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Howard County Youth Engagement Strategy (YES!) Council

Evaluation of Howard County Youth Engagement Programs

Final Report



UNIVERSITY OF
BALTIMORE

Schaefer Center for
Public Policy

**Evaluation of Howard County
Youth Engagement Programs**

Final Report

**Howard County
Youth Engagement Strategy (YES!) Council**

Submitted by

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The Schaefer Center offers program evaluation, policy analysis, survey research, strategic planning, workload studies, opinion research, management consulting, and professional development services. It is through the Schaefer Center that The University of Baltimore and the College of Public Affairs meet a central component of the University's mission of applied research and public service to the Baltimore metropolitan area and to the state of Maryland.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	1
Chapter 1: Project Overview	6
Chapter 2: Engagement Logic Model	8
Inputs	8
Activities	10
Outputs	10
Outcomes	11
Conclusion	12
Chapter 3: Literature Review	13
Introduction	13
Trauma-Informed Care and Behavioral Health Supports	14
Violence Prevention Approaches	15
Adult-Youth Relationships	17
Positive Youth Development	18
Engaging Youth as Stakeholders in Program Design and Delivery	19
Conclusion	20
Chapter 4: Additional Resources for Engaging Howard County Youth	22
Academic Support	23
Arts/Cultural Enrichment.....	24
Civic Engagement & Volunteer Opportunities	26
Environmental Education & Sustainability	28
Mentorship, Health, & Wellness	30
Sports & Athletics	32
STEM Programs.....	34
Targeted Support Services.....	35
Work Readiness & Entrepreneurship	36
Chapter 5: Program and Performance Data	38
YEP! Grants	38
HOCO STRIVES	47
Chapter 6: Focus Groups of Youth and Providers	50

Chapter 7: Gap Analysis..... 54
Chapter 8: Conclusion..... 60
Appendix A: Literature Review References..... 61
Appendix B: Youth Focus Group Guide 64
Appendix C: Provider Focus Group Guide 70

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Logic Model for Howard County Youth Engagement Activities	9
Figure 2: Programmatic Focus Areas of YEP! Grantees, FY23–FY25	39
Figure 3: Quarterly Trends in Participants Served by YEP! Grantees, FY23–FY25	39
Figure 4: Types of Programs, Initiatives, and Efforts Supported by YEP! Grantees, FY23-FY25 ...	42
Figure 5: Types of Upcoming Programs and Initiatives for YEP! Grantees, FY23-FY25	43
Figure 6: Types of Partner Organizations in YEP!-Funded Programming, FY23-FY25	44
Figure 7: Reported Approaches to Supporting Mental Health and Social-Emotional Learning in YEP!-Funded Programs, FY23-FY25	45
Figure 8: Number of YEP! Grantees Reporting Use of Each Method to Measure Success and Outcomes, FY23-FY25	46
Figure 9: Number of YEP! Grantees Reporting Metrics Related to Each Category, FY23-FY25....	47
Figure 10: Number of HoCo STRIVES Grantees and Individuals Served, FY23–FY25.....	48
Figure 11: Programmatic Focus Areas of HoCo STRIVES Grantees, FY23–FY25.....	48
Figure 12: Number of HoCo STRIVES Grantees Reporting Metrics Related to Each Category, FY23-FY25	49

TABLE OF TABLES

Table 1: Project Overview	7
Table 2: Percentage of Funded Organizations Serving Each Youth Age Group, FY23-FY25	40
Table 3: YEP! Grantee Participants Served and Percentage of Funded Programs by Service Area, FY23-FY25	41
Table 4: Gap Analysis Overview	54

Howard County Evaluation of Youth Engagement Programs – Phase 2

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Howard County has made recent investments in youth engagement, education, and violence prevention through three key initiatives: Howard County Strategies to Reach an Inclusive Vision and Equitable Solutions (HoCo STRIVES), Youth Engagement Programming (YEP!) Grants, and the Youth Engagement Strategies (YES!) Council. In support of the work of the YES Council, the Howard County government engaged the Schaefer Center for Public Policy (Schaefer Center) at The University of Baltimore to conduct an evaluation of these initiatives and identify existing gaps in service and opportunities to strengthen youth engagement across the County.

This evaluation was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 focused on laying the groundwork for the evaluation by conducting an initial literature review, developing a draft logic model and data collection instruments needed for a comprehensive assessment, and identifying additional resources available to engage youth in Howard County. Phase 2 completed the evaluation, including expanding and finalizing the literature review, finalizing the logic model, updating and finalizing a catalog of youth-serving programs in Howard County, full data collection and analysis of focus group and program and performance data, and a gap analysis. This report summarizes progress on Phase 2.

FINDINGS

Below, main findings and/or key takeaways from each chapter are summarized.

LOGIC MODEL

The Schaefer Center developed a comprehensive logic model of Howard County's current youth engagement initiatives – including HoCo STRIVES, YEP! Grants, and the YES! Council – providing a visual map linking program inputs, activities, outputs, and intended outcomes.

The logic model shows that Howard County leverages substantial resources including established youth engagement programs, extensive community partnerships, a top-performing education system, dedicated funding, and data-driven decision-making capabilities to deliver varied activities such as educational support and mentoring, out-of-school programming, health and wellness services (including mental health and substance abuse programs), workforce preparation and development, programs for justice-involved youth, social-emotional learning,

and access to essential resources addressing childcare, transportation, and food insecurity, alongside grant programs, and community outreach.

The direct outputs of these efforts include the number of youth participants, engagement activities conducted, new services launched, and grants awarded. These outputs are expected to lead to initial outcomes (within five years) such as improved high school completion rates, successful college and career transitions, reduced youth crime, increased employment, and strengthened cross-sector partnerships, and longer-term outcomes (more than five years) including youth remaining in or returning to Howard County, higher income and employment rates among residents, and improved physical and mental health as adults.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The YES! Council’s establishing Executive Order tasked it with recommending strategies to prevent youth violence and promote positive engagement, particularly among disengaged or underserved students. To support this work, the Schaefer Center conducted a literature review of post-2020 research on youth engagement, education, and violence prevention efforts implemented across the United States. Key insights from this research are listed below.

- **Trauma-informed Care and Behavioral Health:** Exposure to community violence among adolescents can have lasting effects on emotional regulation, social functioning, and school engagement. Mental health support within free or low-cost out-of-school programs can increase access to mental health care and enhance mental health literacy. Given their direct influence on youth, afterschool staff should receive education in complex trauma and the effects of community violence exposure.
- **Violence Prevention Approaches:** Research has shown that university-community partnerships are important in delivering evidence-based violence prevention strategies, as these partnerships can strengthen violence prevention efforts by increasing capacity to identify multifaceted risk factors, reaching more at-risk youth, better monitoring violence trends, and addressing the structural and social determinants of violence. Research has also shown that employment-based interventions can serve as protective mechanisms against youth violence.
- **Adult-Youth Relationships:** Supportive relationships between youth and adults offer young people emotional safety and guidance and can function as protective factors against instability. Mentorship programs and programs that foster relationship building, critical reflection, and purposeful engagement support character development among young people.
- **Positive Youth Development:** Programming that incorporates Positive Youth Development (PYD) can foster adolescent’s personal, social, and emotional growth. This includes music-based, arts, and environmental service, as these engagement settings

intentionally integrate opportunities for skill-building, reflection, and meaningful connection.

- ***Engaging Youth as Stakeholders in Programming:*** Meaningful youth engagement involves positioning young people as partners in shaping the programs and policies that affect them. When youth are given authentic opportunities to contribute ideas and take on leadership roles, they are not only more likely to remain engaged, but they are also provided with practical and developmental skills in the process.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR ENGAGING HOWARD COUNTY YOUTH

As part of Phase 2, the Schaefer Center finalized a catalog of programs administered by local, state, and federal governments and nonprofit organizations that engage and serve youth in Howard County. Over 60 programs were identified covering a wide range of services including academic support; arts and cultural enrichment; civic engagement and volunteer opportunities; mentorship, health, and wellness; sports and athletics; STEM programs; targeted support services (e.g., LGBTQIA+, high-ability youth, youth with disabilities); and work readiness and entrepreneurship.

PROGRAM AND PERFORMANCE DATA HOCO STRIVES AND YEP! GRANTS

HoCo Strives and YEP! Grants provide financial support for a variety of programs serving youth in Howard County. Key program information is summarized below.

- Together, HoCo STRIVES and YEP! Grants were provided to 49 unique organizations from FY23 through FY25. These programs served an average of over 10,000 participants¹ per year.
- Across the fiscal years, most YEP! grantees report that they served youth ages 10-14 and 14-18 years old, with very few serving those ages 0-5 years old. Additionally, most of the funded programming and participants served were in Columbia, Elkridge, and Ellicott City.
- Common program focus areas of both HoCo STRIVES and YEP! Grants recipients include mentorships, health and wellness, and academic support.
- Regarding data and metrics, YEP!-funded organizations reported using participant feedback/surveys and quantitative or time-based measures most often to track progress. Both HoCo STRIVES and YEP! Grants recipients were more likely to report output metrics such as the number of participants and demographics rather than outcome metrics related to academic performance or mental health and wellness.

¹ Data provided for HoCo STRIVES participants includes some adult participants. However, the total number of HoCo STRIVES participants was 3% of the total participant count, so the number of adults served is likely negligible compared to the total number of youth served.

FOCUS GROUPS

As part of this evaluation, three focus groups (two with youth and one with providers of youth engagement programming in Howard County) were conducted to better understand how young people in Howard County experience engagement and belonging, including what makes them feel included or excluded, the activities and services they participate in, barriers to participating, how they learn about opportunities, and what kinds of activities or services they would like to see offered. These discussions highlighted several key factors that influence youth engagement: the need for safe and engaging spaces where youth can participate without fear of being criminalized; the need for financial, transportation, food pantry, and mental health supports for youth and their families; and the importance of effective communication through trusted adults, schools, and social media platforms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several service gaps were identified in Howard County's youth engagement strategy. These include gaps in awareness, interest, access, coordination/collaboration among programs, and feelings of safety in the community. Below are recommendations to address these gaps:

- The YES! Council and Howard County should **consider employing a varied, age-responsive communication strategy that leverages school-based communication and trusted social media platforms** (e.g., Instagram and TikTok) to better reach and engage youth across Howard County.
- To better align programming with youth interests and to elevate youth voices, the YES! Council and Howard County may **consider implementing ongoing, structured approaches for gathering and integrating youth feedback, including youth-led focus groups, youth ambassadorships, or youth summits.**
- The YES! Council and Howard County should **explore ways to leverage YEP! and other grant funds to reduce or remove transportation and financial barriers.** This could include supporting transportation to activities or covering participation fees for youth and families who need assistance.
- The YES! Council and Howard County **should expand its reach beyond current grantees to build a broader, more interconnected network of youth-serving organizations.** This could include a county-wide survey of organizations or implementing a network analysis to better understand how programs currently interact, where communication pathways exist, and where additional collaboration may be beneficial.
- The YES! Council and Howard County should **integrate trauma-informed services into youth programming** where appropriate and **ensure youth-serving professionals receive training in complex trauma and the effects of community violence exposure.**

- The YES! Council and Howard County should **provide youth with an informal space where they can gather freely and feel safe – such as a free or low-cost recreation center or similar community hub.**
- The YES! Council and Howard County **should look to successful youth violence prevention models in other regions,** such as CDC-funded Youth Violence Prevention Centers (YVPCs), Chicago’s BRAVE program, and Cleveland’s Summer Youth Employment Program.

CHAPTER 1: PROJECT OVERVIEW

Howard County has launched several youth-focused initiatives in recent years to increase opportunities for younger residents, particularly those who are underserved, disconnected from existing programs, or have less access to resources. With residents under age 25 making up nearly one-third of the County's population² and concerns about youth crime and educational outcomes growing, these programs represent a strategic investment in the County's future.

These youth-focused initiatives include:

- **HoCo STRIVES** (Strategies to Reach an Inclusive Vision and Equitable Solutions): A collection of initiatives that funds school achievement programs, summer STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, mathematics) learning, transportation to and from programming for youth, and expanded mental health services among other activities.
- **Youth Engagement Programming (YEP!) Grants:** A grant program supporting nonprofits and community-based organizations that provide out-of-school programming.
- **Youth Engagement Strategies (YES!) Council:** A newly established advisory council tasked with identifying youth-serving resources, recommending strategies to prevent youth violence, fostering collaboration among local institutions, and updating the County Executive on council progress.

The Howard County government engaged the Schaefer Center for Public Policy (Schaefer Center) at The University of Baltimore (UBalt) to conduct a program evaluation of its youth engagement efforts. The evaluation was designed to identify service gaps and opportunities to strengthen youth engagement across the County. The evaluation was conducted in two phases, and this report presents the work completed in Phase 2 (see Table 1).

² U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. "Age and Sex." American Community Survey (ACS), ACS 1-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S0101, 2023. Accessed on April 3, 2025.

Table 1: Project Overview

Activity	Phase 1 Description	Phase 2 Description
Program Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewed information on youth engagement efforts on Howard County websites and provided by Howard County officials and program staff. Met with leadership and staff from the youth engagement programs to learn more about programs' history, work, and goals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A
Literature Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compiled an annotated bibliography of recent research on youth engagement, education, and violence prevention strategies, with emphasis on post-2020 programs. Allowed Howard County representatives to review and identify any missing topics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanded review of literature to include research on education and policy. Converted annotated bibliography to a finalized literature review that summarizes and synthesizes research findings into several relevant topic areas.
Logic Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developed draft logic model for Howard County's youth engagement activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finalized the logic model.
Resource Catalog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Began developing a catalog of youth-serving programs in Howard County, including those run by local, state, and federal government and nonprofit organizations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Updated and finalized the catalog to include additional youth-serving programs in Howard County and the surrounding area.
Program and Performance Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Received administrative data from YEP! Grants and HoCo STRIVES from Howard County representatives and program staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyzed program and performance data.
Focus Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drafted a focus group guide to gather input from youth on program activities, offerings, and areas for improvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drafted a focus group guide to gather input from youth programming providers on activities, offerings, and areas for improvement. Conducted youth and provider focus groups and analyzed data collected.

