayed mostly the same between 2010 and 2020. Higher-income neighborhoods are mainly located in the southern and western parts of the Antelope Valley, while lower-income areas are more concentrated in the northeast. For comparison, the median household income in Los Angeles County was about \$75,000 in 2020.

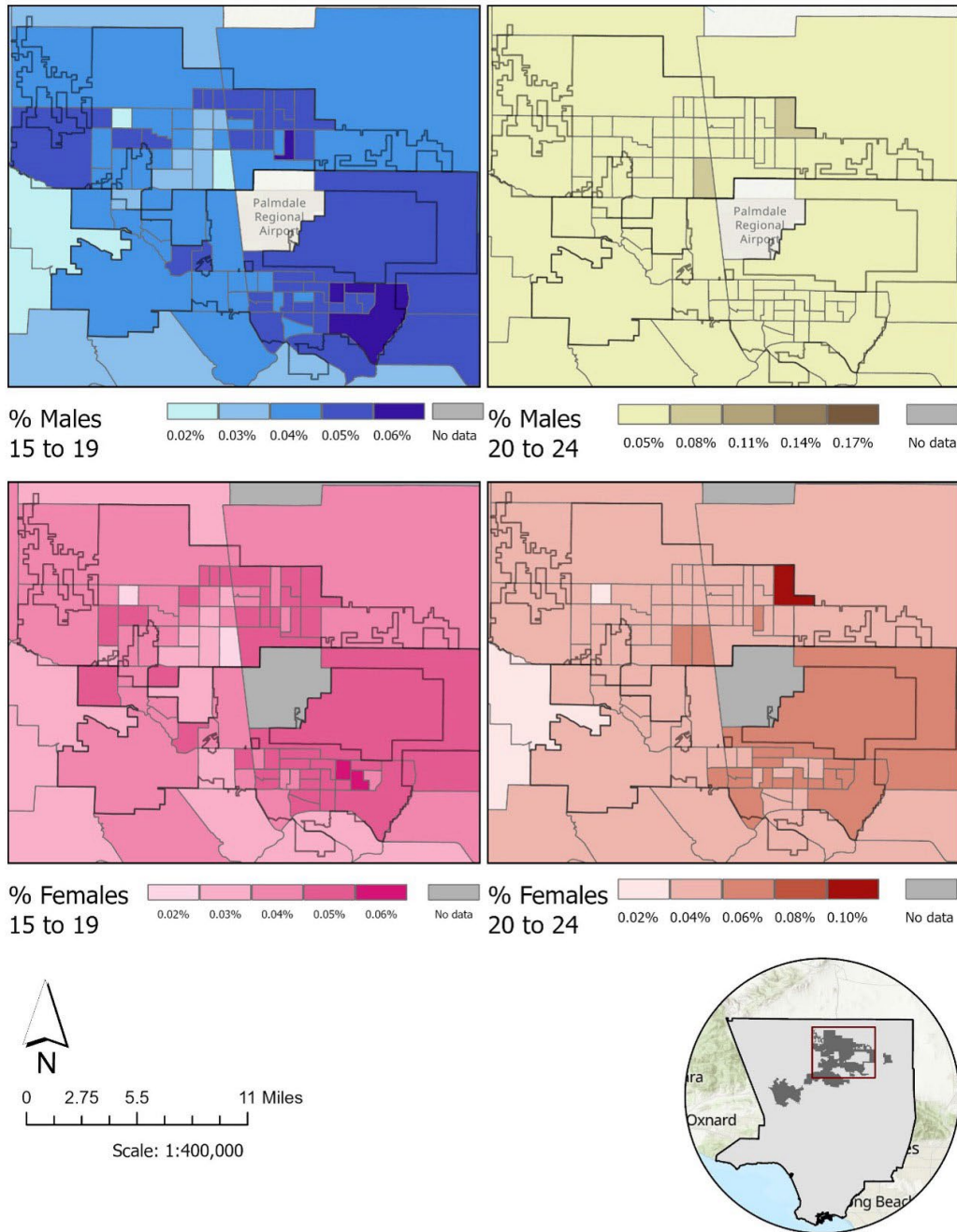
Figure 27. Median Household Income in Antelope Valley, 2010 and 2020.



Youth Population Distribution

Figure 28 shows where residents ages 15–24 live in Lancaster and Palmdale. Teens ages 15–19 make up less than 1% of the population in both cities and are mostly concentrated in eastern neighborhoods. Residents ages 20–24 also represent a relatively small share of the population. Young women in this age group are more concentrated in eastern areas, while young men are spread more evenly across the region.

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

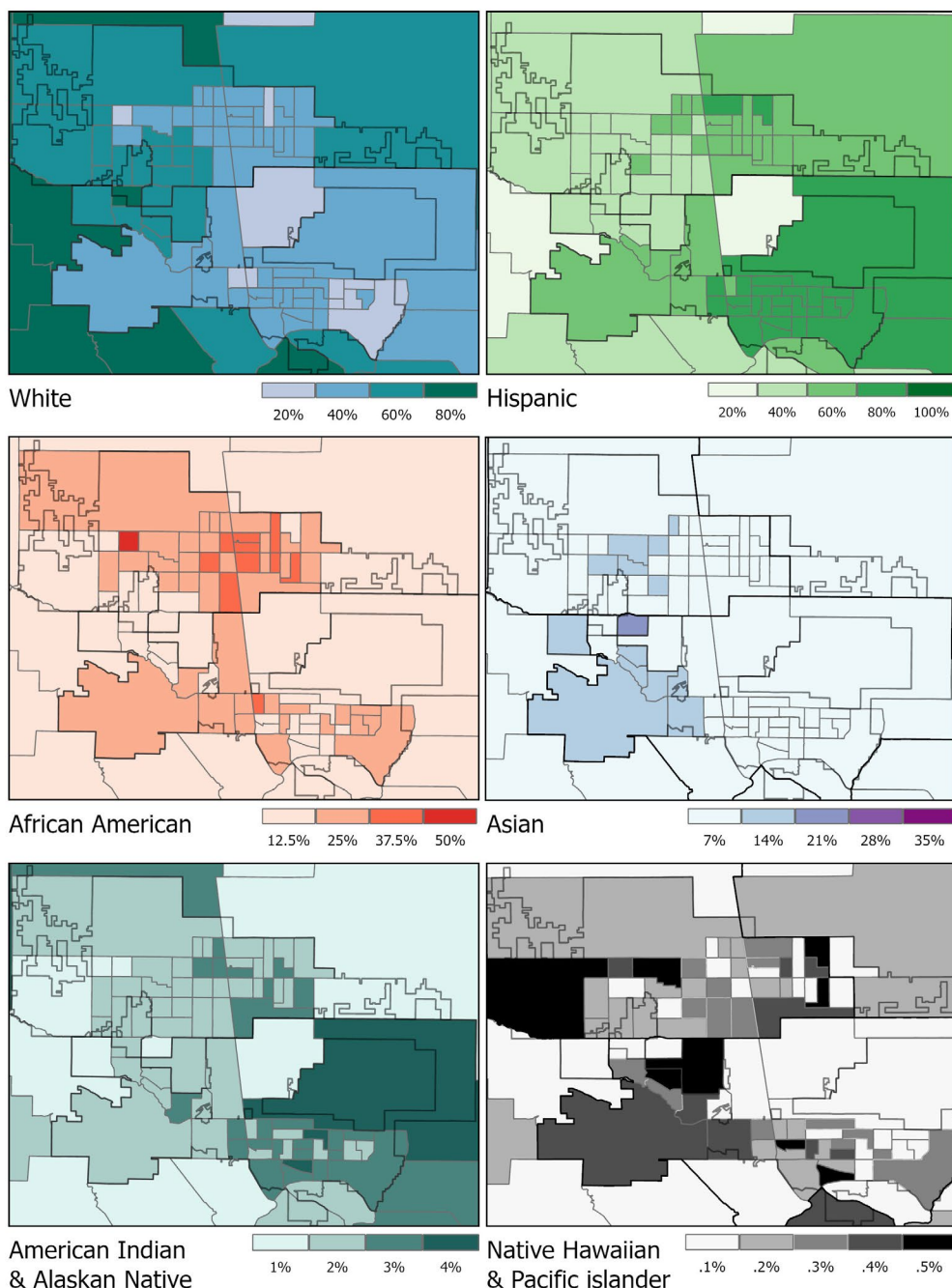


Race and Ethnicity

Results show clear geographic patterns by race and ethnicity. White and Hispanic residents make up the largest population groups. White residents are more concentrated in western neighborhoods, while Hispanic residents are more concentrated in eastern areas. African American and Asian residents represent smaller population groups and also tend to be clustered in western neighborhoods. American Indian and Alaska Native residents, along with Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander residents, make up less than 1% of the population, so patterns for these groups should be interpreted carefully.

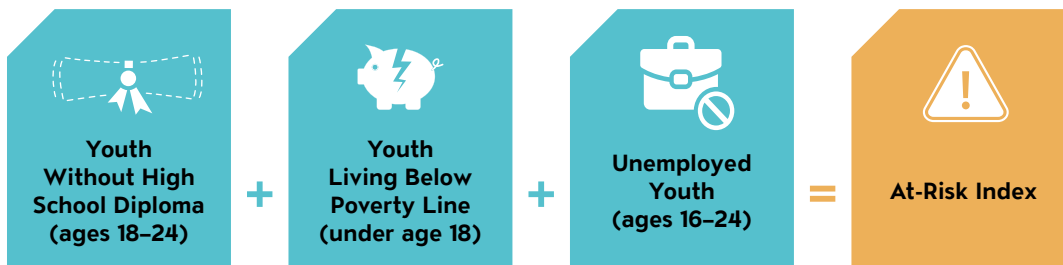
One limitation of the census data is that it does not break down race and ethnicity by both age and gender, making it harder to identify patterns for specific youth subgroups.