CHAPTER 2: ENGAGEMENT LOGIC MODEL

Logic models provide a visual roadmap that links a program’s inputs (i.e., resources), activities, outputs, and outcomes. They are useful tools for understanding how programs are expected to work and for identifying key measures of success. During Phase 1, the Schaefer Center met with leadership and staff from Howard County’s youth engagement programs to learn about their history, operations, and goals. Using this information, the Schaefer Center developed a draft logic model for overall youth engagement in Howard County, which includes HoCo STRIVES, YEP! Grants, and the YES! Council. The logic model was finalized in Phase 2, as Howard County officials did not provide any edits, and thus it reflects the county’s engagement efforts. The logic model is shown in Figure 1, and each section is discussed below.

INPUTS

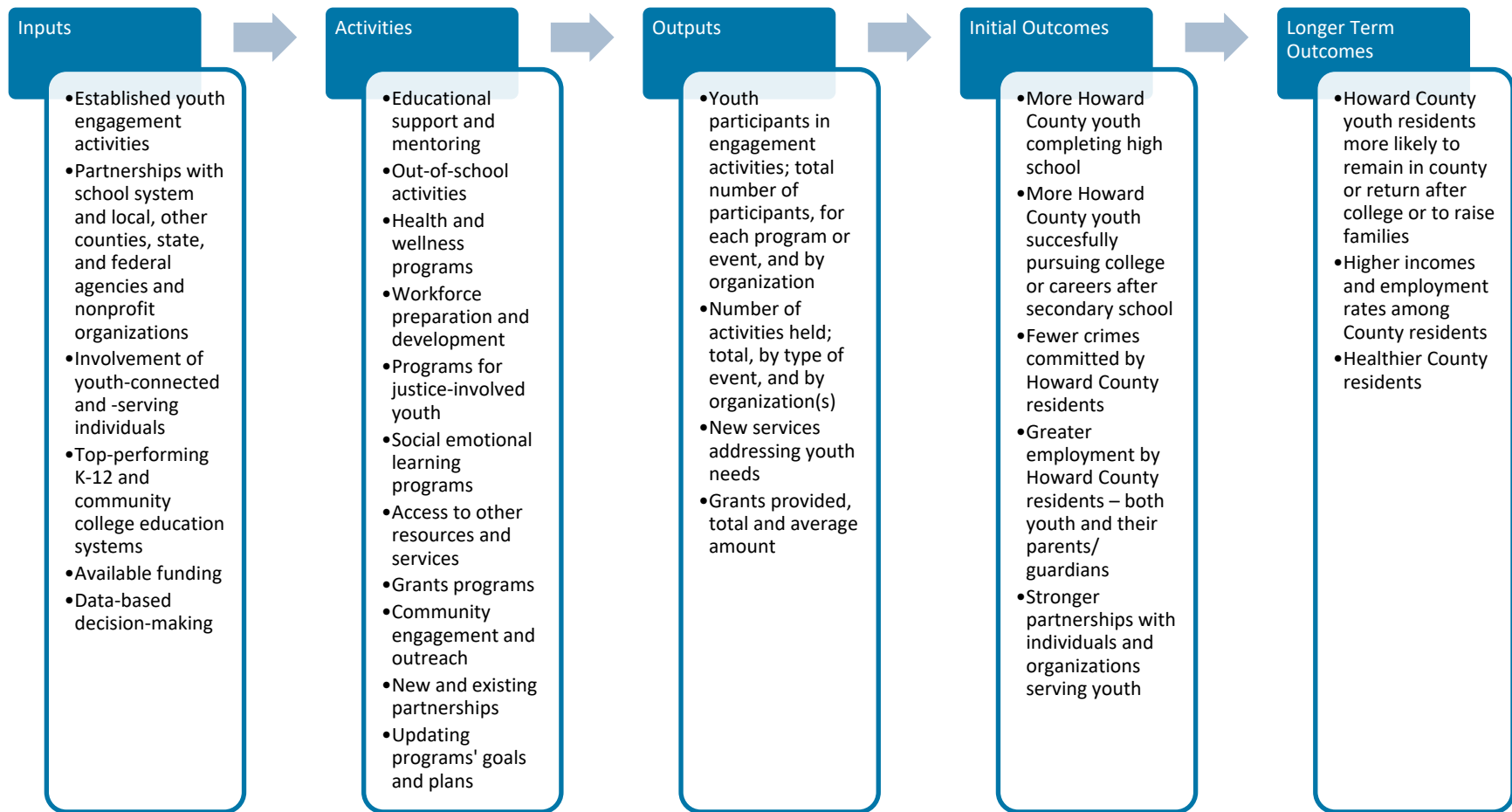
The first section of the logic model shows inputs, which are the resources that Howard County has and uses in its engagement programs. One of the most important inputs is listed first – the County’s **established youth engagement activities**, especially the HoCo STRIVES program and YEP! Grants. These programs provide a base for Howard County’s overall engagement activities and legitimacy for the County’s engagement work that can be built upon going forward.

The second input is the County’s **extensive partnerships** with its local school system; governments at the municipal, state, and federal levels; and nonprofit organizations. The County can use these partnerships to provide engagement activities and specific services to local youth and to recruit participants for engagement activities. The extensive nature of these partnerships is shown in the list of YEP! Grants.³ The third input is the **involvement of many youth-connected and -serving individuals**, whom the County can involve in these engagement efforts. These individuals help develop, lead, and implement engagement activities, as illustrated in the Howard County Community Plan for Children, Youth, and Families FY21-FY25.⁴

³ <https://www.howardcountymd.gov/county-executive/youth-engagement-programming-grants>.

⁴ <https://www.howardcountymd.gov/sites/default/files/media/2020-07/HCLCB%20FINAL%20Narrative%20v7.pdf>.

Figure 1: Logic Model for Howard County Youth Engagement Activities



The fourth input is Howard County's **education systems**, which includes one of Maryland's top-performing K-12 school systems and one of its leading community colleges. These institutions provide a strong foundation and programming for engagement, education, and career-readiness activities. The fifth input is the County's **available funding** to support engagement programs and related initiatives, and the sixth input is Howard County's use of **data-based decision-making** to identify where to best allocate that funding.

ACTIVITIES

Howard County's varied youth engagement activities are presented in the second part of the logic model. The County's engagement efforts include a range of programming for youth, such as:

- **Educational support and mentoring;**
- **Out-of-school activities;**
- **Health and wellness**, including mental health and substance abuse programs;
- **Workforce preparation and development** programs, including work experiences;
- **Programs for justice-involved youth;**
- **Social-emotional learning programs;** and
- **Access to other resources and services**, such as those for child care, transportation, or dealing with food insecurity.

The activities also include administrative work that support overall engagement efforts. For example, one of the County's major activities is its **grants programs**. The County does not provide all engagement activities directly; instead, it relies on its government and nonprofit partners and supports their efforts through programs such as the YEP! Grants. The County also conducts extensive **community engagement and outreach** – both directly and through partnerships with organizations and individuals – to develop and offer engagement activities and recruit youth participants. Moreover, Howard County continues to develop and strengthen **new and existing partnerships** to advance this work. Finally, County staff regularly **update program goals and plans** to ensure the engagement activities meet the current needs and interests of youth and their families, as demonstrated by the forthcoming launch of a new strategic plan for HoCo STRIVES.

OUTPUTS

In the logic model, outputs are the direct products of Howard County's engagement efforts. The primary output of the County's engagement work is the **number of young people participating**

in engagement activities. This includes the youth participating in all County-led or -funded engagement activities as well the number of participants at various types of programs or events or at activities offered by different organizations. The second major output is the **number of engagement activities held**, both the total number of activities as well as breakdowns by type of event and organization. A third output is the number of **new services offered to address youth needs** that are available in Howard County as a product of HoCo STRIVES, YEP! Grants, the YES! Council, and other County engagement efforts. Finally, a fourth output is data about the youth engagement **grants provided** by the County, including the total number, grant dollar amounts, and average funding provided.

It should also be noted that other breakdowns of these output measures would be useful for the County's decision-making process. This might include location and day/time of the activities and demographics of the participants. In addition, it would be useful to consider collecting satisfaction scores and conducting pre-/post-knowledge or -skills assessments for some activities if they are not already being utilized, as they can also help determine where best to direct funding.

OUTCOMES

Outcomes are the results of the engagement activities. Outcomes can be classified as initial or longer term. Initial outcomes, which typically occur up to five years after participation, include more Howard County youth **successfully completing high school** and **successfully pursuing college or careers** after they finish high school as a result of both the educational and workforce supports provided by the engagement activities, as well as the health and wellness, child care, and other services that are demonstrated to lead to better educational and work outcomes. Relatedly, there is expected to be a **decrease in the crimes committed** by Howard County residents, both youth and younger adults, specifically as a result of participating in mentoring and programs for justice-involved youth as well as the many other services that provide them with education and work experiences that limit involvement in the criminal justice system. **Greater employment** is expected among both Howard County youth – who have greater skills and opportunities to pursue part-time or post-secondary employment – and their parents/guardians, who have reliable services being provided for their children and can therefore remain or increase their time in the workforce or pursue their own educational goals, if they wish. A final initial outcome will be **stronger partnerships** among the individuals and organizations serving youth in Howard County as they build and strengthen their relationships.

Longer term outcomes – those expected to occur more than five years after youth participation in the engagement activity(ies) – include that youth are more likely to **remain as Howard County residents or return to the County to raise their families** rather than leave the County because they do not feel welcome or are not able to establish social and employment networks that enable them to live in the County. This is especially important as Howard County is one of the highest cost-of-living counties in Maryland, which itself is one of the highest cost-of-living states; however, employment and robust personal networks can help offset these costs. More residents in the County also can help decrease costs and reduce the costs of living in the area. Due to the many types of services provided through the available engagement activities, Howard County youth are more likely to be successful in their education and employment, which should lead to **higher income and employment rates** among County residents, both those who participated in the engagement activities and those who benefit from multiplier or downstream effects. Finally, youth who receive health and wellness services or participate in other engagement activities including social-emotional learning, mentoring, and education are more likely to have **better physical and mental health as adults**.

CONCLUSION

Other outputs and outcomes are likely from Howard County’s engagement activities, but these outputs and outcomes are the most likely from the overall engagement work and most important for the County. Individual programs and organizations may have their own logic models with more detailed inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes specific to their programming.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

In its establishing Executive Order, the YES! Council was charged with recommending strategies that prevent youth violence and promote positive engagement, particularly among students who are disengaged or underserved. In support of this goal, the Schaefer Center conducted a literature review to examine youth engagement, education, and violence prevention strategies that have been implemented across the United States. The review focuses on approaches designed to reach disengaged or underserved youth and prioritizes literature published since 2020, recognizing that the COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts on young people's education, social connections, and overall well-being. Findings of note for the YES! Council are bolded for the reader's ease.

INTRODUCTION

Youth today face a range of complex challenges that can impact their safety, well-being, and future opportunities, with marginalized youth often being disproportionately affected. Nationally, courts with juvenile jurisdiction handled an estimated 549,500 delinquency cases in 2022 alone (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2024).⁵ Many of these cases reflect broader structural inequities present in places young people cannot avoid, such as schools and their own communities.

Exclusionary school discipline practices, such as suspensions and expulsions, remain widespread and disproportionately applied to Black students, youth with disabilities, and those from low-income families (Council on School Health et al., 2024). These punitive measures not only remove students from educational environments, but also increase the risk of negative social, health, and legal outcomes, including contact with the juvenile justice system.

At the same time, many young people are growing up in environments characterized by high levels of community violence. Research has shown that economically marginalized youth are often most exposed to violence yet are the least likely to access traditional mental health supports (Clarke et al., 2023; Wasserman et al., 2021). Exposure to violence has wide-ranging consequences, including trauma-related disruptions to adolescent development and behavior (Hamilton, 2024). Neighborhood violence is further linked to adverse health outcomes. For example, youth who have already come in contact with the justice system who return to communities with high rates of violence reported higher levels of stress, depression, asthma, and

⁵ References are available in Appendix A: Literature Review References.

strained family relationships (Meza et al., 2023). These challenges are further compounded by the adverse effects of poverty, housing instability, and systemic racism that more often affect Black youth and other marginalized groups (Sheats et al., 2018).

Taken together, these conditions facing youth highlight the urgency for interventions and programs that are trauma-informed, community-centered, and equity-driven. Youth engagement initiatives – programs that empower young people to contribute to their communities, access support, and develop leadership and life skills – can create proactive solutions and safe spaces for protecting youth against harm before it occurs.

TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SUPPORTS

Youth engagement programs increasingly recognize the critical need to address the mental and behavioral health impacts of community violence, particularly among adolescents in economically marginalized areas. Exposure to violence, whether direct or indirect, can have lasting effects on emotional regulation, social functioning, and school engagement, thus highlighting the importance of trauma-informed care in program design and delivery (Hamilton, 2024). As previously stated, traditional mental health services often fail to reach the young people most affected by these issues, especially those facing structural barriers to care such as cost, stigma, and limited provider availability (Clarke et al., 2023; Wasserman et al., 2021).

To bridge this gap, researchers and practitioners have begun embedding behavioral health support within community-based and out-of-school settings. Clarke et al. (2023) examined the integration of trauma-informed services into out-of-school time (OST) programs through the Violence Intervention and Prevention (VIP) Initiative. This initiative aimed to minimize the impact of community gun violence on young people’s mental health outcomes by increasing access to evidence-based and trauma-informed mental health care delivered by trained professionals. To do this, the researchers partnered with six community-based OST programs in southeastern Pennsylvania to provide their staff with professional development training in trauma-informed interventions and to create connections between OST programs and VIP clinicians. In evaluating the effects of the VIP initiative on these programs, the authors found that the introduction of this initiative resulted in increased therapy referrals, with just under half of those referrals resulting in initiated treatment. The authors note that these rates of initiation are almost the same as outpatient community mental health services and are estimated to even surpass the rates of such services if OST programs were to bring VIP clinicians on in a full-time capacity. Their findings highlight how including **mental health support within free or low-cost OST programs can increase access to mental health care and enhance mental health literacy for both program**

staff and participating youth. The VIP initiative model also demonstrates **the feasibility of using community-based settings** as trusted, low-barrier entry points for behavioral health interventions.

Complementing this work, Hamilton (2024) provides a practitioner-oriented perspective on addressing complex trauma among adolescents exposed to community violence. Her dissertation emphasizes the role of afterschool staff in recognizing and responding to trauma-related behaviors, offering a detailed guide to help frontline workers integrate trauma-informed principles into programming. Hamilton posits that afterschool program staff are paramount to the overall success and quality of the programs themselves and to the youth's positive experience and engagement with the program. The author also points out that frontline staff often receive much less training and education than programmatic leadership, which is unfortunate given their unique position to directly and significantly impact the young people who participate in these programs. Given the pervasiveness and uptick of community violence and its impact on young people, Hamilton recommends that **afterschool staff receive education in complex trauma and the effects of community violence exposure.** In her informational guide, Hamilton outlines how afterschool staff can intentionally incorporate protective factors into their programming, and build stronger connections to licensed mental health professionals, thus providing youth with a more tangible connection to mental health care. This informational guide provides an example for how trauma-informed training can strengthen program effectiveness and bolster youth resilience in the face of high-violence environments.

VIOLENCE PREVENTION APPROACHES

In addition to providing mental and behavioral health support to address the consequences of community violence, youth engagement programs can also target its root causes by incorporating violence prevention approaches within their programming. Recent research demonstrates that community-based violence prevention initiatives can play a vital role in promoting safer and more supportive environments for young people. Research has also shown that partnerships between community programs and academia are important in delivering evidence-based violence prevention strategies. In a supplement of editorials, D'Inverno and Bartholow (2021) highlight the work of CDC-funded Youth Violence Prevention Centers (YVPCs), which support collaborations among federal agencies, academic institutions, and communities. Through these partnerships, YVPCs work with local organizations to monitor violence trends, assess needs, and implement violence prevention strategies. Across the editorials, the authors describe how YVPCs strengthen community-academic partnerships, address structural and social determinants of violence, and shift the narrative away from individual blame towards systemic

contributors of youth violence. By building this capacity, YVPCs enable community organizations to more effectively prevent violence by addressing its root causes, rather than merely treating its symptoms.

Similarly, Kim (2021) highlights the importance of **university-community partnerships** in youth violence prevention through a case study of the Building Resilience Against Violence Engagement (BRAVE) program. This community-based initiative operates in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods in Chicago, offering individualized case management, group work, tutoring, extracurricular activities, counseling, and community engagement opportunities. Kim notes that university–community partnerships can strengthen violence prevention efforts through collaboration with diverse community stakeholders, which helps identify multifaceted risk factors, reach more at-risk youth, and enhance the community’s overall capacity for prevention. In this case study, the BRAVE program emerged from a collaboration between the Loyola University Chicago School of Social Work and three community agencies. Kim documents how their partnership evolved across four phases – initiation, clarification of goals and scope, implementation, and completion/evaluation. Two key facilitators of a successful partnership were identified: 1) building trust and mutual respect by valuing community partners’ expertise and proximity to the affected youth, and 2) fostering shared decision-making that allowed flexibility to accommodate each community partner’s cultural context and preferred intervention methods. This case study underscores that flexible and reciprocal partnerships between academic institutions and communities are essential to building trust and achieving meaningful violence prevention outcomes.

Atwell et al. (2023) extend the evidence on community-centered violence prevention by examining the protective effects of structured youth employment. Summer Youth Employment Programs (SYEPs) provide paid work experiences and job training to youth ages 14–24, often including pre-employment workshops on financial literacy, career readiness, and postsecondary planning (Leos-Urbel, 2014; Modestino, 2019). Previous evaluations in large cities such as Boston, Chicago, New York, and Detroit have found that SYEP participation can reduce violent crime involvement, improve educational outcomes, and increase short-term earnings (Davis & Heller, 2020; Gelber et al., 2015; Gross et al., 2019). Atwell et al. build on this research by assessing outcomes from Cuyahoga County’s SYEP, located in Cleveland – a city marked by higher levels of poverty than those previously studied. Their quantitative analysis revealed that youth who completed the program had fewer delinquency filings, lower incarceration rates, and improved school attendance compared to nonparticipants. The authors also found notably higher high school graduation rates among program completers, suggesting that structured employment opportunities may be particularly impactful in high-poverty contexts. These findings reinforce that **employment-based interventions can serve as protective mechanisms** against youth

violence by fostering purpose, structure, and social connection while simultaneously expanding economic opportunity.

ADULT-YOUTH RELATIONSHIPS

Alongside access to trauma, mental health services, and violence prevention, youth engagement programs provide opportunities for consistent, supportive relationships to develop between youth and adults. Mentorship and developmental relationships are often a central feature of youth engagement initiatives, as they offer young people emotional safety and guidance. These connections can function as protective factors, helping young people build resilience against instabilities they may face in their home and school lives.

Research has consistently shown the positive impact of such adult-youth relationships. Parker et al. (2025) found that Black K-12 students participating in an **electronic mentoring program** developed in partnership with a local Black church reported improvements in self-regulation, confidence, and school engagement. Specifically, those who participated were able to reframe negative thoughts and behaviors that had previously been interfering with school engagement through developing self-regulation skills. Youth described feeling valued and nurtured by their mentors, which strengthened program participation and retention. Building on this perspective, Rice et al. (2023) investigated how youth connections with adult staff at drop-in centers for youth experiencing homelessness influenced engagement with services that promote stability, self-sufficiency, and wellbeing. Using survey data from youth across three Los Angeles drop-in centers, the authors found that frequent and sustained attendance is associated with stronger relationships with supportive staff. Positive staff relationships were also linked to greater utilization of employment, education, and housing services.

Syvertsen et al. (2024) also examined the role of developmental relationships in promoting character among youth participating in U.S.-based conservation service programs. Drawing on survey data from 846 adolescents, the study used a pre- and post-program evaluation design to assess the influence of three key developmental experiences: developmental relationships, critical reflection, and intrinsic program engagement. Results showed that youth who had supportive and challenging relationships with program leaders, engaged in reflective meaning-making, and reported intrinsic engagement with the program demonstrated significantly higher levels of character strengths (trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship) by program completion. The findings suggest that **character development in youth programs depends on how effectively programs foster relationship building, critical reflection, and purposeful engagement**, not just the activities themselves (e.g., conservation work). These

findings help demonstrate that the connections cultivated between adults and youth are not inconsequential components of engagement programming; rather, they can provide pathways through which youth can develop useful life skills, confidence, and a sense of belonging.

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

As a complement to the developmental relationships between youth and adults, research suggests that youth engagement programs that incorporate Positive Youth Development (PYD) can play a vital role in fostering adolescents' personal, social, and emotional growth. PYD emphasizes building youths' strengths – such as competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring – through supportive environments and meaningful activities that promote both individual and community well-being.

For example, Ilari and Cho (2023) examined middle school students participating in both school-based and extracurricular music programs and found that those engaged in multiple types of music education – particularly for longer durations – showed higher levels of competence (a core PYD construct) and more hopeful future expectations. Students who participated in extracurricular activities and expressed a strong liking for music also demonstrated greater school connectedness, showing how sustained engagement and genuine interest can strengthen a young person's sense of belonging and motivation.

Building on this, Kapa et al. (2025) explored the impacts of Beyond the Bars (BTB), a Philadelphia-based community music program designed to disrupt cycles of youth violence and promote community healing. Through qualitative interviews with 16 adolescents, four instructors, and six community partners, the study identified five themes highlighting the program's role in promoting PYD outcomes: providing safe and creative spaces, supporting personal and relational growth, developing musical and technical skills, and enhancing future orientation and growth mindset. Together, these findings demonstrate how **music-based programs can nurture emotional well-being and empower youth to engage constructively with their communities.**

As noted earlier, Syvertsen et al. (2024) found that supportive and challenging adult-youth relationships were key drivers of character development among participants in U.S.-based conservation service programs. Beyond highlighting the importance of relationships, the study also speaks to broader principles of PYD, emphasizing how **experiences that promote critical reflection, intrinsic engagement, and connection to nature can foster civic, moral, and performance character.** The authors note that group-based, nature-focused activities may be particularly effective in cultivating a sense of awe and humility – emotions that have been linked

to respect for others and enhanced social-emotional competencies (Hendijani et al., 2019; Leary, 2018). The study highlights that youth development is not solely a function of the specific activities themselves, but rather of how effective programs create environments that foster character development.

Collectively, these studies underscore the impact of the PYD framework across many engagement settings, from arts to environmental service. **When youth programs intentionally integrate opportunities for skill-building, reflection, and meaningful connection, they can cultivate the personal strengths and community ties that support long-term thriving.**

ENGAGING YOUTH AS STAKEHOLDERS IN PROGRAM DESIGN AND DELIVERY

Meaningful youth engagement involves positioning young people as partners in shaping the programs and policies that affect them. **When youth are given authentic opportunities to contribute ideas and take on leadership roles, they are more likely to remain engaged in community change efforts.** Jones et al. (2021) illustrate this through an editorial co-authored by youth aged 14-26 involved in Youth Violence Prevention Centers, who reflected on their experiences addressing violence in their communities. The authors describe both the challenges of not always having a seat at policymaking tables and the success of contributing to tangible change through their work. Their perspectives provide insight into how youth involvement and collaboration can strengthen the impact of violence prevention efforts.

The involvement of youth in leadership and decision-making can also improve program design and delivery. In their article, Aeschbach et al. (2024) describe how they incorporated the lived experiences and perspectives of youth into their goals, initiatives, and programming for the Providers and Teens Communicating for Health (PATCH) Program in Wisconsin. This program sought to improve adolescent health by working directly with a diverse group of young people, ensuring their voices were included in decisions that affect adolescent health care quality and the overall health of their generation. Results of a comprehensive evaluation of this program showed significant improvements in both provider and youth knowledge, self-efficacy, and the intention to seek and provide sexual health care. As this program expanded, it went on to incorporate youth advocacy fellowships, employment opportunities for youth, and continued education around stigmatized health topics. Involving youth as stakeholders in the design and development of the PATCH Program led it to become not only successful in accomplishing their mission, but also a trusted connection between Wisconsin's Department of Health Services and youth throughout the state.

Similarly, Ballard et al. (2023) argue that substance use prevention efforts can be strengthened by involving youth as authentic leaders and partners and that amplifying youth voices can increase the quality and speed with which prevention programming is delivered. The authors overview the challenges of youth engagement in the United States, where adults and organizations often hold disproportionate power, creating barriers to shared decision-making. To address this, they outline three core competencies they believe are needed for prevention professionals: understanding adolescent development across key domains and the core elements of youth–adult partnerships, applying this knowledge to program design and practice, and implementing relational practices that support collaboration and power-sharing with youth. The authors call out the need for training and resources to strengthen the substance use prevention workforce in these areas, so that young people can be better included in the development, implementation, and evaluation of such programs.

Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2006) likewise emphasize the importance of involving youth, particularly from low-income communities of color, as active participants rather than passive recipients in shaping educational policy and practice. Through examples of youth-led initiatives and participatory models, the authors discuss how young people bring valuable perspectives and strategies to the reform process, leading to more equitable and sustainable educational reforms. Further, the authors point out that youth’s participation in educational reform prepares them to exercise their political rights and to actively participate in a democratic society, thus providing them with life skills that can be applied far and beyond their participation in the reform process. Together, these studies suggest that **engaging youth as stakeholders is essential in designing youth engagement programs that are responsive to their lived experiences and that foster lasting community impact**. Furthermore, **involving youth in program design and delivery has been shown to increase both engagement and retention in programming, as well provide youth with practical and developmental skills**, such as working alongside adults, using their voice for advocacy, employment and volunteer opportunities, and serving as leaders and mentors to their peers.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this literature review highlights that comprehensive youth engagement programs are most effective when they address multiple layers of influence, from individual trauma and behavioral health to structural and community-level risk factors. Programs that integrate trauma-informed care, community-based violence prevention, Positive Youth Development principles, and structured opportunities such as employment or extracurricular engagement create protective environments that promote resilience, skill-building, and positive outcomes for youth.

Central to these efforts are strong, reciprocal partnerships between academic institutions, community organizations, and youth themselves, which can enhance program reach and foster trust. Furthermore, mentorship and adult-youth relationships serve as critical pathways for supporting personal growth, social-emotional development, and civic engagement among young people. In conclusion, these findings demonstrate that empowering youth, cultivating supportive relationships, and addressing structural inequities through youth engagement programming are essential for reducing youth violence, promoting well-being, and fostering long-term community thriving.

CHAPTER 4: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR ENGAGING HOWARD COUNTY YOUTH

Howard County is committed to youth engagement, education, and violence prevention, but it is not working alone to solve these complex and interlocking challenges. Other government and nonprofit organizations are working on these issues as well. As part of Phase 2, the Schaefer Center finalized a catalog of programs administered by local, state, and federal governments and nonprofit organizations that engage and serve youth in Howard County. This includes providing services such as mentorship, mental health, workforce development, restorative justice, and safe spaces.

Information collected about each organization includes the program name and agency responsible, demographics of the population served, service area (i.e., if the program serves only a portion of the county or a wider geographic area), eligibility criteria, and primary activities, if available. This information was collected by reviewing organizations' websites and other publicly available materials. To support ease of use, the catalog is organized by program focus area. Sub-categories include:

- Academic support;
- Arts and cultural enrichment;
- Civic engagement and volunteer opportunities;
- Environmental education and sustainability;
- Mentorship, health, and wellness;
- Sports and athletics;
- STEM programs;
- Targeted support services (e.g., LGBTQIA+, high-ability youth, youth with disabilities); and
- Work readiness and entrepreneurship.