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



AT-RISK INDEX

The study developed an **At-Risk Index** to identify areas where youth may face greater barriers to education, employment and economic stability. The index combines three indicators:



Each variable was standardized and combined into a single score ranging from low to high risk. Unemployment data for ages 16–19 and 20–24 were weighted equally due to census data limitations.

Mapping the index showed lower risk levels in higher-income communities such as Santa Clarita and western areas of Lancaster and Palmdale. Higher-risk areas were concentrated in older central neighborhoods between Highway 14 and Sierra Highway, where youth were more likely to experience poverty, unemployment and lower educational attainment.

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

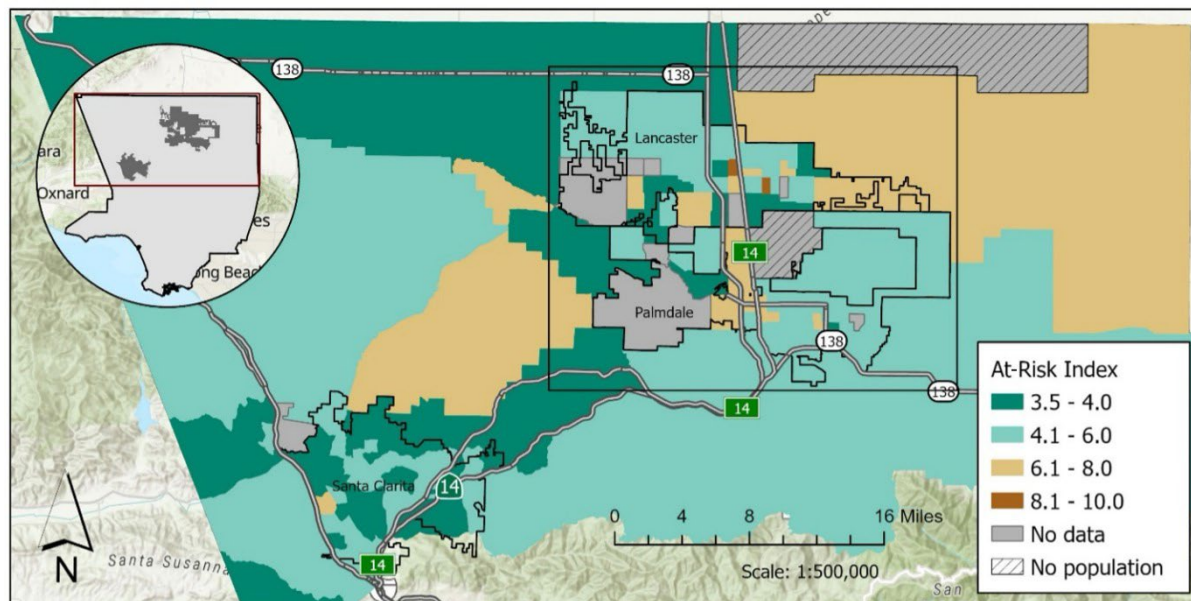
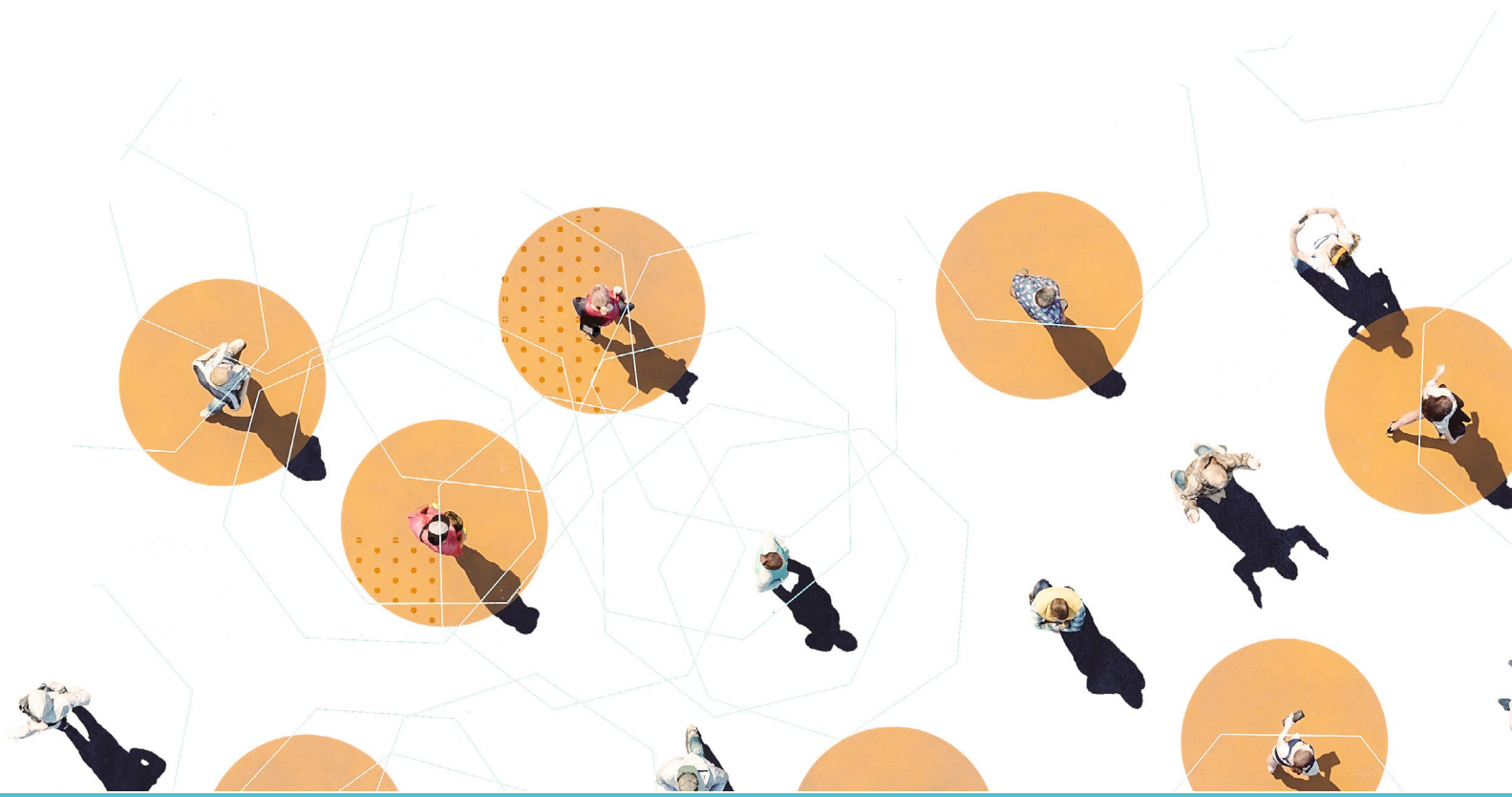
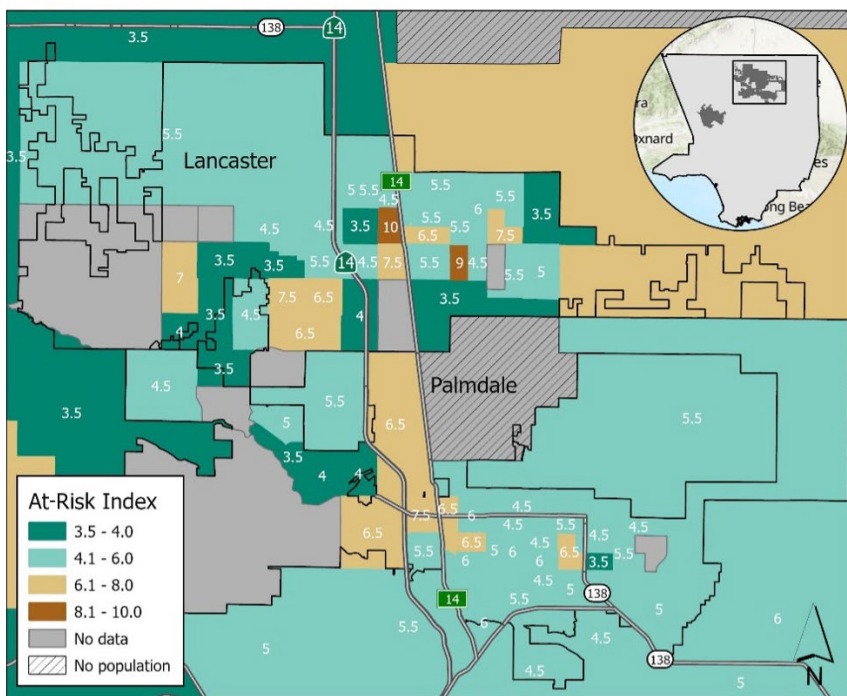


Figure 31. At-risk index of Lancaster and Palmdale (2020).



JOB AND EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

To better understand how employment opportunities align with the needs of opportunity youth, this study geocoded 361 verified businesses and nonprofits from Chamber of Commerce data and reviewed local education and workforce data, including Antelope Valley College programs and school district outcomes.

Job Growth

- Job growth in the Antelope Valley increased steadily between 2017 and 2022.
- Most of this growth was concentrated in five ZIP codes in Lancaster and Palmdale.
- While some areas experienced slower growth, the overall trend points to a region with expanding economic activity and employment opportunities.

Entry-Level Employment

The local economy is driven by industries that can provide accessible entry-level jobs for young adults.

- The most common sectors include health care and social assistance, retail, food service, construction, transportation and other service industries.
- Most businesses in the Antelope Valley are small employers; more than half have fewer than five employees.
- Several large employers—including Boeing, Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman—anchor the regional economy and support additional subcontractors and service industries.

Education

Education trends add important context:

- Antelope Valley College is the region's primary public higher education institution and offers programs with strong employment outcomes in health care, technology and vocational fields.
- Enrollment dropped significantly during the COVID-19 period before beginning to recover in recent years. This decline may reflect a period when more young adults were disconnected from both school and work.
- At the K–12 level, graduation rates and college-and-career readiness levels at the Antelope Valley Union High School District remain below state averages, suggesting that many students leave high school without strong pathways into employment or postsecondary education.

Education Needed to Work

This study mapped businesses by the level of education or training needed for entry-level positions.

- In Lancaster, about 43% of businesses offered jobs requiring minimal or vocational training, while most others required college degrees.
- Many businesses are located near higher-risk neighborhoods, though some eastern areas still have limited access to employers.



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

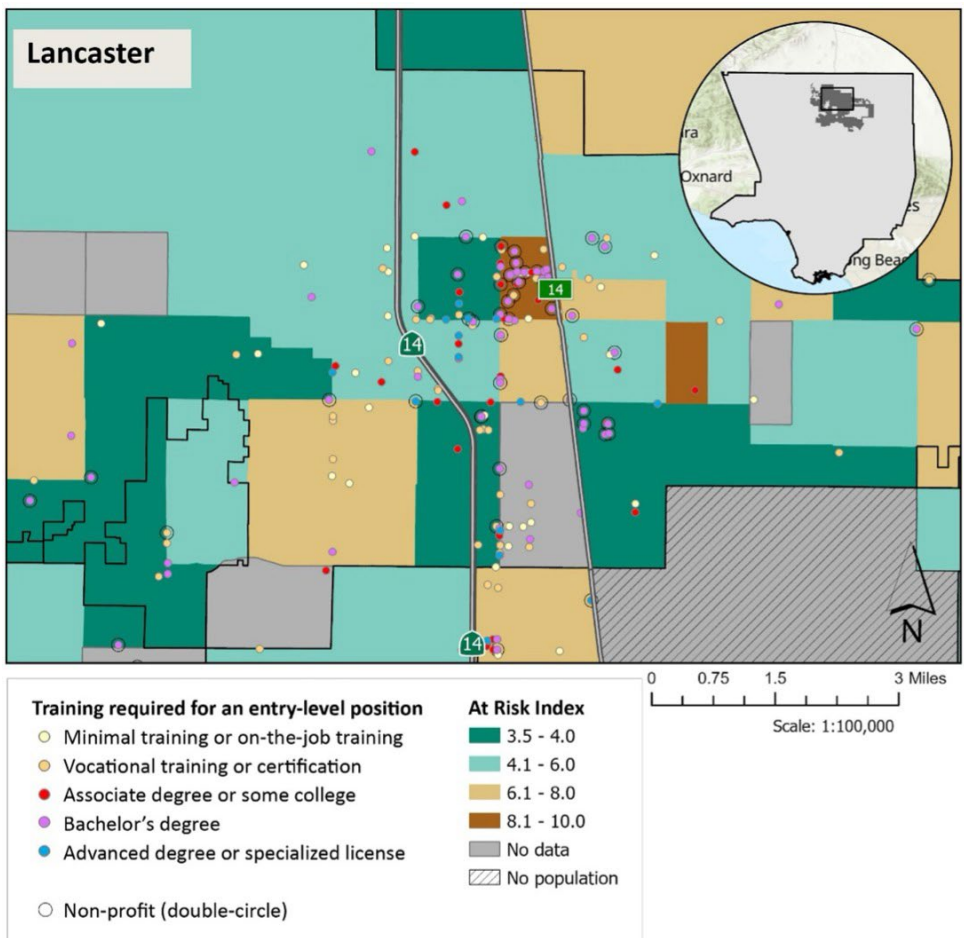


Figure 37. Locations of potential employers by level of training required for an entry-level position, superimposed on the risk index in Lancaster.

In Palmdale, about 51% of businesses offered jobs requiring minimal or vocational training.

Many businesses are located farther from higher-risk neighborhoods, which may create transportation barriers for youth. Some lower-training jobs are located closer to these areas, creating opportunities for workforce partnerships, targeted job placement and transportation support.

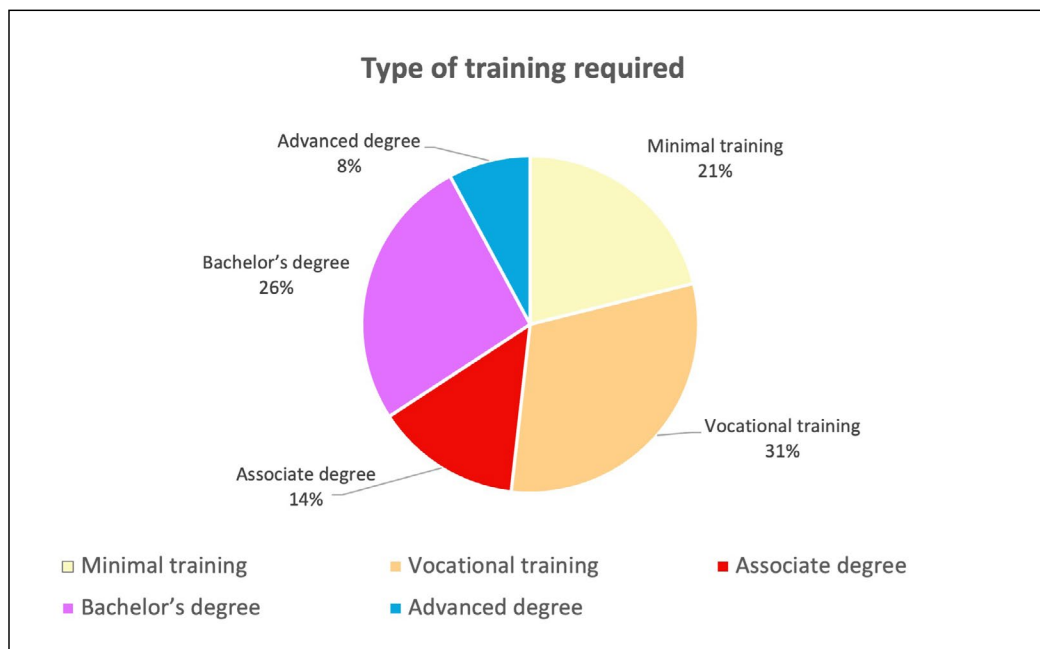


Figure 12. Percentage of jobs available in Palmdale by type of training required for an entry-level position.

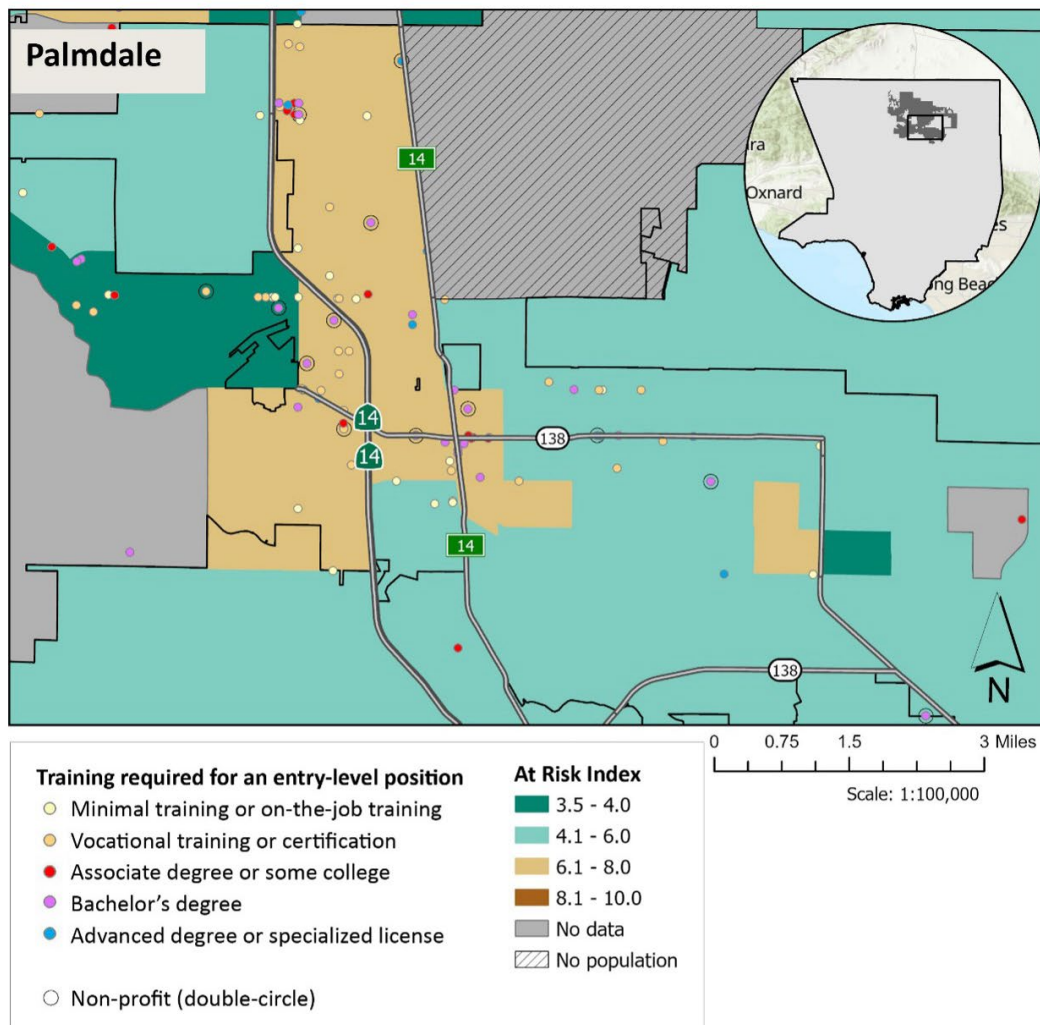


Figure 39. Location of potential employers by level of training required for an entry-level position, superimposed on the risk index in Palmdale.