ACADEMIC SUPPORT

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Achieve Success Together: Homework Help	CAPA AST	Nonprofit	Middle school (ages 11-13)	Howard County	None	Free	https://www.achievethecore.org/homework-help	Free assistance with homework assignments in four core subjects: math, English, science, or social studies. <i>Keywords: Homework Assistance</i>
A-OK Mentoring and Tutoring	A-OK	Nonprofit	Elementary-middle school (ages 6-13)	Howard County	None	Free	https://www.aokmentor.org	Homework and academic help; social/emotional support. <i>Keywords: Homework Assistance</i>
Howard County Chinese School	Howard County Chinese School	Nonprofit	All ages	Maryland	Non-Chinese native speakers	Fee-based	https://www.hccs-md.org/home	Weekend classes for students whose native language is not Chinese. <i>Keywords: Academic Weekend Program, Special Populations</i>
Howard County Public Schools Summer Programs	Howard County Public Schools (HCPSS)	County	Kindergarten-high school (ages 5-18)	HCPSS students	None	Fee-based, (financial assistance available for current HCPSS students)	https://www.hcps.org/summer-programs/#programs	Summer programs offering academic acceleration, enrichment, and credit-bearing courses. <i>Keywords: Academic Summer Programs</i>

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Teaching Children Academics and Humanities	Teaching Children Academics and Humanities Myanmar	Nonprofit	All ages	Virtual/ International	Burmese/ Myanmar community	Free	https://www.tcahmyanmar.org/	Free learning opportunities for Burmese children, youths, adults, families and lifelong learners. <i>Keywords: Cultural Enrichment, Parental Engagement, Special Populations</i>

ARTS/CULTURAL ENRICHMENT

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Achieve Success Together: Octave	CAPA AST	Nonprofit	Elementary-middle school (ages 6-13)	Howard County	None	Free	https://www.achievetosuccess.org/octave	Summer music mentoring program. <i>Keywords: Musical Arts, Summer Program</i>
Camp Hippodrome	Hippodrome Foundation	Nonprofit	Middle-high school (ages 11-18)	Maryland	None	Free	https://hippodromefoundation.org/hippodrome/camp-hippodrome/	Summer workshops covering theatre, music, dance, makeup, and more. <i>Keywords: Theatrical Arts, Summer Program</i>
Career Pathways and Professional Development	Hippodrome Foundation	Nonprofit	High school (ages 14-18)	Maryland	None	Fee-based	https://hippodromefoundation.org/hippodrome/career-pathways-professional-development/	Experience in theater industry jobs such as stagehand work/management, wigs, costumes, lighting, sound. <i>Keywords: Theatrical Arts, Career & Workforce</i>

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Columbia Center for Theatrical Arts Outreach	Columbia Center for Theatrical Arts with State Arts Council support	Nonprofit	Elementary-high school (ages 6-18)	Howard County	None	Free	https://www.cctarts.shop/	Provides performing arts education through its Conservatory, curriculum-based theatrical productions, and outreach programs that make theater accessible to underserved and special needs youth. <i>Keywords: Theatrical Arts, Special Populations</i>
Every Kid Can Cook	Healthy Little Cooks	Private/For-Profit	Adult/family programs	National	Families with children	Fee-based	https://healthylittlecooks.com/	Family cooking parties and classes; cooking and nutrition education. <i>Keywords: Food/Nutrition Education</i>
Maryland Classic Youth Orchestras	Strathmore Music Center	Nonprofit	Elementary-high school (ages 6-18)	Maryland	None	Fee-based	https://www.strathmore.org/nurturing-artists/maryland-classic-youth-orchestras/	Classical music education through various ensembles, including string orchestras, full orchestras, and chamber groups. <i>Keywords: Musical Arts</i>
Master Classes	Hippodrome Foundation	Nonprofit	High school (ages 14-18)	Maryland	None	Fee-based	https://hippodromefoundation.org/hippodrome-classes/	Broadway professionals teach musical theatre skills and provide careers insights. <i>Keywords: Theatrical Arts, Career & Workforce</i>
Merriweather Teens	Merriweather Arts and Culture Center	Nonprofit	Middle-high school (ages 11-18)	Howard County	None	Free	https://www.merriweatherarts.org/teens	Arts-based events and activities where teens can connect, express themselves, and build community. <i>Keywords: Arts, Community Building</i>

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Smithsonian Summer Camp – Youth Teaching Assistants	Smithsonian Institution	Educational Institution	High school (ages 15-18)	Regional	None	Free	https://www.si.edu/volunteer/teen	Teens serve as teaching assistants at Smithsonian summer camps, mentoring younger children while gaining hands-on experience in arts, science, and history. <i>Keywords: Arts, Teen Engagement, Community Service</i>
Upcycle Art Classes	Clarksville Youth Group	Community Organization	Elementary-high school (ages 6-18)	Maryland	None	Free	https://www.clarksvilleyouthcaregro.up.org/upcycle-art-class.html#/	Monthly art classes using recycled materials are offered to the community. <i>Keywords: Visual Arts, Creative Programs</i>

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT & VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Clarksville Youth Care Group	Clarksville Youth Care Group	Community Organization	Elementary-high school (ages 6-18)	Howard County	None	Free	https://www.clarksvilleyouthcaregroup.org	Youth-led organization promoting community service and providing leadership and growth opportunities for young people. <i>Keywords: Leadership Development</i>
Howard County Police Department Youth Programs	Howard County Police Department	County	Middle-high school (ages 11-18)	Howard County	None	Free	https://www.howardcountymd.gov/police/youth-programs	Programs including mentorship, leadership camps, defensive driving, and community engagement initiatives that foster positive relationships between youth and law enforcement. <i>Keywords: Leadership Development, Community Engagement, Summer Programs</i>

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
League of Korean Americans: Summer Internship, Mentoring	League of Korean Americans (LoKA-MD)	Nonprofit	High school (ages 14-18)	Howard County	Korean American focus	Free	https://lokamd.org/home/services	Summer internship and mentoring that build civic engagement, leadership and career readiness for Korean American students. <i>Keywords: Summer Program, Special Populations</i>
Maryland 4-H State Council & Congress	UMD Extension/ 4-H	Nonprofit	High school (ages 13–18)	Maryland	None	Fee-based	https://extension.umd.edu/sites/extension.umd.edu/files/2021-08/State%20Council%20FAQs.pdf	State-level youth leadership, conferences, community service. <i>Keywords: Leadership Development</i>
THES Youth Engagement Program	Thunder Hill Elementary – PTA	Community Organization	Elementary school (ages 6-10)	Howard County	None	Free	https://thes.hcpss.org/news/2023/2023-06/thes-youth-engagement-program-yep	After-school enrichment, academic support, and community events that engage students, families, and the broader school community. <i>Keywords: Community Events, Youth Engagement</i>
VolunTeens	VolunTeens	Community Organization	Middle-high school (ages 11-18)	Howard County	None	Free	https://volunteensc.org/	Volunteer activities for teens (e.g., knitting baby hats, food delivery, stream restoration). <i>Keywords: Volunteerism</i>
YMCA Youth & Government (Model Legislature)	YMCA of the USA and local YMCA	Nonprofit	High school (ages 14-18)	Howard County	None	Fee-based	https://ymaryland.org/programs/youthgovernment	High school students participate in a hands-on model legislature to learn government, debate, and develop leadership skills. <i>Keywords: Leadership Development, Youth Government</i>

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Youth Leadership Summit	Pearl Foundation	Nonprofit	Middle-high school (ages 11-18)	Howard County	None	Free	https://www.pearlFOUNDATIONINC.org/youth-leadership-summit	Interactive youth summit offering leadership activities, life skills workshops, and a service project supporting underserved girls. <i>Keywords: Leadership Development, Community Service</i>

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION & SUSTAINABILITY

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
DIY Indoor Composting Buckets	Clarksville Youth Care Group	Community Organization	Elementary-high school (ages 6-18)	Howard County	None	Free	https://www.clarksvilleyouthcaregroup.org/diy-indoor-composting-bucket.html#/	This program teaches youth how to make and use composting buckets. <i>Keywords: Sustainability, Interactive Activities</i>
EnvSmart	Clarksville Youth Care Group	Community Organization	Elementary-high school (ages 6-18)	Howard County	None	Free	https://www.clarksvilleyouthcaregroup.org/cycg-yep-envsmart-2023.html#/	This program hosts a series of youth-lead community activities and events intended to spread environmental awareness and education. <i>Keywords: Environmental Education, Sustainability, Community Engagement</i>
Every Kid Outdoors	U.S. government agencies (e.g., NOAA, NPS, USACE)	Federal	Elementary school (ages 6-10)	National	U.S. citizens, Grade 4 students	Free	https://everykidoutdoors.gov/pass.htm	Free pass for grade 4 students (and their accompanying family) to National Parks and Federal Recreation Lands. <i>Keywords: National Parks and Recreation</i>

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Green Seeds Internship Program	Community Ecology Institute	Nonprofit	High school-young adult (ages 14-24)	None	None	Free	https://www.communityecologyinstitute.org/green-seeds-internship.html	Experiential agricultural and ecological learning program on Freetown Farm. <i>Keywords: Agricultural Education, Nature</i>
Howard County Conservancy – Youth Climate Institute	Youth Climate Institute	Nonprofit	High school (ages 14-18)	Maryland	None	Fee-based	https://youthclimateleader.org/	Educates and certifies youth on climate science, environmental justice, and practical solutions. <i>Keywords: Leadership Development</i>
Junior Showmanship	Howard County Farm Bureau	County	Early childhood (ages 5-8)	Howard County	Family must be a member of Howard County Farm Bureau	Fee-based	https://mdfarmbureau.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/10-JUNIOR-SHOWMANSHIP-WITH-HOWARD-COUNTY-FARM-BUREAU.pdf	Youth learn to show dairy calves, swine, goats, and lambs through hands-on workshops and fair participation. <i>Keywords: Agricultural Education</i>
Robinson Nature Center Programs	Howard County Recreation & Parks	Nonprofit	Elementary-high school (ages 6-18)	Howard County	None	Fee-based	https://www.howardcountymd.gov/creation-parks/programs#programs-by-age	Field trips, homeschool/scout programs, environmental education, and planetarium shows. <i>Keywords: Interactive Activities, Nature</i>
Waste Warriors	Upcycled	Private/For-Profit	Elementary-high school (ages 6-18)	Howard County	None	Free	https://www.goupycled.com/waste-warriors	Hands-on program teaching youth about plastic pollution, recycling, and watershed protection. <i>Keywords: Recycling</i>

MENTORSHIP, HEALTH, & WELLNESS

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Alpha Foundation of Howard County	Alpha Foundation	Nonprofit	High school (ages 14-18)	Howard County	African American male youth	Free	https://www.alphafoundationhc.org/about-afhc	Provides academic enrichment, mentoring, and leadership development programs supporting African American youth in Howard County. <i>Keywords: Leadership Development, Special Populations</i>
Boys & Girls Clubs of Metropolitan Baltimore	Boys & Girls Club	Nonprofit	Elementary-high school (ages 6-18)	Regional	None	Free	https://www.bgcmetrobaltimore.org	Safe, supportive spaces offering programs that promote health, leadership, academic success, and workforce readiness for all youth. <i>Keywords: Wellness, Youth Development</i>
Camp Attaway	Camp Attaway	Nonprofit	Elementary-middle school (ages 7-13)	Howard County	Children with emotional and behavioral disorders	Fee-based, tuition assistance available	https://campattaway.org/summer-program/campers/	Three-week summer day camp offering new skills for youth with emotional and behavioral disorders. <i>Keywords: Summer Camp, Special Populations</i>
Center for Creative Life and Learning	Center for Creative Life and Learning	Nonprofit	Elementary-high school (ages 6-18)	Regional	None	Fee-based	https://cclalinc.org	Leadership and mentoring program, parent workshops. <i>Keywords: Mentoring, Leadership Development</i>
Islamic Leadership Institute of America	Islamic Leadership Institute of America	Nonprofit	Elementary-young adult (ages 9-25)	Regional	None	Free	https://www.islamicleadership.org/about	Nonprofit leadership development and mentorship program offering school, home school, and afterschool programming. <i>Keywords: Youth Development</i>

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Kidpower Teenpower Fullpower International	Kidpower Teenpower Fullpower International	Nonprofit	All ages	Virtual/ International	None	Free & fee-based programs	https://www.kidpower.org/	Personal safety education for all ages, teaching skills for strong relationships and the prevention of harm. <i>Keywords: Life Skills, Crisis/Emergency</i>
Leadership in Action	Oakland Mills United	Nonprofit	Middle-high school (ages 11-18)	Howard County	None	Free	https://www.oaklandmillsunited.org/leadership	Mentorship program focusing on group learning, teamwork/collaboration, creating relationships, and leadership skills. Students will gain leadership experience through both classroom and applied learning. <i>Keywords: Mentoring, Leadership Development</i>
Ohana Howard County	Ohana Howard County	Nonprofit	High school-young adult (ages 14-18+)	Howard County	None	Free	https://ohanahc.org/	Mentorship program pairing youth with trained community mentors to build life skills, leadership, and resilience. <i>Keywords: Mentoring, Life Skills, Community Engagement</i>
Push Program	Columbia Community Care	Nonprofit	High school (ages 14-18)	Howard County	None	Free	https://columbiacommunitycare.org/what-we-do/youth/p-u-s-h/	Hunger relief (Grocery delivery, Food Distribution sites); Violence Prevention (P.U.S.H.), Mentoring and Academic support (S.T.A.N.D.), Volleyball clinics <i>Keywords: Crisis/Emergency, Food/Nutrition, Sports & Athletics</i>
S.T.A.N.D. Mentorship	S.T.A.N.D. Mentorship	Nonprofit	Middle-high school (ages 11-18)	Regional	None	Free	https://www.standmentorship.org/register	Mentoring focused on entrepreneurship, health, life skills and trades. <i>Keywords: Mentoring, Career & Workforce, Life Skills</i>

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Teacher Care Kit	Clarksville Youth Care Group	Community Organization	Elementary-high school (ages 6-18)	Maryland	None	Free	https://www.clarksvilleyouthcaregroup.org/teacher-care-kit-2021#/	Youth collaborate to make care kits for essential workers (i.e., teachers, police officers, and healthcare providers) and families in need since COVID. <i>Keywords: Community Engagement & Outreach, Special Populations, Crisis/Emergency</i>
Winter Blanket Drive	Clarksville Youth Care Group	Community Organization	Elementary-high school (ages 6-18)	None	None	Free	https://www.clarksvilleyouthcaregroup.org/winter-blanket-drive.html#/	Youth are involved in donating blankets locally and internationally to hospitals, homeless populations, and crisis-stricken regions. <i>Keywords: Crisis/Emergency, Special Populations, Community Engagement</i>

SPORTS & ATHLETICS

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Ellicott City Soccer Club	Ellicott City Soccer Club	County	Elementary-high school (ages 6-17)	Ellicott City	None	Free & fee-based programs	https://ellicottcitysoccer.org/	A soccer club offering recreational, travel soccer, soccer for youth with disabilities, international soccer, and summer camp opportunities. <i>Keywords: Soccer, Travel</i>

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Get on the Bus	Get on the Bus	Nonprofit	Elementary school (ages 6-10)	Howard County	None	Free	https://gotbsoccer.org/about/	A nationally recognized after-school program that removes barriers to youth sports by providing free access to soccer and academic support for underserved elementary school students. <i>Keywords: Soccer, After-School Program</i>
Sports Camps	Wild Lake Athletics Boosters & HS Program	Educational Institution	High school (ages 14-18)	Columbia	None	Free & fee-based programs	https://www.wlboosters.org/sports-camps	Various sports camps including football, soccer, field hockey, basketball, baseball, softball, volleyball, distance running, lacrosse, cheer, and wrestling. <i>Keywords: Sports Camps</i>
YEP! Basketball Clinic	Howard Community College	Educational Institution	Middle-high school (ages 11-17)	Howard County	None	Free	YEP! Basketball Youth Clinic - Howard Community College Athletics	A free 12-month basketball clinic designed to teach the fundamental skills required to become successful basketball players. <i>Keywords: Mentoring, Basketball</i>
YEP! Esports Youth Clinic	Howard Community College (HCC)	Educational Institution	Middle-high school (ages 11-17)	Howard County	None	Free	https://howardcdragons.com/sports/2023/5/1/yep-esports-clinic.aspx	A free monthly clinic that combines fitness, mentorship, and Esports skill development, including healthy meals and coaching from HCC Esports athletes. <i>Keywords: Mentoring, Esports, Food/Nutrition</i>
YEP! Track & Field Youth Clinic	Howard Community College	Educational Institution	Middle-high school (ages 11-17)	Howard County	None	Free	https://howardcdragons.com/sports/2023/6/23/yep-track-field-youth-clinic.aspx	A free track and field clinic designed to teach and develop participants skills and techniques in track and field. <i>Keywords: Mentoring, Track & Field</i>

STEM PROGRAMS

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Achieve Success Together: Tech Girls	CAPA-HC	Nonprofit	Elementary school (ages 6-10)	Howard County	Girls only	Free	https://www.achievethecore.org/techgirls	After-school STEM workshops and enrichment opportunities with social and emotional development elements. <i>Keywords: After-School Programs, Special Populations</i>
Army Educational Outreach Program (AEOP) Internships and Fellowships	U.S. Army/AEOP	Federal	High school (ages 14-18)	Nationwide	None	Free	https://www.usaeop.com/program/high-school-apprenticeships/	Competitive internships and fellowships to conduct cutting-edge STEM research with Army and university labs, supported by mentorship, training, and networking opportunities. <i>Keywords: Research, Mentorship</i>
ASPIRE by Johns Hopkins University	Johns Hopkins University	Educational Institution	High school juniors and seniors (ages 15-18)	Regional	Must be at least 15 years old	Free	https://www.jhuapl.edu/education/stem-outreach/aspire	Hands-on, unpaid STEM internship for high school juniors and seniors to explore careers, complete projects, and develop technical and interpersonal skills with Applied Physics Laboratory mentors. <i>Keywords: Internship</i>
Kids on Campus	HCC	Educational Institution	Elementary-high school (ages 6-17)	Virtual/National	None	Free for Howard County, fee-based for those outside of the county	https://www.howardcc.edu/programs/courses/continuing-education/courses/kids-on-campus/	Year-round enrichment programs in STEM, creative arts, test prep, and more. <i>Keywords: Enrichment Program</i>

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Maryland Wing Civil Air Patrol (CAP)	U.S. Air Force Auxiliary	Federal	Middle-high school (ages 11-18)	Maryland	None	Free	https://mdwg.ca.gov/	Aerospace education, leadership training, physical fitness, and moral leadership. <i>Keywords: Aerospace, Leadership Development</i>
Nivaro AI Program	Nivaro AI Program	Private/ For-Profit	Middle-high school (ages 11-18)	Virtual/ International	None	Fee-based	https://nivaro.io/program	High school students collaborate with Ivy League and MIT students to build AI-driven websites. <i>Keywords: AI, Mentoring</i>

TARGETED SUPPORT SERVICES

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Community Allies of Rainbow Youth & HCPSS Pride	CARY HoCo	Nonprofit	Elementary-high school (ages 6-18)	Howard County	LGBTQIA+ students	Free	https://www.cary-hoco.org	Advocacy and support programs creating safe, affirming spaces for LGBTQIA+ youth through school-based clubs and community engagement. <i>Keywords: LGBTQIA+ Support, Advocacy</i>
G/T Independent Research and Intern/Mentor Programs	HCPSS	County	High school (ages 14-18)	Howard County	Gifted and talented	Free	https://www.hcpss.org/academics/gifted-and-talented/research/	Mentors provide students with professional guidance in a particular field of study. Students complete research projects, learn about advanced-level research methodologies, college-level writing, and oral presentation skills. <i>Keywords: Mentoring, Research</i>

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
PFLAG Howard County	PFLAG	Nonprofit	All ages	Howard County	LGBTQIA+ students and their families	Free	http://pflaghoco.org/education-programs/	Offers scholarships, peer-led support groups, and educational programs to empower LGBTQ+ youth and allies. <i>Keywords: LGBTQIA+ Support</i>
Youth Transition Services – Work-Based Learning Experience (WBLE)	Humanim	Nonprofit	High school-young adult (ages 14-18+)	Regional	Special needs/disabilities	Free	https://humanim.org/what-we-do/youth-services/transitions-services/	Four- to eight-week internship and mentoring program that provides high school students with disabilities hands-on career exploration, workplace readiness training, and transferable job skills. <i>Keywords: Career & Workforce, Disability Services</i>

WORK READINESS & ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Biz Kidz Academy	Biz Kidz	Nonprofit	Elementary-high school (ages 8-18)	Howard County	None	Free	https://bizkidz.co/	Program for young entrepreneurs to have real-world business experiences. <i>Keywords: Workshops, Activity Guides</i>
Health Tech Alley	Health Tech Alley	Nonprofit	Middle school-young adult (ages 10-25)	Maryland	None	Free	https://healthtechalley.org/data-science/	Nonprofit offering youth apprenticeship and opportunities to teach their peers about social capital. <i>Keywords: Health Technology, Career & Workforce</i>
Lemonade + Life Skills: Tech Summit	Consult Lemonade	Nonprofit	All ages	Maryland	None	Free	https://consultlemonade.org/lemonade-tech-summit	Tech Summit for families to explore new technologies, innovation, and career opportunities. <i>Keywords: Tech, Career & Workforce</i>

Program	Agency	Type	Eligibility – Age	Eligibility – Location	Eligibility – Other	Cost	URL	Notes about Program, Including Summary and Keywords
Pre-Employment Transition Services	Humanim	Nonprofit	High school-young adult (ages 14-21)	Howard County	Must complete a DORS application	Fee-based	https://humanim.org/what-we-do/youth-services/transition-services/	Program for students with disabilities that combines classroom and work-based learning to develop career skills, workplace behaviors, and independent living skills for successful employment. <i>Keywords: Life Skills, Workplace Behaviors, Special Populations</i>
Summer STEM Camp - Jr. Camp Counselors	St. John Baptist Church	Nonprofit	Middle-high school (ages 11-18)	Columbia	None	Free	https://sibc.org/summer-camp-application/	Jr. Camp Counselor opportunities for middle and high school students at a Summer STEM camp. Students are given a stipend and school community hours. <i>Keywords: Camp Counseling, STEM</i>
The Career Academies @ the Applications and Research Laboratory (ARL)	HCPSS	County	High school juniors and seniors (ages 15-18)	Howard County	None	Free	https://arl.hcpss.org/about-applications-and-research-lab-arl	A career-focused program for HCPSS high school students that provides hands-on, project-based learning, industry certifications, college credits, and professional mentorship to prepare for postsecondary education and careers. <i>Keywords: Mentorship, Career & Workforce</i>

CHAPTER 5: PROGRAM AND PERFORMANCE DATA

Together, HoCo STRIVES and YEP! Grants funding was provided to 49 unique organizations from Fiscal 2023-2025. These programs served an average of over 10,000 participants⁶ per year. Although these are not unique youth, since many likely took advantage of different opportunities, this is still a substantial number of young people who had a new experience or received additional support as they mature.

This chapter explores data provided by Howard County for YEP! Grants and HoCo STRIVES including the types of programs funded, the funding amounts and number of youth participants, and the performance measures tracked. While detailed information on the performance measures is not provided, due to the number of programs funded, more information can be found in YEP! Grants and HoCo STRIVES funding reports or strategic plans.

YEP! GRANTS

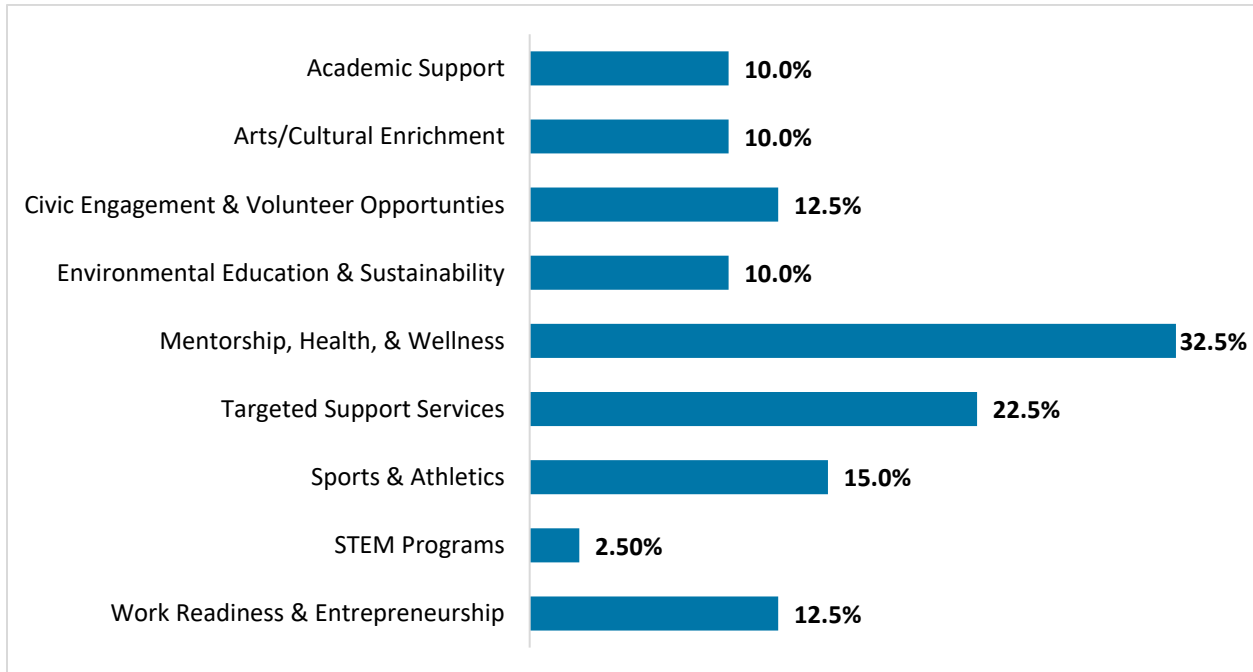
A total of 40 unique organizations received YEP! Grant funding through fiscal years 2023 (FY23), 2024 (FY24), and 2025 (FY25).⁷ Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of the 40 funded programs by their focus area(s), based on a review of each program's website description. As shown, the programs cover a wide range of focus areas, with mentorship, health, and wellness being among the most common. Approximately one-third (33%) of the programs funded related to these issues. Targeted support services (23%) were also a frequent focus area, encompassing services for populations such as LGBTQIA+ youth, youth with disabilities, and programming for individuals of a specific racial or ethnic background.

Figure 3 presents the quarterly trends in the number of participants served by YEP!-funded programs across FY23, FY24, and FY25. In FY23, participant counts steadily increased each quarter, beginning with 1,327 participants in Q1 and reaching 6,693 by Q4. FY24 saw higher overall participation, peaking at 9,025 in Q1 before slightly declining to 7,821 in Q2. In FY25, reported participant counts fluctuated, starting at 1,496 in Q1, increasing to 2,942 in Q2, and rising sharply to 7,234 in Q3.

⁶ Data provided for HoCo STRIVES participants includes some adult participants. However, the total number of HoCo STRIVES participants was 3% of the total participant count, so the number of adults served is likely negligible compared to the total number of youth served.