Figures 40 and 41 compare the locations of businesses with concentrations of youth ages 15–19 and 20–24 across the Antelope Valley. Some youth population centers are located near employment corridors, while others remain more isolated. These spatial differences affect how easily young people can access jobs, internships and career pathways.

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

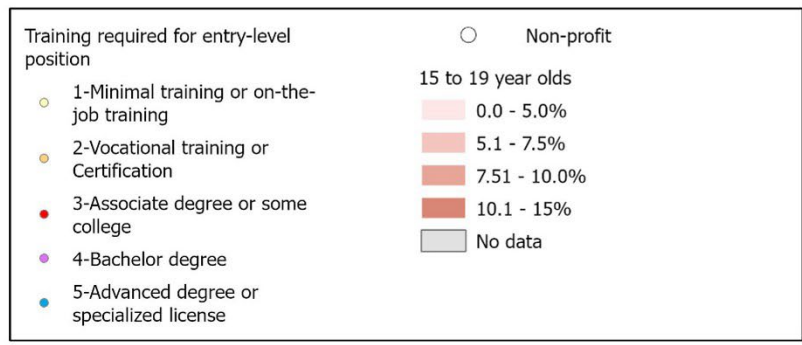
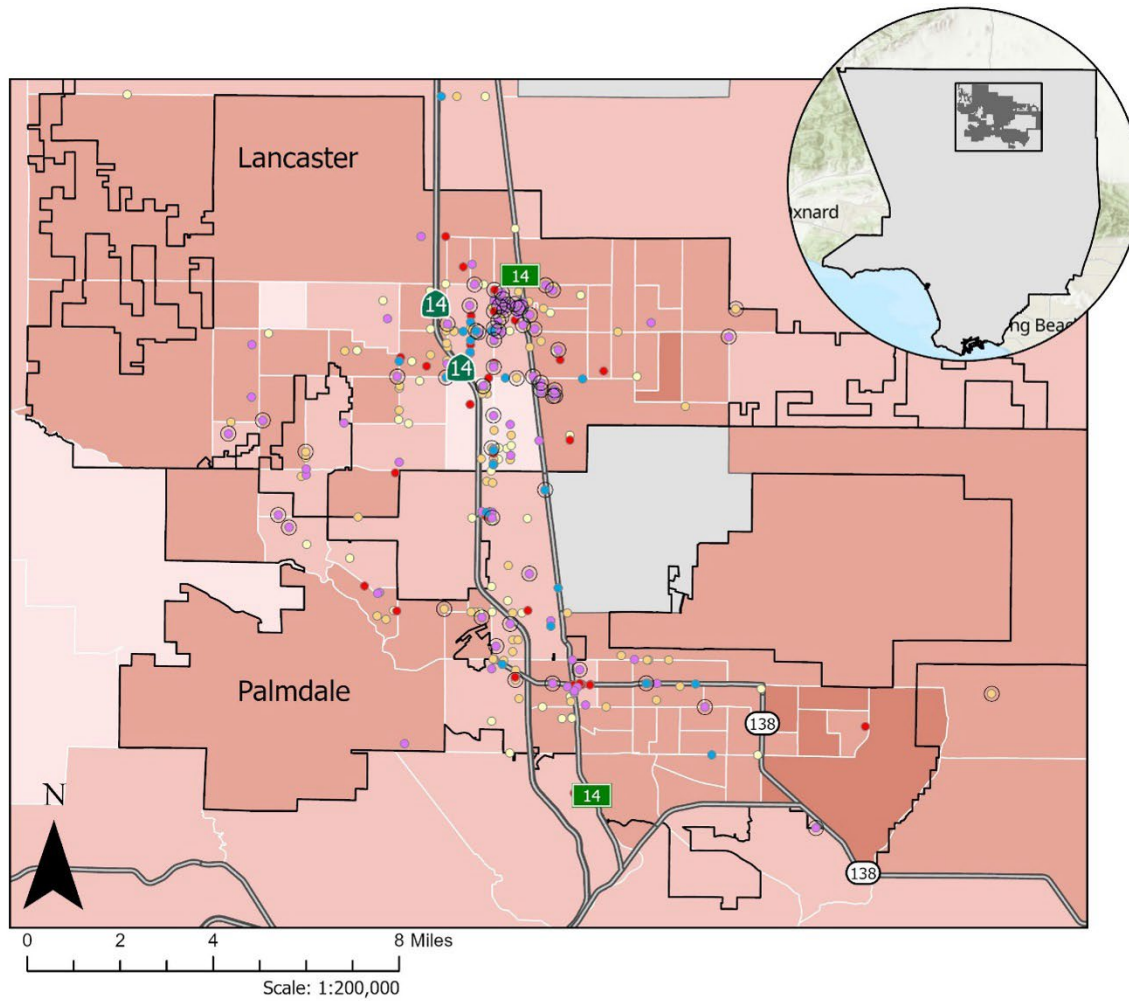
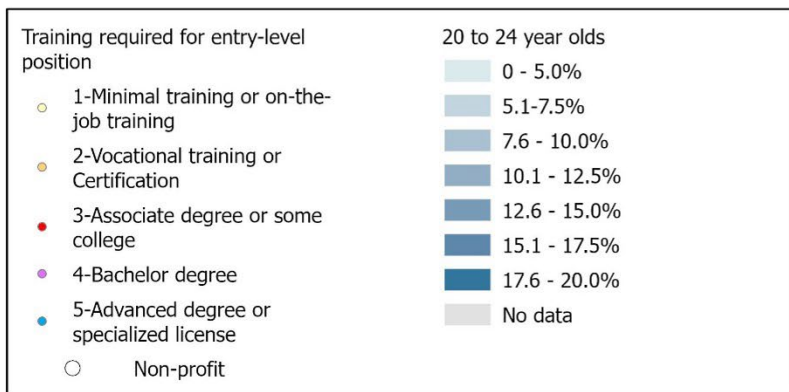
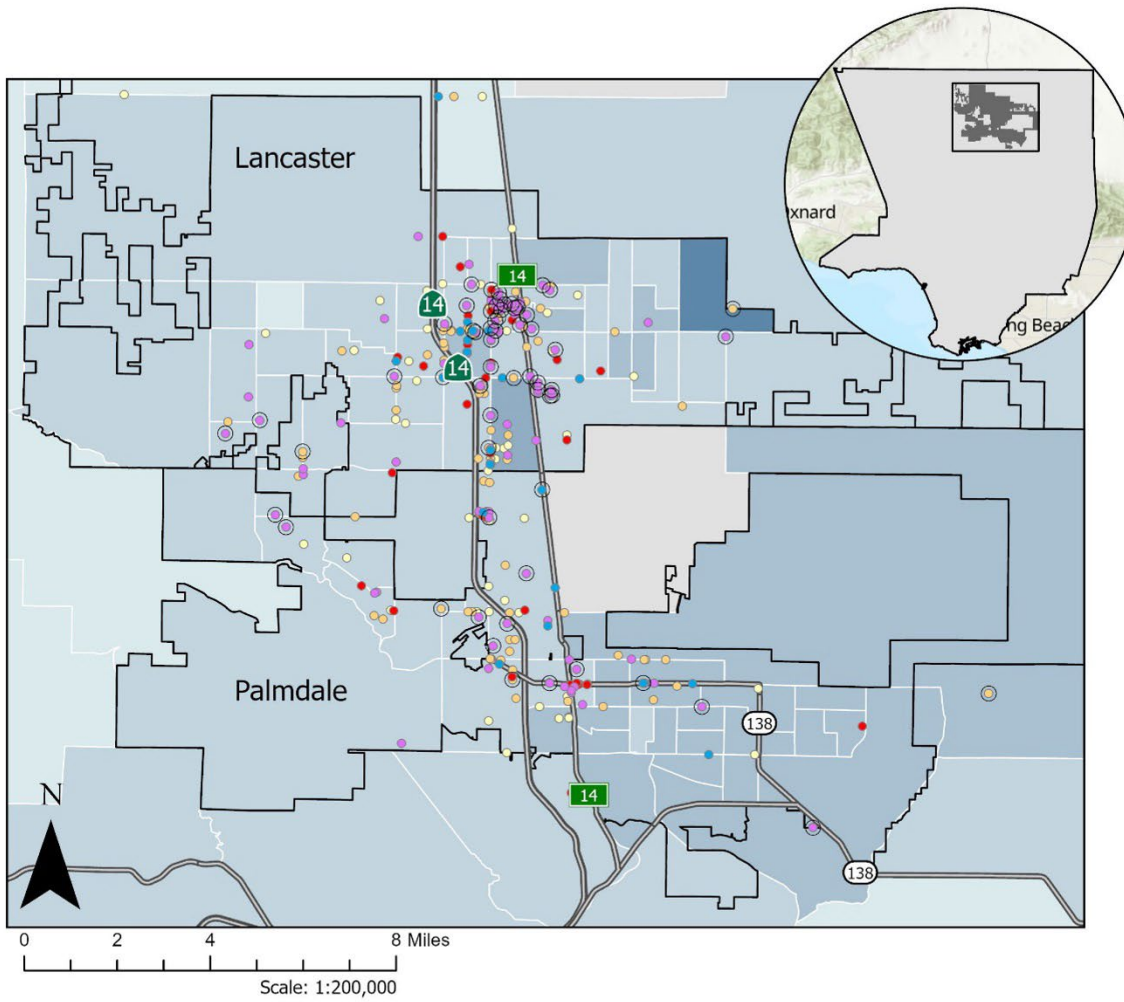


Figure 41. Location of businesses in the Antelope Valley with location of youth, 20 to 24 years old (male and female combined).



INTERVIEW & SURVEY THEMES

LOCATION & ISOLATION

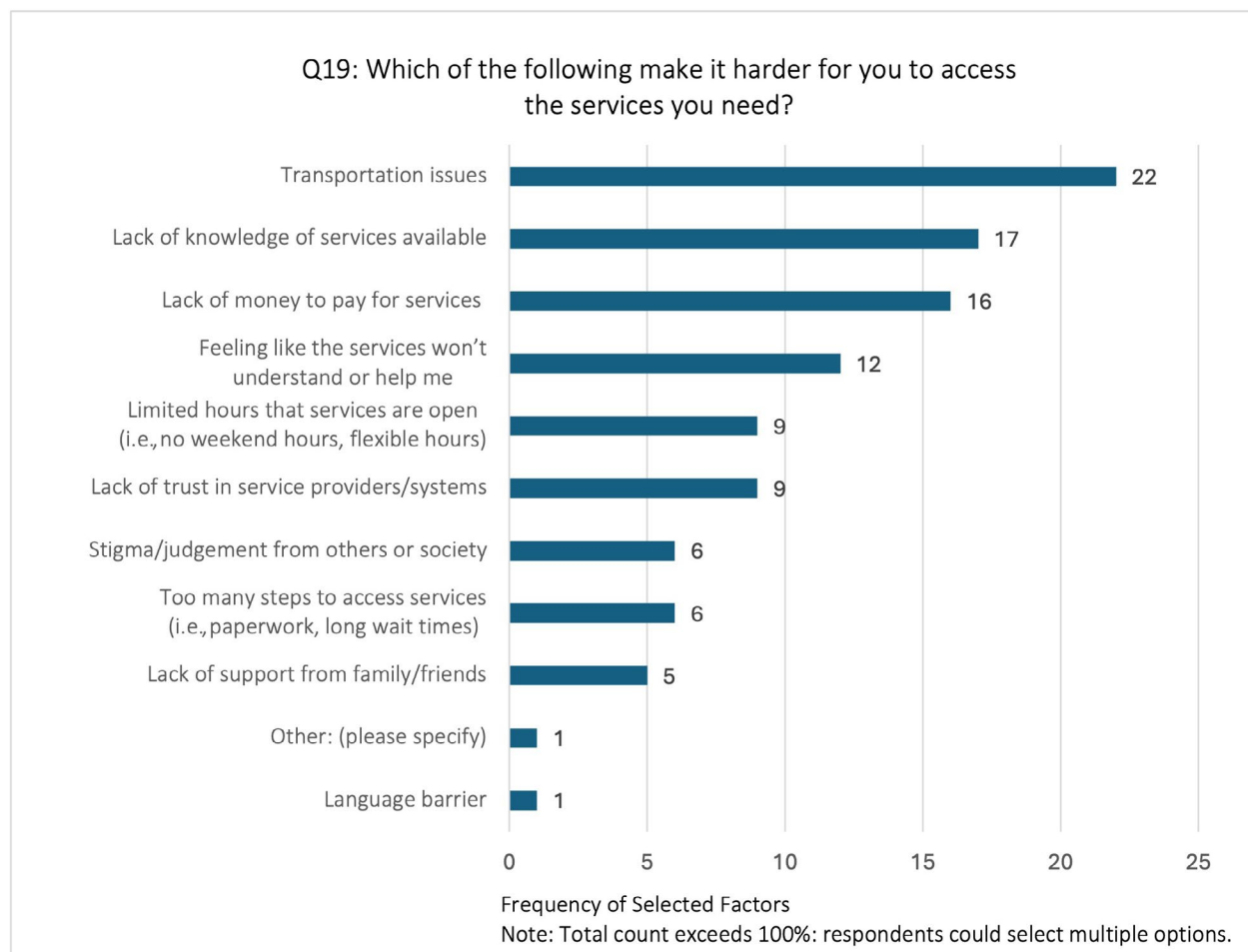
Service providers across the Antelope Valley consistently identified transportation and geographic isolation as major barriers for opportunity youth. The region's large size and limited public transit make it difficult for youth to reach schools, jobs, housing services, courts and other support programs. Travel to essential services can take one to two hours each way, reducing participation and making long-term engagement difficult.

Organizations frequently use funding to provide rides or coordinate transportation because public transit does not adequately meet local needs. However, these limited efforts cannot fully address demand. Families and caregivers also face long commutes, inflexible work schedules and unreliable transportation, further limiting youth access to educational and enrichment opportunities.

Safety concerns add another layer of difficulty. Service providers reported that some youth must cross multiple gang territories to access programs or services, creating fear and discouraging participation. Even when services are available, unsafe or difficult travel routes can prevent youth from using them.

Overall, transportation challenges in the Antelope Valley are a structural barrier, limiting access to education, employment, housing and supportive services and increasing the isolation of opportunity youth.

Figure E5. Youth survey responses identifying barriers to accessing services.





Quotes from organizations:

"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 five 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

Housing instability is one of the most serious challenges facing opportunity youth in the Antelope Valley. Both service providers and youth described a severe shortage of safe, affordable and age-appropriate housing, with many young people relying on family, shelters or temporary living arrangements to avoid homelessness.

Opportunity youth described major barriers to securing housing, including high rents, strict income requirements, competition from higher-income applicants and restrictions on pets or household size. Several participants explained that landlords often require tenants to earn two to three times the monthly rent, making stable housing difficult even for employed youth. Others discussed the emotional and financial strain of frequent moves, overcrowded living situations and supporting families that are struggling with medical issues or unstable income.

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

—Organization / service provider in the Antelope Valley

Quotes from youth:

"A lot of the renters... require, like, two to three times the income that you're bringing in... and a lot of renters don't allow pets."

"Whether it's even a small apartment or a studio... it's really hard to find affordable housing that would essentially be just a nice place to live in... the prices are always up."

"What would be beneficial is possibly helping, you know, like... looking for or maybe even applying for low-income housing."

"The problem that I see is not having enough financial power. Because if you do find a house that you're interested in... other people when they try to get the house, they'll probably outbid you."



Service providers raised concerns about policy changes affecting youth housing programs. Organizations reported that some federal grant requirements have created housing arrangements they consider unrealistic or unsafe, while uncertainty surrounding the possible expiration of the Emergency Housing Voucher (EHV) program in 2026 has increased stress for youth who depend on rental assistance.

■ Table E5. Current housing situations of youth 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
	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
Housing instability	(No Response)	3
Total		65

Housing insecurity is a larger community and economic problem—not caused by a lack of effort by young people. High housing costs, limited affordable options and gaps in youth-focused support make it difficult for many youth to achieve stable housing, even when they are working, attending school or actively trying to improve their situation.

“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.

—Organization / service provider in the Antelope Valley

Youth Profile: "Oreo"

Pseudonym chosen by the participant to maintain anonymity.

Male, age 18–25, living in Lancaster

Education: High school graduate; enrolled in college

Employment: Currently employed via a workforce development or youth employment program

Oreo's story highlights the challenges and resilience of former foster youth as he navigates higher education, employment, mental health and the transition to self-sufficiency.

How do you feel about your community? What are the strengths and weaknesses?

One of the weaknesses in our community is, honestly, aggression... the noncommunication and even that miscommunication or just a lack of sympathy and compassion... We just need more humanity.

What programs and services do you rely on?

After you're fostered, it's like, who's there for you? Not really nobody. I'd say the SILP (Supervised Independent Living Placement) and the Extended Foster Care Program. I turn to [job training center] to look for a job. And I also get EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) because... food prices nowadays... I don't think that the cost of living for anybody should be this crazy.

What would you change about the services provided?

I'd say the reaching out part and the actual commitment to it, because some programs... offer the help, but it's either you reach out or you don't get reached out back to.

Have you ever sought out professional help, like therapy or counseling?

It's mostly, like... just a quick visit and see what you feel and see how you can stop feeling that way... You can get emotion out... but in the long-term, you usually don't get that support.

Can you share a time when you felt proud about overcoming something?

The biggest accomplishment... for me as a foster kid is getting out, like, getting my own place... I can come in and out... I can go to the fridge now and just get whatever I want... I have my own day to plan out, you know, just self-reliance. I really love that.



WORKFORCE MISMATCH

Both youth and service providers described a major disconnect between the jobs available in the Antelope Valley and the opportunities accessible to young people. While the region has a strong industrial and aerospace economy, many of those jobs require advanced technical skills, prior experience, security clearances or other qualifications that opportunity youth often do not yet have. As a result, many young people compete for a small number of entry-level jobs or travel long distances to Los Angeles for work.

Youth repeatedly described an “experience paradox” where even entry-level jobs require previous work experience, making it difficult to get started. Several participants expressed frustration that degrees or certificates alone do not guarantee employment if applicants lack experience. Others questioned whether college was worth the financial stress and uncertainty, instead viewing trade programs, certifications and paid training opportunities as more realistic pathways to stable work. Survey results reflected these challenges, with more than half of respondents reporting being unemployed and many identifying job training and career counseling as their greatest need.

Service providers emphasized the importance of paid training pipelines, hands-on work experience and more flexible hiring practices that better match youth skill levels and life circumstances.

Quotes from youth:

“Even if you have that degree... it doesn't give you a chance because you don't have experience.”

Quotes from organizations:

“Many people have to compete very, very hard to get into the workforce.”

“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.”