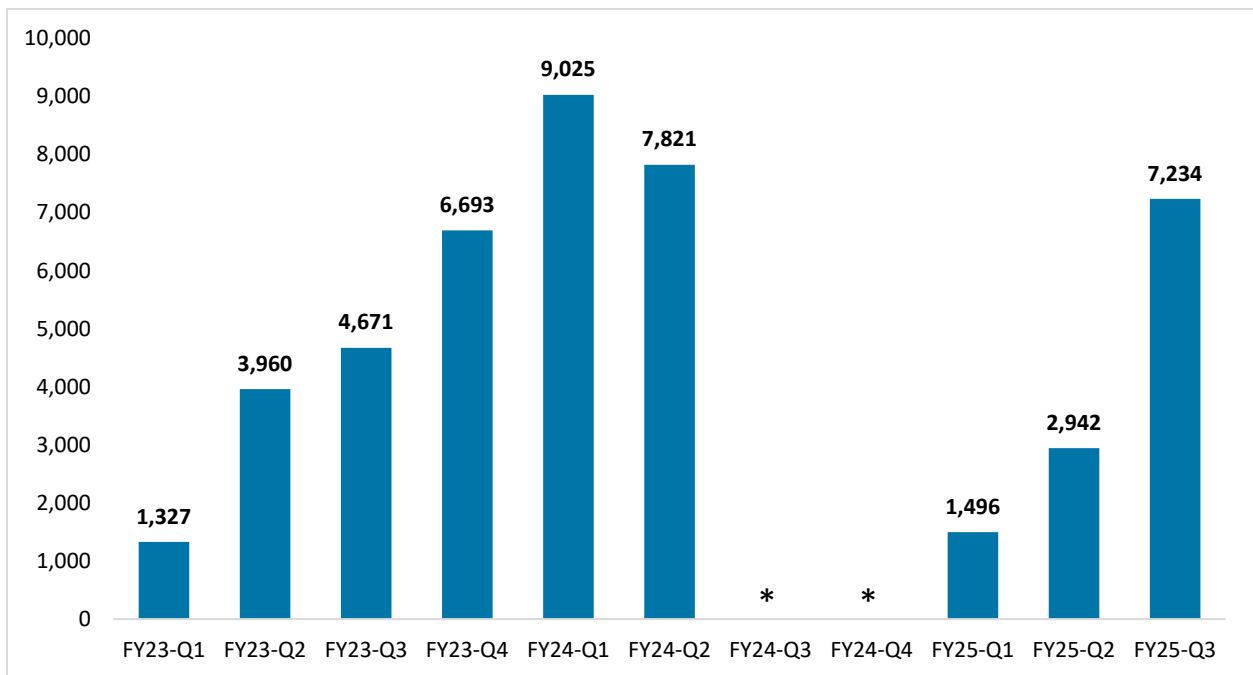
⁷ Data was only provided for Fiscal 2024 for quarters one and two. Therefore, all data in this chapter referencing FY24 are only for the first two quarters of the year. In addition, only data for the first three quarters of FY25 was available at the time this report was completed.

Figure 2: Programmatic Focus Areas of YEP! Grantees, FY23–FY25



Notes: A total of 40 unique organizations received YEP! Grant funding across FY23–FY25. Annual participation counts: FY23 n = 31; FY24 (Q1-Q2 only) n = 28; FY25 (Q1-Q3 only) n = 33. Some organizations participated in multiple fiscal years. Percentages may exceed 100% because programs can have more than one focus area.

Figure 3: Quarterly Trends in Participants Served by YEP! Grantees, FY23–FY25



*Note: * indicates that data was not available for FY24 Q3 and Q4.*

Table 2 shows the percentage of grantees reporting that they served youth within the age group during that fiscal year. In FY23, most grantees (83.5%) reported that they served youth ages 14-18 years old and a slightly smaller percentage (78.9%) served those 10-14 years old. Few grantees (7.3%) reported serving very young participants, those ages 0-5 years old. In FY24, however, a slightly greater share of grantees reported serving those 10-14 years old, although the share serving those 14-18 years old was still over 80%. In FY25, the percentages serving both groups decreased slightly as did the percentages serving those 0-5 years old and those 5-10 years old. Only the percentage serving those 18-25 years grew slightly from FY24 to FY25.

Table 2: Percentage of Funded Organizations Serving Each Youth Age Group, FY23-FY25

Age Group	FY23	FY24	FY25
0-5 years	7.3%	7.6%	6.6%
5-10 years	41.3%	39.6%	35.2%
10-14 years	78.9%	84.9%	81.3%
14-18 years	83.5%	81.1%	76.9%
18-25 years	25.7%	35.9%	37.4%

Note: FY24 includes Q1-Q2 only; FY25 includes Q1-Q3 only.

Table 3 shows the total number of participants served and the percentage of funded programs serving each town or area across the fiscal years. Columbia consistently had the highest number of participants served and the highest proportion of programs, with 88% or more of grantees reporting services there each year. Other areas with substantial participation included Ellicott City and Elkridge, both showing increases in the proportion of programs serving these areas over time. Fulton, Western Howard County, and Savage served fewer participants overall, with relatively lower percentages of programs reporting services in these areas.

Table 3: YEP! Grantee Participants Served and Percentage of Funded Programs by Service Area, FY23-FY25

Town/Area	Total Served, FY23	Percent, FY23	Total Served, FY24	Percent, FY24	Total Served, FY25	Percent, FY25
Clarksville	1,712	31.2%	516	32.1%	901	40.7%
Columbia	5,815	88.0%	2,973	90.6%	4,913	91.2%
Elkridge	1,057	38.5%	730	45.3%	1,270	61.5%
Ellicott City	1,589	43.5%	1,318	58.5%	1,829	64.8%
Fulton	269	17.4%	272	24.5%	1,973	25.3%
Jessup	356	28.4%	343	34.0%	360	39.6%
North Laurel	356	33.3%	343	37.7%	461	44.0%
Savage	208	17.4%	189	20.8%	132	15.4%
Western Howard County	566	19.3%	350	20.8%	551	27.5%

Note: FY24 includes Q1-Q2 only; FY25 includes Q1-Q3 only.

FUNDED ACTIVITIES

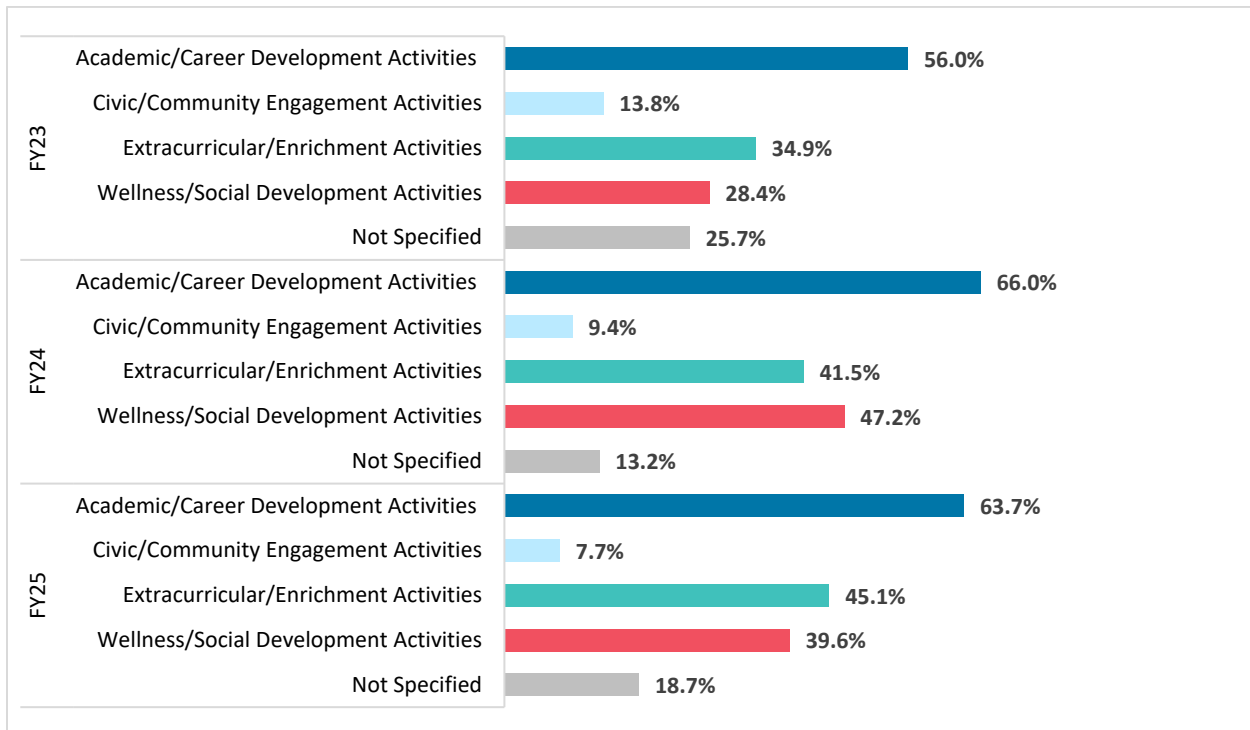
Grantees were asked to respond to a series of open-ended questions that captured their YEP!-funded activities each quarter. These narrative responses provide insight into: the types of programs and initiatives supported; the partnerships established; the ways in which programming has promoted youth wellness and development; the goal and plans for upcoming quarters; and the methods used to measure program success. The qualitative analysis presented in this section summarizes grantees’ responses across these five areas by fiscal year.

The first question asked grantees to describe all programs, initiatives, and efforts that have been supported by YEP! Grants to date. These activities were grouped into the following thematic categories:

- Academic and career development activities, including educational or vocational/work readiness programs;
- Civic and community engagement activities, including volunteering, advocacy, or youth council programs;
- Extracurricular and enrichment activities, including arts, music, cultural, sports/athletics, or environmental programs;
- Wellness and social development activities, including emotional wellness, relationship building, or LGBTQIA+ programs; and
- Not specified, when the programming was not directly specified or the organization reported that no programmatic activities occurred.

Figure 4 presents the distribution of these program activities by fiscal year, showing the percentage of funded organizations that reported activities within each category. Across all three fiscal years, academic and career development activities were the most frequently reported – mentioned by over half of funded organizations each year (56% in FY23, 66% in FY24, and 64% in FY25). The share of organizations offering extracurricular and enrichment activities increased slightly over time, rising from 35% in FY23 to 45% in FY25. Wellness and social development activities also remained a key focus, particularly in FY24, as nearly half (47%) of grantees described initiatives supporting youth well-being and social growth. In contrast, civic and community engagement activities were reported less frequently, with fewer than 15% of organizations citing this type of programming in any fiscal year. The proportion of responses that were not specified declined between FY23 (26%) and FY24 (13%), before rising slightly in FY25 (19%).

Figure 4: Types of Programs, Initiatives, and Efforts Supported by YEP! Grantees, FY23-FY25

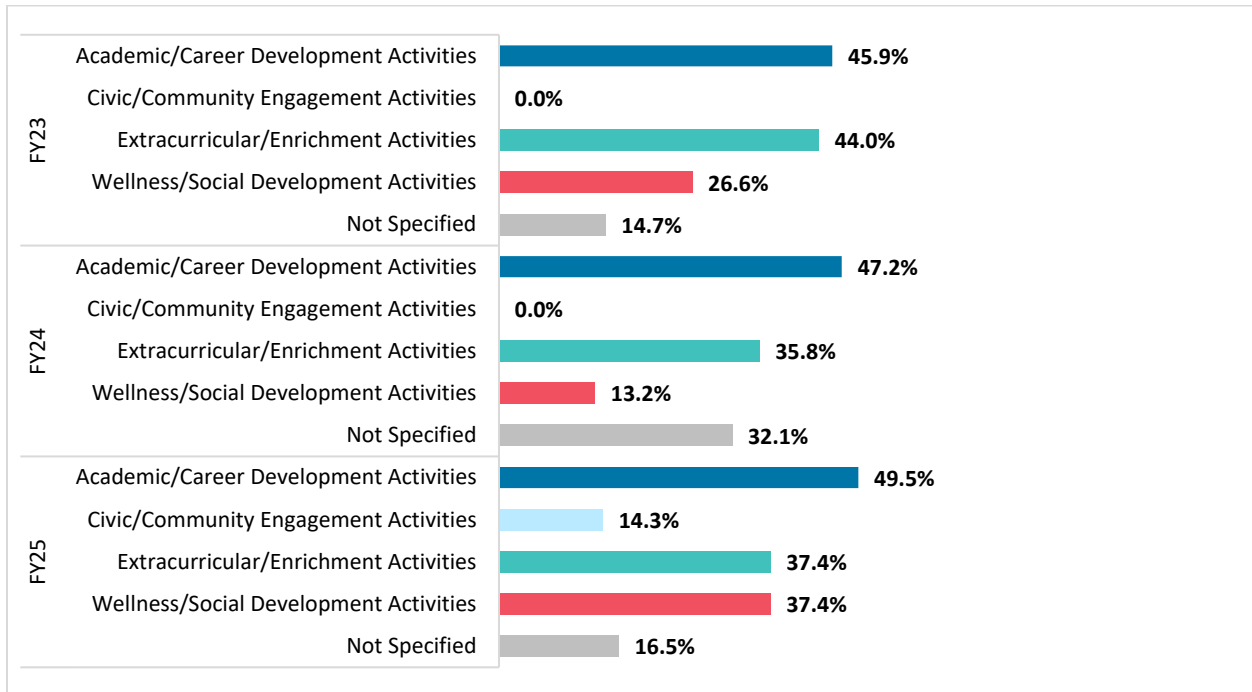


Note: FY24 includes Q1-Q2 only; FY25 includes Q1-Q3 only.

Grantees were also asked to describe the programs and initiatives that they plan to undertake in the upcoming quarter. The same thematic categories were applied as the previous question, and academic and career development activities were the most frequently planned areas of focus, with half or just under half of organizations reporting plans for this topic in FY23 (46%), FY24 (47%), and FY25 (50%). Extracurricular and enrichment activities were also commonly planned, reported by 44% of organizations in FY23, 36% in FY24, and 37% in FY25. Plans to support

wellness and social development varied across years, with 27% reporting plans in FY23, dropping to 13% in FY24, then increasing to 37% in FY25. A smaller proportion of organizations indicated plans for civic or community engagement activities, reported only in FY25 (14%), and several organizations did not specify the focus of their planned initiatives, ranging from 15% in FY23 to 32% in FY24 and 17% in FY25.