Figure E4. Current employment status of survey respondents

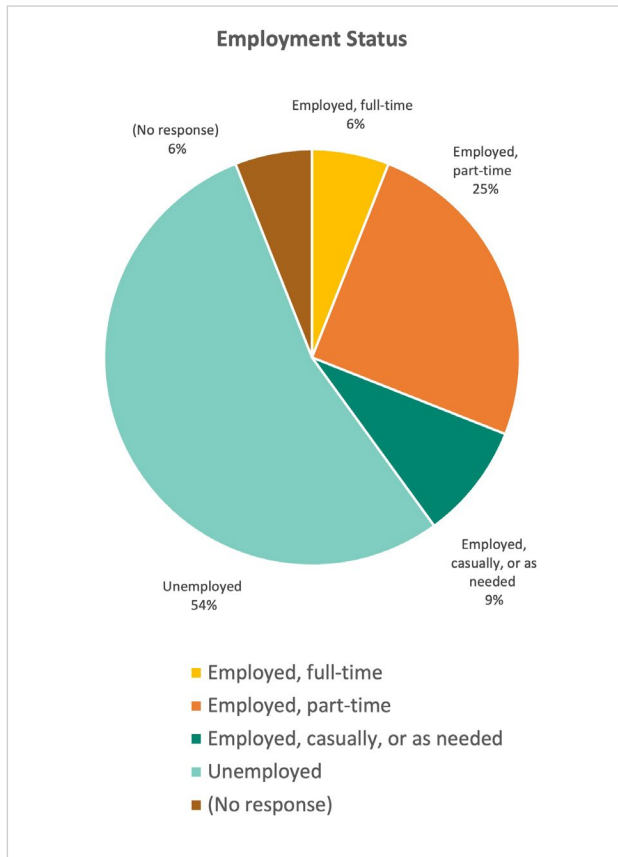


Figure 14. The highest level of education of survey respondents

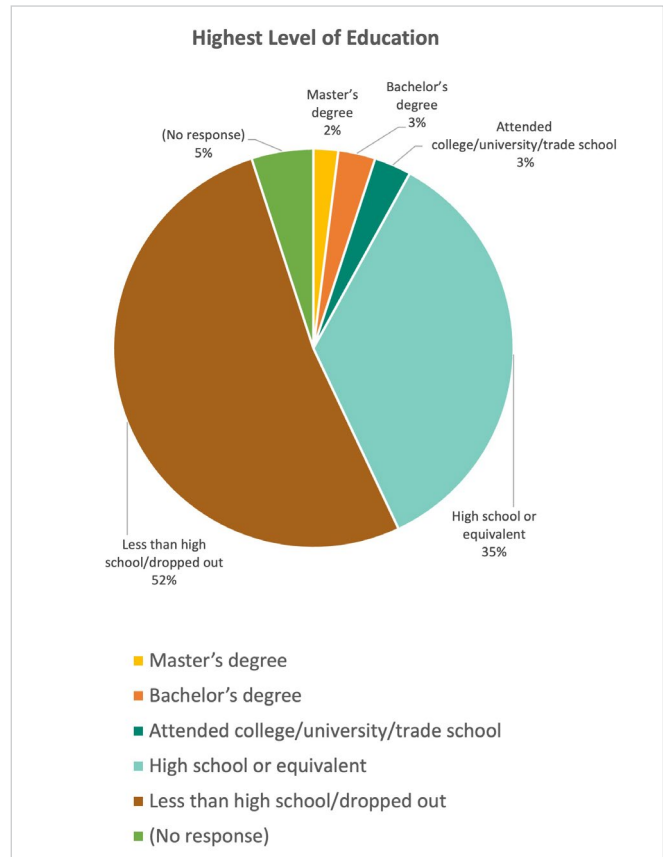
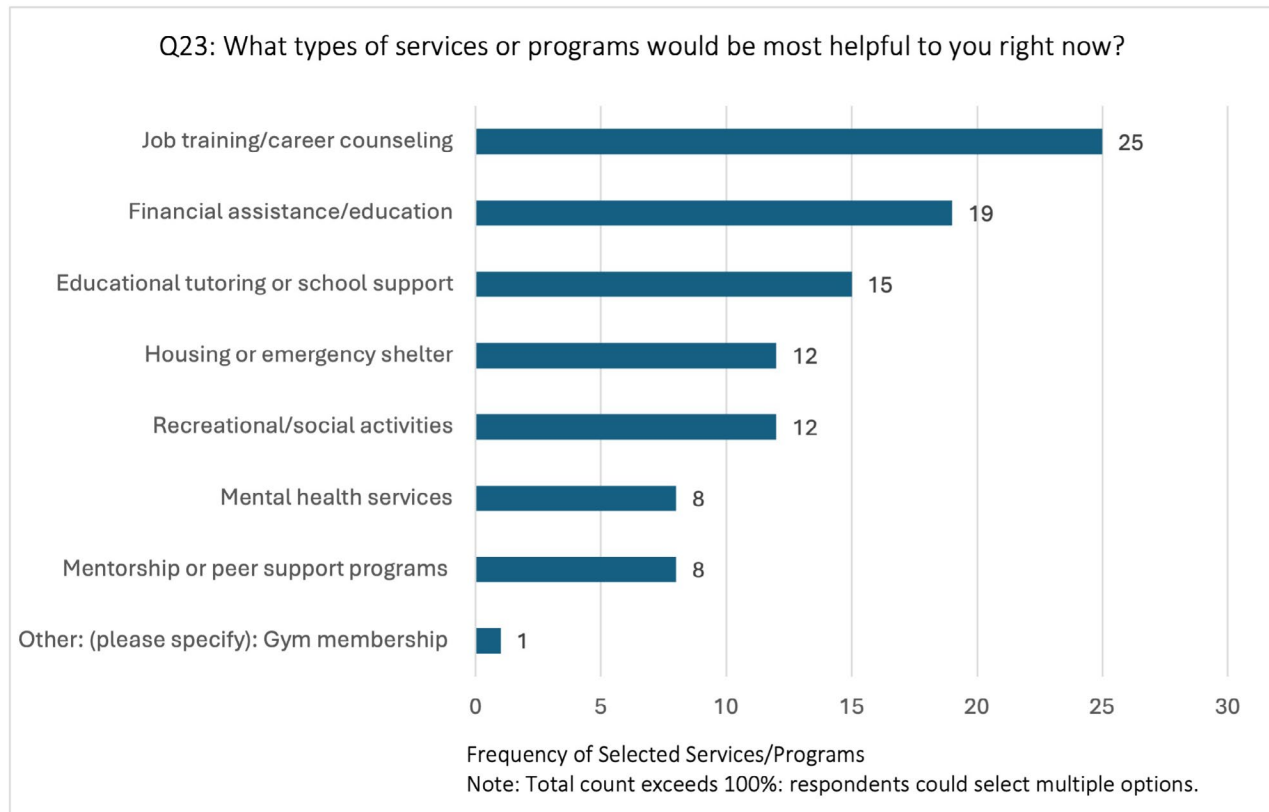


Figure E8. Survey responses identifying services or programs perceived as most helpful



Youth Profile: "Armando"

Pseudonym chosen by the participant to maintain anonymity.

Male, age 18–25, living in Palmdale

Education: Enrolled in a high school equivalency and vocational training program

Employment: Not currently employed

Armando is a young adult who is working toward greater independence, supported by his family as he navigates mental health challenges and searches for stable employment.

What are some of the challenges you have faced in finding jobs?

When there is some type of ad for... construction or something, even if it's in the area... the areas where you have to go work are upstate or all the way down in San Diego.... not really anything local around here.

How do you think mental health services are viewed by your peers or your community?

My dad was just really angry with me over the fact that I was failing school and that I wasn't motivated... 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.

How do you feel about your community? What are the strengths and weaknesses?

When I lived in [the San Fernando Valley], you knew all of your neighbors... where I live right now [in the Antelope Valley], I don't think I know more than maybe four or five of my neighbors.

What activities help you feel engaged in your community?

I like the events that they sometimes throw here [at my training program center]. Because a lot of times, the students here are parents and they'll sometimes bring their children. I feel like we can sometimes spread good values and positivity at some of these events and you're not just influencing us and the students here, but the next generation, too.

If you could change one thing about the services you receive, what would it be?

More information about it in schools, because... parents are working all day... far from home, so they don't really have too much time to be involved in the community and see what kind of resources might be out there... It might just be easier for the kids to learn what resources are out there.



FRAGMENTED MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Mental health challenges were a central topic for both youth and service providers in the Antelope Valley, but many described the local care system as difficult to access, inconsistent and hard to trust. Service providers reported long wait times for care—sometimes weeks or months—and limited capacity to support youth with serious mental health needs. Many organizations said they often act as referral navigators rather than providers of long-term care.

Youth generally viewed therapy positively and described counseling as helpful for coping, self-understanding and healing. However, stigma remains a major barrier, especially within some families where mental health struggles are dismissed as weakness, laziness or “just a phase.” Several youth also shared negative experiences with therapy, including unprofessional providers, referrals that led nowhere and concerns about affordability.

Trust and safety were recurring concerns. Some youth feared opening up because mandatory reporting rules could trigger system involvement or major disruptions in their lives. Others said they wanted spaces where they could speak honestly without feeling judged or immediately escalated into crisis systems. In response to service gaps, some organizations have developed peer-support programs, respite services and school-based mental health clubs to provide earlier and more approachable support. Overall, findings suggest that improving youth mental health requires not only more services, but also more trusted, youth-centered and accessible care.

Quotes from youth:

"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."

"I would say... my family... don't 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."

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

"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."

Quotes from organizations:

"[We need] capacity building trainings... like, trauma-informed care, mental health, first aid, mindfulness."

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

"At the hospital... we get no follow up, most of the time, for people that are in severe crisis."

"Another challenge is having a lot of volunteer programs due to limited funding [for paid staff positions]. When you're bringing volunteers in from the community, then they are also dealing with mental health in their family member issues that may prevent them from being as focused on their volunteer work."

SERVICEABILITY OVER ACCESSIBILITY

Both youth and service providers described a service system that hinders effective support for opportunity youth, especially those with greater needs. Staffing shortages, high turnover, fragmented funding and outcome-driven performance measures place pressure on programs to prioritize youth who are easiest to serve and most likely to achieve short-term goals, such as employment or school enrollment. Young people facing more complex challenges—including housing instability, mental health needs or experiences in foster care or the justice system—often require more intensive support than programs are able to provide. As a result, youth experience long wait times, repeated referrals, inconsistent follow-up or disengagement from services altogether.

Youth generally valued workforce and social service programs as entry points, but many described frustration with delayed communication, confusing processes and broken promises. Many youth respondents rated the available services as only moderately effective or less.

A recurring theme was that responsiveness signals respect. Youth often interpreted inconsistent communication and support as evidence that they were not valued. At the same time, providers acknowledged that limited resources make it difficult to offer the level of engagement many youth need. Service gaps leave some opportunity youth disconnected from support even when services technically exist.

Quotes from organizations:

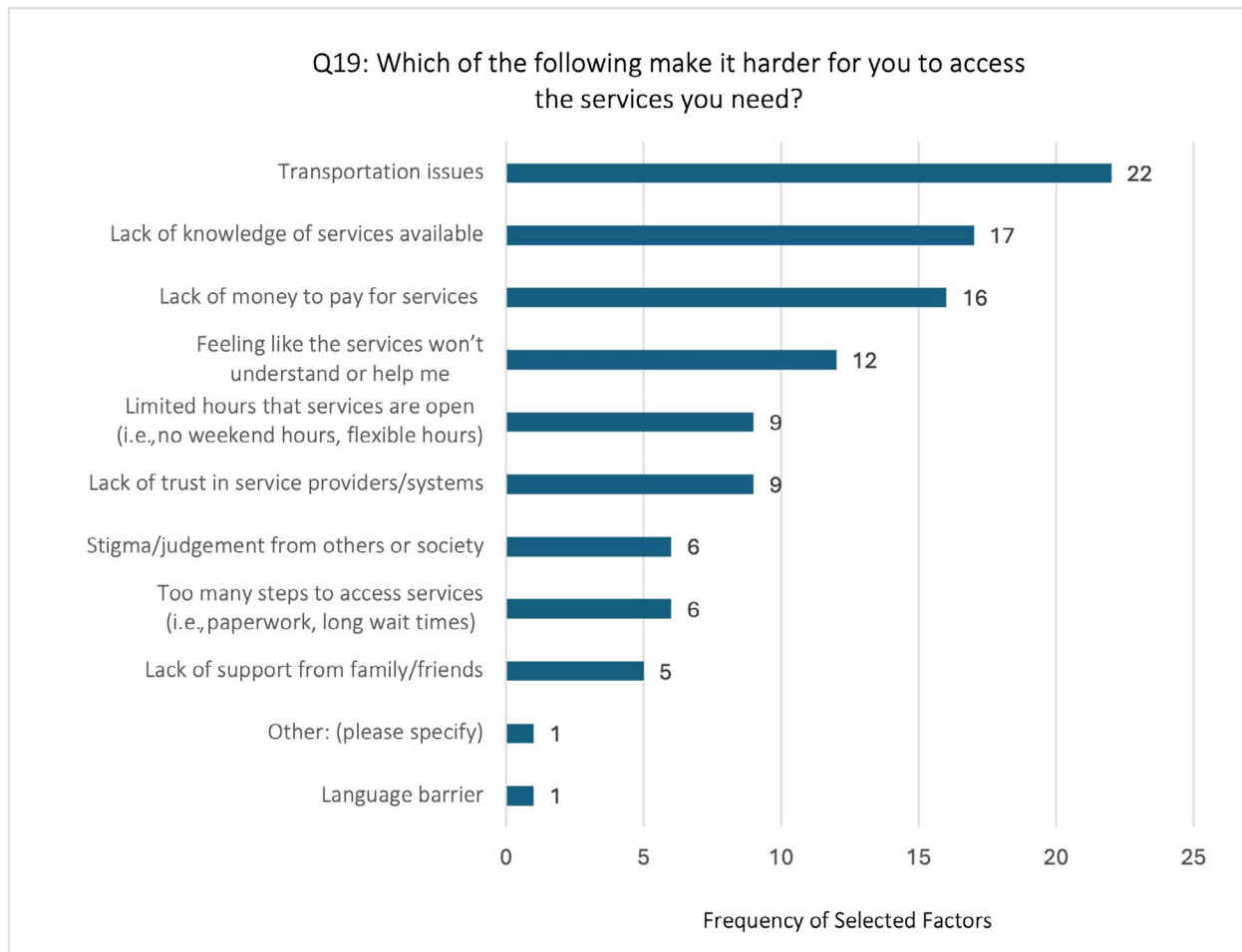
"Even following up with these referrals, it is difficult to get people engaged... And I have been told many times that I am not a case manager."

"There is no continuity, no consistency... Mental health support providers... come and go."

"We're able to put band-aids on some of those kinds of things, but grants... don't last forever."



Figure 48. Survey responses identifying barriers to accessing services.
 Note: Total count exceeds 100%: respondents could select multiple options.



Quotes from youth:

"I applied... didn't get a callback for... months. They said, 'next week,' over and over again. It took, like... half a year just for me to actually get a job that, sadly, wasn't even permanent."

—Peter

"There's a lot of fakeness: greeted with a smile but not genuine help."

—Oreo

**names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants*

Youth Profile: "Mocha"

Pseudonym chosen by the participant to maintain anonymity.

Female, age 18–25, living in Lancaster

Education: High school diploma or GED is undetermined; not currently enrolled in school

Employment: Not currently employed

Mocha is a young mother, overcoming financial and personal challenges while striving to build a stable future for her son.

What are your dreams for the future?

My dreams for the future is to become a caregiver or to work within the social services... It's something I'm very passionate about.

Share a time when you've felt proud of overcoming something.

One of the major accomplishments is getting out of the baby blues stage—post-partum depression. I feel like my son made me a better person and is continuing to make me a better person.

What programs and services do you turn to for help?

I turn to [a career center] for help... they've helped me a lot. I also get... EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) for my son... This is my first baby, so I wanted to say that I was able to do it on my own, but... I was, like, struggling and... I was skipping meals to put food... for my baby... and that's why I get the help that I get.

What other services would be beneficial for you?

Help finding... low-income housing—not a space that's... asking for three times the rent. And places that allow pets.

On mental health services:

Sometimes getting advice is good, but I just want somebody that listens sometimes.

How do you feel about your community?

I got physically attacked while I was eight months pregnant with my son... I can name is a lot of instances where, you know... like, a lot of aggression... What we need is more humanity.



COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS, SUPPORT & BELONGING

Youth and service providers emphasized the importance of safe, welcoming spaces where young people can build relationships and find support. Many interviewees described the Antelope Valley as socially fragmented, with limited opportunities to interact with neighbors or participate in community life. Concerns about safety and aggression discouraged engagement and contributed to feelings of disconnection.

At the same time, youth identified schools, sports, churches, volunteer activities, nonprofit programs and community events as important sources of belonging. These spaces provide them with opportunities to build friendships, receive support from trusted adults, develop leadership skills and contribute to something larger than themselves. Several participants said community is not defined by geography, but by shared activities, relationships and a sense of purpose. Many also valued opportunities to mentor younger children and volunteer within their communities.

Service providers echoed these findings, pointing to a shortage of youth shelters, drop-in centers and youth-focused gathering places. Together, the findings suggest that belonging is built through meaningful connections and opportunities to participate. Expanding youth-friendly spaces, community hubs, leadership opportunities and programs that bring young people together could help reduce isolation, strengthen social bonds and encourage greater investment in the future of the Antelope Valley.

Quotes from organizations:

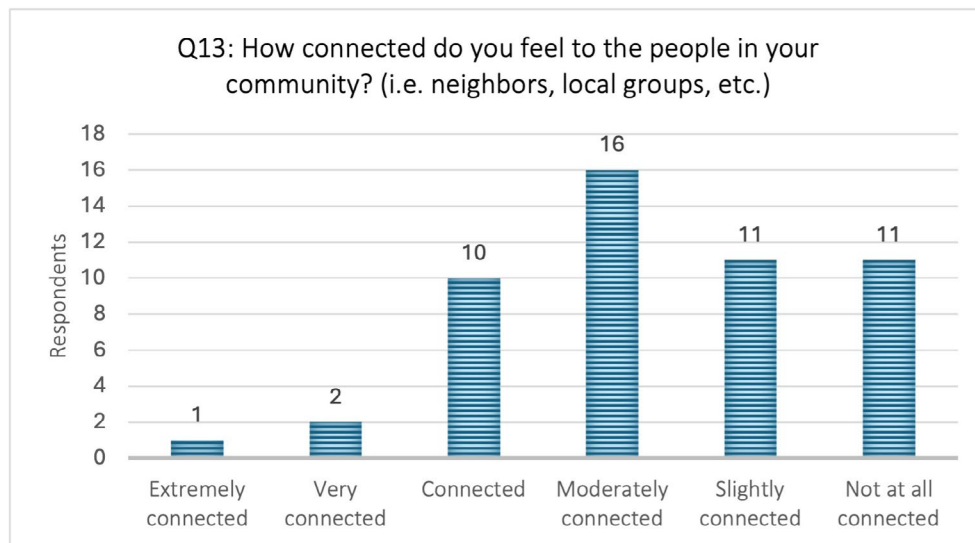
"We don't have any... 24-hour youth drop-in centers or shelters. So, if a kid needs something and they can't get their needs met, then of course they're not going to feel like they belong."

"There's not really a lot of stuff for kids to do... they end up getting in trouble because they're bored."

"They [the youth] are like, 'At 18, I'm leaving'... they don't feel like they should stay here and reinvest into their community."



Figure 46. Youth participants' sense of community connection



Quotes from youth:

"One of the weaknesses [about my community]—aggression... a look turns into an argument... We need more humanity."

—Oreo

"I've never really participated in a community gathering before until I came to [this job training program]."

—Luke

"I like the events that they sometimes throw here... we can spread good values and positivity... not just to the students here, but to the next generation, too."

—Armando

*names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants

Youth Profile: Peter

Pseudonym chosen by the participant to maintain anonymity.