Figure 5: Types of Upcoming Programs and Initiatives for YEP! Grantees, FY23-FY25



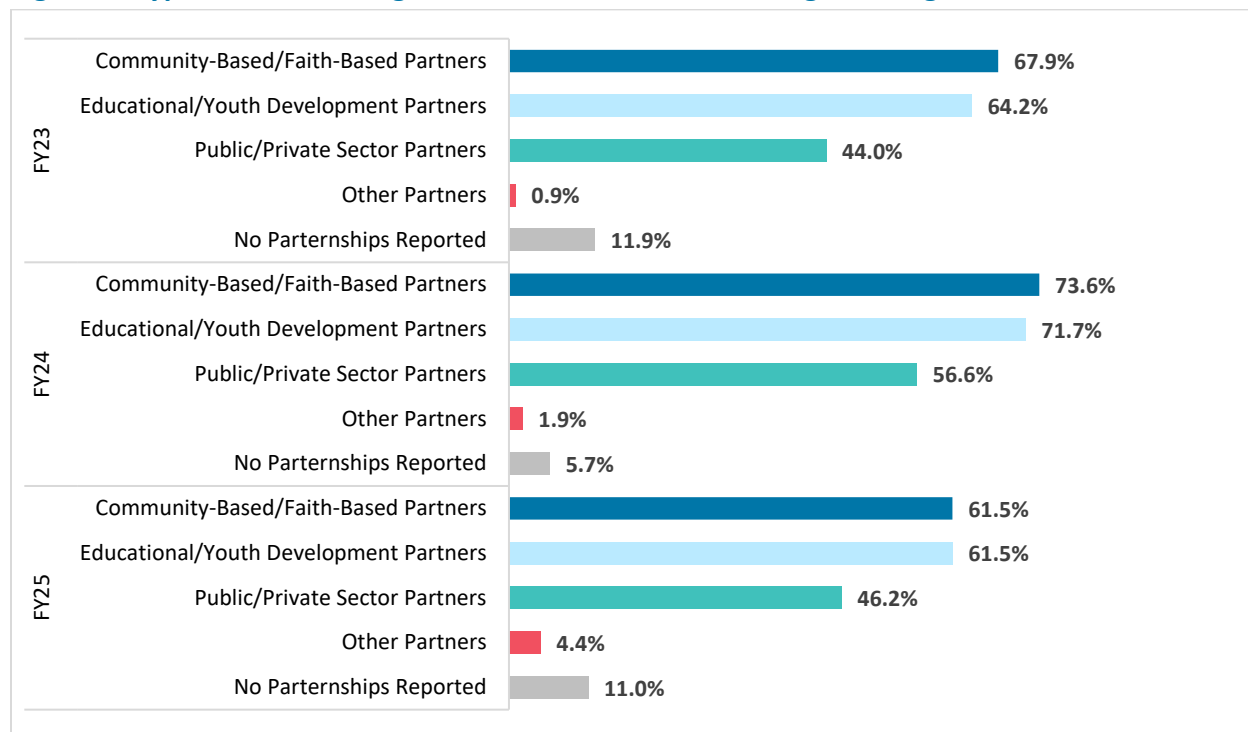
Note: FY24 includes Q1-Q2 only; FY25 includes Q1-Q3 only.

Grantees were asked to describe any partnerships with community organizations and institutions that collaborated on YEP!-funded programming alongside their organization. These partnerships were grouped into the following thematic categories:

- Community-based and faith-based partners, including nonprofits, community neighborhood associations, and churches/religious institutions;
- Educational and youth development partners, including schools, educational institutions, clubs, youth organizations, and museums, cultural institutions, or galleries;
- Public and private sector partners not otherwise captured above, including public agencies, local government offices, or for-profit organizations;
- Other, which includes partners who do not fit into the above categories or in which the organization is unclear; and
- No partnership reported.

Figure 6 presents the types of partnerships reported by YEP! Grantees. Across all fiscal years, community-based and faith-based and educational and youth development partnerships are the most frequently reported, particularly in FY24 (74% and 72%, respectively). Partnerships with public and private sector entities were also commonly cited, especially in FY24 (57%). A small percentage of organizations (ranging from 6% to 12%) indicated that they did not have any partnerships associated with their YEP!-funded programming.

Figure 6: Types of Partner Organizations in YEP!-Funded Programming, FY23-FY25



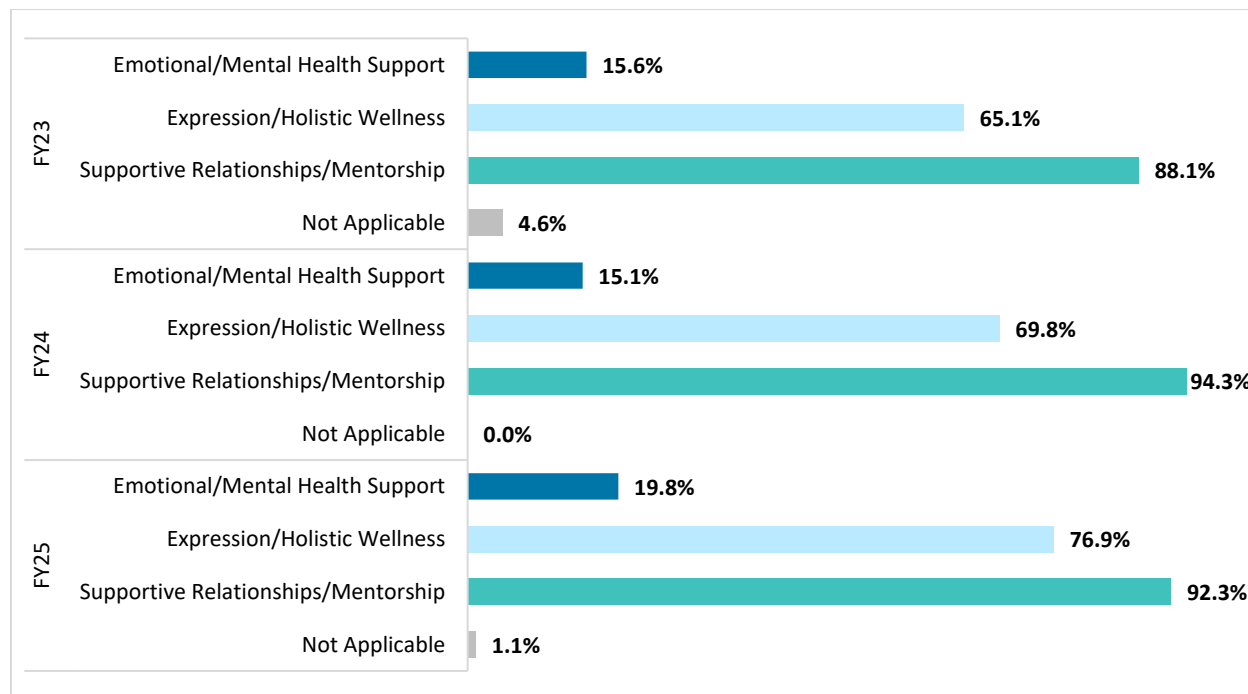
Note: FY24 includes Q1-Q2 only; FY25 includes Q1-Q3 only.

Grantees were asked also how YEP!-funded programs supported mental health, wellness, and social-emotional learning among the young people they served. The following thematic categories were applied:

- Emotional and mental health support (e.g., psychoeducation, therapy, or counseling);
- Expression and holistic wellness (e.g., providing an emotional outlet, wellness and mindfulness activities, nature-based activities, or free or discounted programming);
- Supportive relationships and mentorship (e.g., community building, interpersonal relationship building, providing a safe and supportive environment, or providing individual attention/small program sizes); and
- Not applicable (the organization’s response did not describe programming related to mental health, wellness, or social-emotional learning or no programming occurred).

Across the three fiscal years, the majority of YEP! Grantees reported providing some form of mental health, wellness, or social-emotional learning support to youth (Figure 7). Supportive relationships and mentorships were the most reported type of support, with 88% of organizations in FY23, 94% in FY24, and 92% in FY25 indicating they provide this support. Opportunities for expression and holistic wellness were also widely offered, reported by 65% of organizations in FY23 and increasing to 77% by FY25. A smaller proportion of organizations reported providing emotional and mental health support, with 16% in FY23, 15% FY24, and 20% in FY25. Very few organizations indicated that these types of support were not applicable to their programming.

Figure 7: Reported Approaches to Supporting Mental Health and Social-Emotional Learning in YEP!-Funded Programs, FY23-FY25



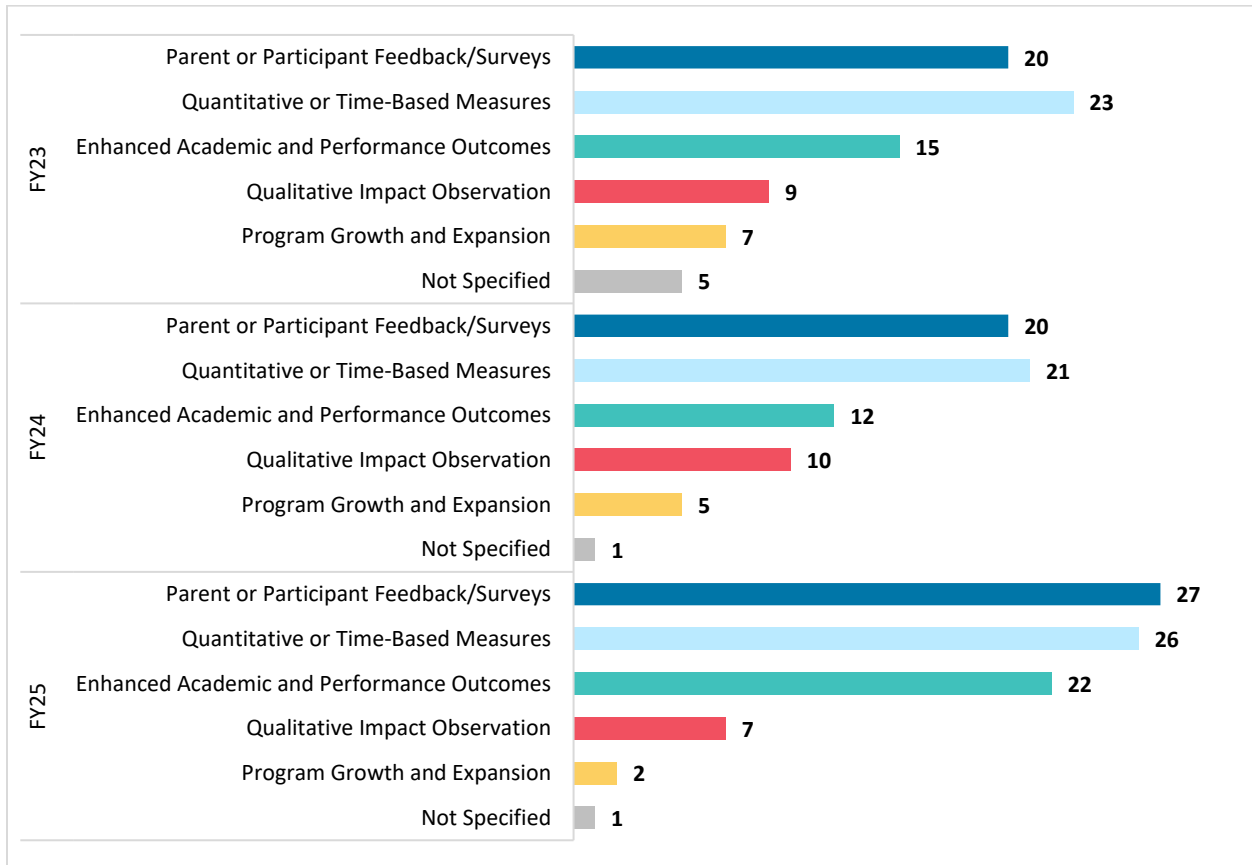
Note: FY24 includes Q1-Q2 only; FY25 includes Q1-Q3 only.

OUTCOMES AND PERFORMANCE

Grantees were asked both how they measured their performance and to provide their performance measures. Figure 8 illustrates the approaches YEP!-funded organizations report using to measure success and track progress towards intended outcomes. The most commonly reported strategies were parent or participant feedback/surveys and quantitative or time-based measures (Figure 8). The former method was used the most in FY25, with 27 organizations reporting their use, while the latter was used more consistently over the three years, with between 21 and 26 organizations reporting their use. Enhanced academic and performance

outcomes was the next most frequently used outcomes, followed by qualitative impact observations and outcomes concerning growth and expansion.

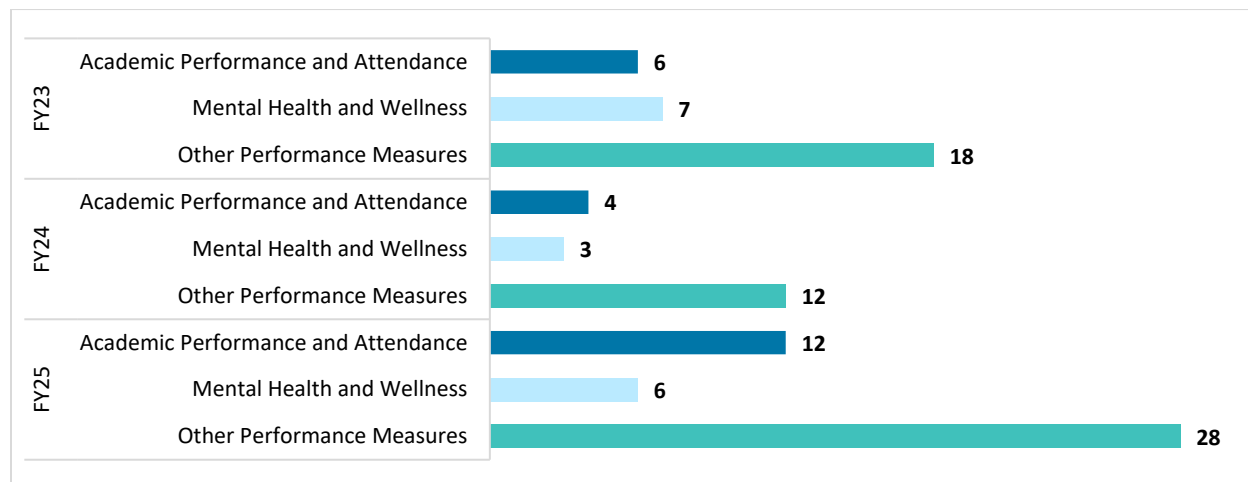
Figure 8: Number of YEP! Grantees Reporting Use of Each Method to Measure Success and Outcomes, FY23-FY25



Note: Annual participation counts: FY23 n = 31; FY24 (Q1-Q2 only) n = 28; FY25 (Q1-Q3 only) n = 33.