Male, age 18–25, living in Lancaster

Education: High school graduate; not currently enrolled in college or a training program

Employment: Not currently employed.

Peter is a young father striving to build a stable future for his child while navigating unemployment, housing affordability challenges and the difficult transition from adolescence into adulthood.

What are some of the challenges you face when looking for work?

Even that starting job... need[s] to have a minimum of a year or two... I am trying to start my life and yet I need experience for something that I'm trying to get experience with.

If you could change one thing about the services you receive, what would it be?

The kind of service I'd like to change where it's immediate and... the communication is a lot better. Rather than just... leaving me in the dark and not letting me know anything.

What changes would you like to see in the community?

The decrease in criminal activity or, rather, the idolization of said criminal activity, where can we at least go and actually feel comfortable and not worry about either getting mugged or... meeting someone who is just far too aggressive for no apparent reason whatsoever.

Can you share a time when you felt really proud about overcoming something?

Getting a [driver's] license was such an accomplishment for me... What really made me feel proud... it was for the sake of my son. And that now kind of pushes me to anything I want to go to, whether it's going back to school, getting a job or pursuing any other like dreams that I have... it's always, "this is for my son."



Organization 1

This anonymous community-based organization serves opportunity youth and young adults (ages 16–24) in the Antelope Valley through domestic violence prevention, mentorship, workforce readiness and personal development programming. The organization uses a trauma-informed, relationship-based approach that combines mentorship, internships, leadership development, financial literacy and career exploration to support youth impacted by domestic violence, foster care involvement, economic hardship and disconnection from school or work.

KEY THEMES

Geographic Isolation and Limited Resources

- Staff described the Antelope Valley as a resource-scarce region where transportation barriers, long travel distances and limited local services constrain access to opportunities and support.
- Limited housing and shelter options often force youth to choose between maintaining stable housing and remaining connected to school, work and community supports.

Trauma, Mental Health and Youth Stability

- Many youth experience trauma related to domestic violence, foster care involvement, unstable housing and other adverse life experiences.
- Staff emphasized the need for trauma-informed interventions that address underlying causes of distress and prioritize healing over punitive responses.

Workforce Development and Opportunity Gaps

- Local employment opportunities are often concentrated in entry-level service industries, while career-track positions require skills and credentials that many opportunity youth lack access to.
- The organization's internship and workforce readiness programs help youth build soft skills, financial literacy, technology skills and career awareness.

Supportive Relationships and Youth Empowerment

- Inconsistent adult support was identified as a major barrier, with many youth lacking reliable mentors, guardians or advocates.
- Through mentorship and cohort-based programming, the organization fosters trusted relationships that promote confidence, leadership development and long-term engagement.



Organization 2

This anonymous county-based organization serves justice-impacted adults and opportunity youth through diversion, reentry, workforce development, housing support and case management services. Using a continuum-of-care approach, the organization connects individuals to immediate needs such as transportation, shelter, employment support, legal aid and behavioral health referrals while providing longer-term wraparound services designed to promote stability and reduce recidivism.

KEY THEMES

Access Barriers and Resource Navigation

- Geographic distance, limited transportation infrastructure and a shortage of local service providers create significant barriers for justice-impacted youth and adults in the Antelope Valley.
- The organization's drop-in centers, call centers and navigation services serve as critical access points, helping individuals connect to resources and navigate complex systems of care.

Housing Stability and Basic Needs

- Staff identified emergency, interim and permanent supportive housing as critical needs, with ongoing shortages of long-term housing options in the region.
- Housing assistance is paired with wraparound services that address employment, food security, clothing, transportation and other stabilization needs.

Trauma-Informed Support and Behavioral Health

- Many participants have experienced trauma, incarceration, foster care involvement or other forms of instability that affect their well-being and long-term success.
- The organization emphasizes trauma-informed care, de-escalation practices and behavioral health support through direct services and referrals.

Workforce Development and Economic Mobility

- Staff highlighted the need for employment opportunities that provide sustainable wages and long-term career growth rather than unstable, low-wage work.
- Workforce programs focus on vocational training and emerging career pathways, including construction, wildland firefighting, and regional workforce opportunities tied to future economic development.

Serving Justice-Impacted and Transition-Age Youth

- Although the organization primarily serves adults, many participants fall within the opportunity youth age range and require specialized support during critical transition periods.
- Programs provide mentorship, intensive case management, workforce development, housing navigation and coordinated wraparound services to support long-term stability and self-sufficiency.



Organization 3

This anonymous organization is a community-based charter and youth development program serving opportunity youth ages 16–29 in the Antelope Valley. The organization provides alternative education, workforce development, leadership training and supportive services for youth who have experienced school disconnection, poverty, housing instability or involvement with the justice system. Through partnerships with local agencies and community organizations, it combines high school completion, career pathway training, housing support, case management and community engagement to address the broader needs of young people.

KEY THEMES

Housing Instability and Basic Needs

- Housing instability and homelessness were identified as significant barriers for many youth, prompting the organization to provide transitional housing, emergency shelter and emerging tiny-home initiatives.
- The organization integrates housing support with education and workforce programming, including opportunities for youth to participate in community housing construction projects.

Geographic Isolation and Limited Access

- Transportation challenges and the distance from resources, employment and educational opportunities contribute to youth isolation and limit participation in programs and services.
- Staff noted that limited recreational spaces and community activities can further reduce opportunities for youth engagement and connection.

Mental Health and Holistic Support

- Many youth experience chronic stress related to poverty, housing instability, family responsibilities and other life challenges.
- The organization addresses these needs through case management, mentorship, life-skills training and individualized social-emotional support.

Workforce Development and Career Pathways

- Limited local career opportunities often require youth to seek employment outside the Antelope Valley, while many available jobs are concentrated in entry-level industries.
- The organization seeks to connect youth to longer-term career pathways through training in fields such as construction, advanced manufacturing, culinary arts and other emerging industries.

Serving Highly Vulnerable Youth

- The organization primarily serves youth facing multiple barriers, including school disconnection, homelessness, parenting responsibilities and justice-system involvement.
- Staff emphasized a "whole person" approach that combines education, workforce training, housing support, leadership development and case management to promote long-term stability and success.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



1. Stabilize Youth Housing as a Primary Intervention

Unstable housing is the biggest obstacle to success in other areas of life. Without a safe place to live, many youth struggled to keep jobs, stay in school or access healthcare and mental health services. Stable housing gives young people the foundation they need to move forward.

- Treat stable housing as a basic need, not something youth have to earn through employment or program participation.
- Expand youth-specific, non-congregate options that reflect real needs (e.g., young parents, pets, varied households)
- Preserve and extend housing support, including renewing or replacing the emergency housing voucher program and creating smoother transitions for youth exiting systems.
- Use state-level stopgaps (e.g., bridge subsidies) to prevent displacement when federal support is uncertain.
- Reform funding and compliance rules to give providers flexibility to prioritize safety, trauma-informed care and appropriate placements.



2. Invest in Transportation as Workforce and Service Infrastructure

Service providers and youth emphasized that limited transportation in the region makes it harder for youth to reach jobs, school, housing and services, reducing the effectiveness of other support programs.

- Cover transportation costs—such as bus passes, ride-share programs and shuttle services—through workforce, housing and support-service funding.
- Improve transit connections between high-need neighborhoods and key destinations like job centers, colleges, courts, housing programs and healthcare services.
- Expand flexible transportation options, including increased route frequency and demand-responsive transit designed around youth schedules.
- Pair transportation improvements with safe-passage strategies in areas affected by violence or gang activity, including escorts and community-based safety support.



3. Expand Paid Training and Career Pathways

Both quantitative and qualitative data show that job growth alone does not create opportunity when hiring requirements, lack of experience and screening practices continue to exclude opportunity youth from stable employment.

- Shift workforce-funding metrics from short-term job placement to long-term outcomes such as retention, wage growth and transitions into permanent employment.
- Expand investment in paid workforce pathways tied to regional industries, including EMS, construction, career technical education and wildland firefighting.
- Ensure training and internship programs provide paid participation so youth can support themselves while gaining experience.
- Use local government contracts and procurement policies to encourage paid internships, apprenticeships and inclusive hiring practices for opportunity youth, especially those impacted by foster care or the justice system.



4. Expand Youth-Friendly Mental Health Support

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 sustain engagement.

- Expand peer-led, low-barrier mental health services such as peer respite and brief-care programs through Medi-Cal and MHSA funding.
- Increase access to fast, community-based support that helps prevent crises before they escalate.
- Require clear communication about mandatory reporting rules so youth better understand confidentiality and feel safer seeking help.
- Train providers to use listening-first, trust-building approaches that prioritize consent and de-escalation.
- Invest in school- and community-based prevention programs, including wellness clubs, family education and youth-led mental health initiatives.



5. Address “Most Servable” Bias Through Flexible Funding Design

Programs often prioritize youth who are easiest to serve, while those with more complex needs struggle to access consistent support.

- Design funding systems that allow longer timelines and more intensive support for youth with higher needs.
- Recognize stabilization and continued engagement—not just quick job placement or program completion—as meaningful outcomes.
- Allow programs to combine navigation and light case management services so youth receive more consistent support.
- Reduce dependence on short-term grants that disrupt staffing, relationships and services.
- Increase multiyear funding commitments to improve program stability, staff retention and long-term impact.



6. Invest in Youth Spaces and Community Connections

Youth-friendly spaces help young people build connections, reduce isolation and feel more invested in their communities.

- Invest in welcoming, youth-friendly spaces—such as drop-in centers, shelters and community hubs—in high-need neighborhoods, with a focus on serving low-income youth and youth of color.
- Create spaces that combine job support, wellness services and community-building activities in one location.
- Expand programs focused on leadership, volunteering, mentorship and intergenerational connection.
- Pay youth for participating in planning, peer leadership and community decision-making roles.

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