Grantees were also asked to provide any additional performance data and metrics pertaining to academic performance and attendance, mental health and wellness, and any additional performance measures and metrics that they were tracking related to the YEP! Grant. As shown in Figure 9, grantees were more likely to report general metrics, such as the number of participants and demographics rather than specific metrics related to academic performance or health. This was especially the case in FY25, when grantees were not asked to report their metrics in the three categories but rather just to provide “all” performance measures and metrics. However, in FY23, grantees were also more likely to report that they would be collecting the data in the future but had not yet started to do so or were not yet able to provide the data as part of their report.

Figure 9: Number of YEP! Grantees Reporting Metrics Related to Each Category, FY23-FY25



Note: Annual participation counts: FY23 n = 31; FY24 (Q1-Q2 only) n = 28; FY25 (Q1-Q3 only) n = 33.

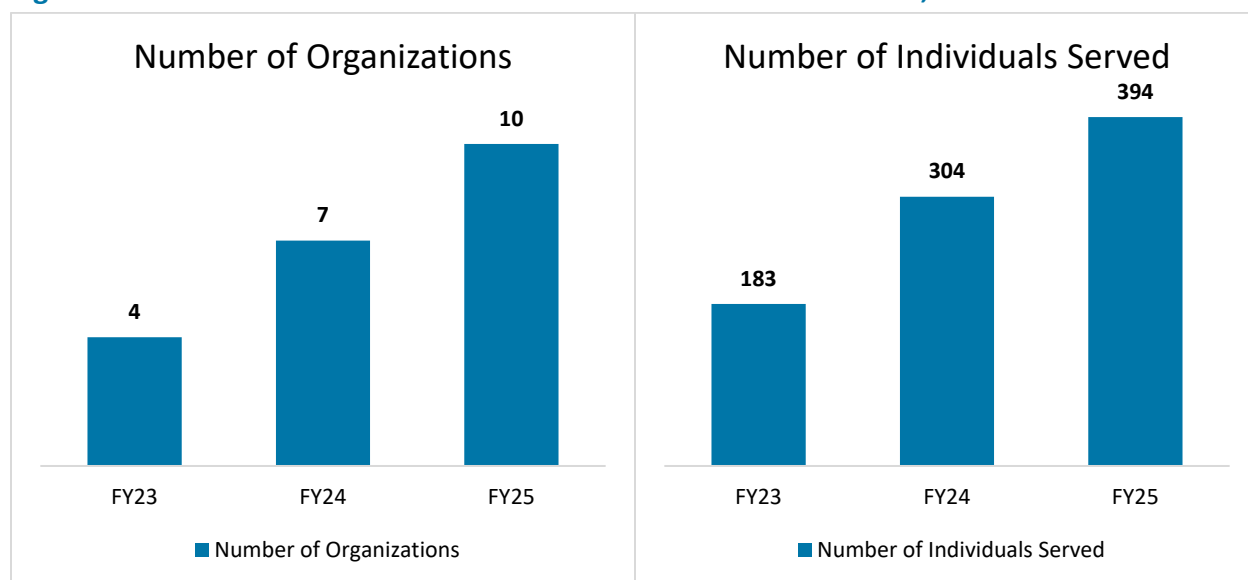
HOCO STRIVES

Across the HoCo STRIVES initiative, data from eight programs implemented by 10 grantee organizations highlight the scope of community partnerships supporting youth, family, and equity-focused services in Howard County during the time period covered by this evaluation.

A total of 881 youth and adults were served by HoCo STRIVES grantees from fiscal year 2023 (FY23) to fiscal year 2025 (FY25). As can be seen in Figure 10, there were four organizations in FY23, seven funded organizations in FY24, and 10 funded organizations in FY25. The number of individuals served was more than doubled, from 183 individuals to 394 individuals.⁸

⁸ Two organizations reported serving adults as well as youth. However, the total number of individuals served during the three years by the organizations declined from 75 people to 44 people.

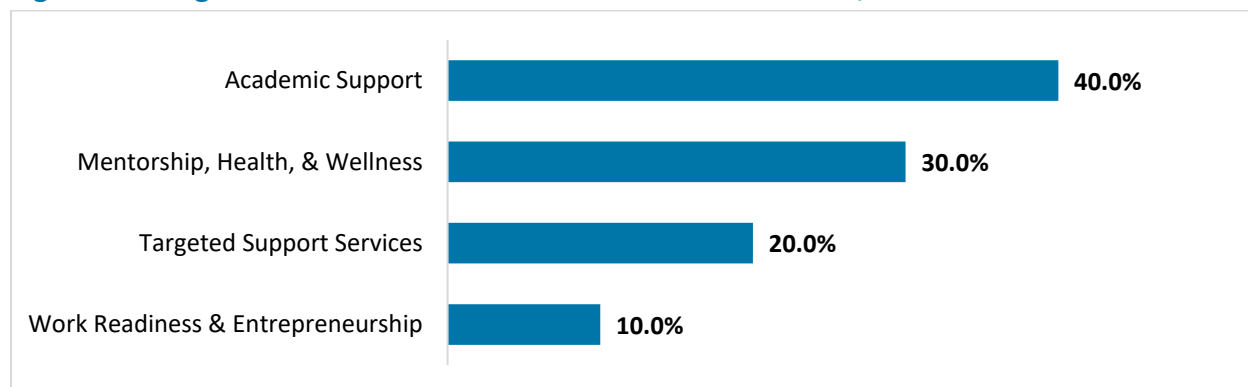
Figure 10: Number of HoCo STRIVES Grantees and Individuals Served, FY23–FY25



Note: Individuals served by Local Care Team (LCT) are counted as one individual per case referred to the LCT.

Programs funded by HoCo STRIVES were categorized by their focus area, using the same groups as those for the YEP! Grants. During the three years covered by this evaluation, most of the programs funded primarily related to academic support (40%, Figure 11). The second largest percentage of programs related to mentorship, health, and wellness, followed by targeted support services, then work readiness and entrepreneurship.

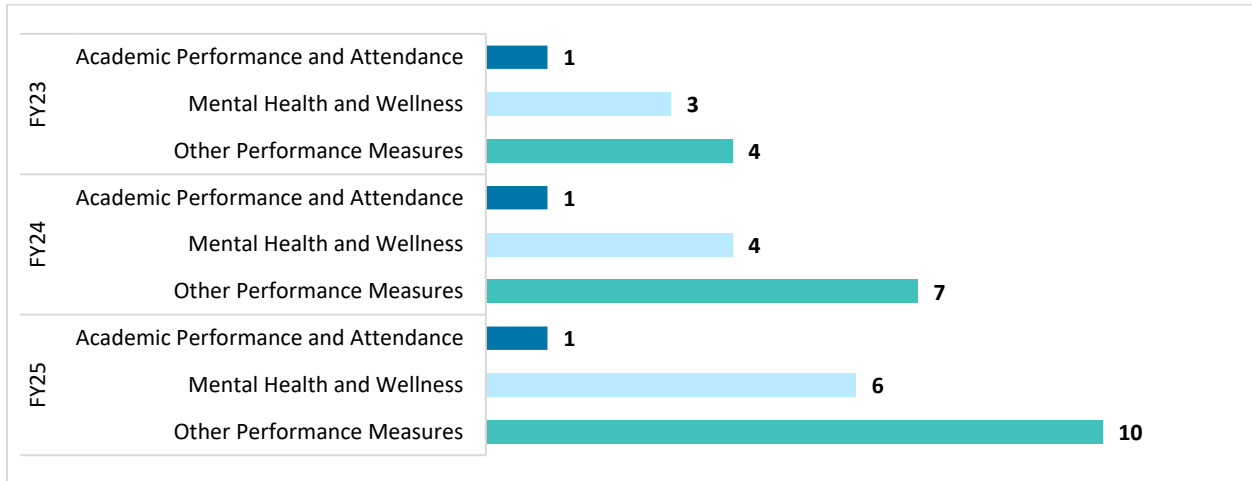
Figure 11: Programmatic Focus Areas of HoCo STRIVES Grantees, FY23–FY25



Performance measure data was also provided for the three fiscal years for the HoCo STRIVES grantees. As with the performance measure data provided for the YEP! grantees, most HoCo STRIVES grantees provided performance measures related to the number of attendees or specific outcomes not related to academic achievement or mental health and wellness (Figure 12). In

FY25, six grantees had performance measures related to mental health and wellness, while compared to four grantees in FY24 and three grantees in FY23. One grantee that was funded each year had a performance measure related to academic achievement.

Figure 12: Number of HoCo STRIVES Grantees Reporting Metrics Related to Each Category, FY23-FY25



Note: Annual participation counts: FY23 n = 4; FY24 n = 7; FY25 n = 10.

CHAPTER 6: FOCUS GROUPS OF YOUTH AND PROVIDERS

As part of this evaluation, focus groups were conducted to better understand how young people in Howard County experience engagement and belonging, specifically, what makes them feel included or excluded in their community. The discussions also explored the types of activities and services young people currently participate in, barriers to participating, how they learn about opportunities available to them, and what kinds of activities or services they would like to see offered in the county.

In total, three focus groups were held. Two were conducted with youth – one on August 19, 2025, with 10 high school-aged participants from the S.T.A.N.D. program and another on November 7, 2025, with 13 middle school-aged participants from the Boys and Girls Club of Metropolitan Baltimore. Participants in the youth focus groups were primarily Black or African American. The third focus group, held on November 6, 2025, included seven providers of youth engagement programming in Howard County.

While the insights gathered through these discussions are valuable and provide meaningful context for understanding youth engagement in Howard County, it is important to note that focus groups are not generalizable to the larger population and these groups, in particular, were small in size and included participants from specific youth programs. As such, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of all young people or all youth engagement providers in the county.

The following sections summarize key themes that emerged from these discussions.

BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

Through the focus groups, several barriers were identified that currently prevent some youth from engaging in activities and events in Howard County. These limiting factors include lack of awareness or interest in available opportunities, challenges related to cost and transportation, and the absence of safe or welcoming spaces where youth feel accepted. Each of these barriers is described in more detail below.

AWARENESS/INTEREST IN ACTIVITIES AND EVENTS

Across the youth focus groups, many participants expressed that there is not much for young people to do in Howard County and that they often look outside of the county (e.g., Baltimore City, Ocean City, Pennsylvania) for activities or events. Participants also noted that they are often

unaware of what opportunities are available and the events they do know about are not always of interest to them. Similarly, providers of youth engagement programming observed that while many young people could benefit from existing activities in the County, they are often unaware of or lack access to these activities.

COST AND TRANSPORTATION

Youth and providers both noted that there are financial barriers preventing some youth from participating in activities in Howard County. Youth stated that activities that are available to them cost too much (such as memberships at the local YMCA). They also said that even if they had money for some of these activities, they would not want to pay because they did not feel the activity was worth the cost. In addition to these financial factors, youth and providers also noted that transportation is a barrier, as many young people do not have a license or access to a car, and many activities are not within walking distance for them. Younger youth echo these sentiments – they wish there were more options for sporting activities at school, as recreation teams are not very accessible due to scheduling, lack of reliable transportation, and the cost.

LACK OF SAFE AND ACCEPTING SPACES

Older youth expressed that they do not feel comfortable attending events in Howard County because they often feel singled out or like they do not belong, feel as if people are afraid of them, or do not feel safe. Participants cited examples such as the events at the Lake Front for the Fourth of July, in which some participants expressed they did not attend due to the fear of fights breaking out at these events. Youth also discussed the recent shootings at the Columbia Mall⁹ that claimed the lives of teens who were friends, classmates, and family members. Many expressed that they felt as though they could be the next victim, and that this fear impacts their sense of security in the County. Providers stated that they felt youth need more safe spaces where they will not be labeled as “trespassers” and mentioned that youth in the County are often over-policed and over-criminalized. They also recognized the need for activities in the county to be more all-inclusive of youth in the county, not just for those coming from affluent communities or certain demographics.

COMMUNICATING OPPORTUNITIES TO YOUTH

As a part of the discussion, youth and providers were asked to share the best ways for young people to learn about activities and events happening in Howard County. Their insights are detailed below.

⁹ For example, in February 2025 there was a double shooting near the mall that resulted in two victims, one of who died. This followed a fatal shooting in July 2024 in the mall’s food court.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A COMMUNICATION TOOL

Across both youth focus groups, participants stated that they are most likely to learn about what is going on in Howard County through social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, as well as through signs or flyers at school and word of mouth. When asked for suggestions on the best way to communicate with teenagers about available activities and services, youth stated that social media would be the best method and suggested that social media pages be created specifically for events for young people to better get the word out.

ROLE OF TRUSTED ADULTS

Providers felt it was important that young people learn about events and activities through trusted adults with whom they have established relationships, as this can help encourage participation. They suggested increasing advertising and communication through schools and recommended simplifying event registration so that it is directly accessible to youth, rather than relying on parents to register participants.

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PROGRAM LEADERS

Providers also suggested the creation of a centralized hub, such as a shared calendar, for information sharing between programs, which would allow events to be cross promoted more effectively. They noted that regular planning meetings or other forms of connection between programs could further support awareness and coordination of events and activities in Howard County.

DESIRED EVENTS AND SERVICES

Focus group discussions revealed distinct differences in the types of events and services desired by younger and older youth participants. High school-aged participants expressed interest in safe, inclusive recreation centers offering a variety of activities, such as music studios, life skill classes (e.g., financial literacy), and structured clubs or organized sport leagues. They also highlighted the importance of services like food pantries, mental health counseling, career planning, mentorship opportunities, and creative outlets.

Middle-school aged participants, on the other hand, were particularly interested in school-based activities that are accessible in terms of cost and transportation, as well as experiential opportunities such as field trips and overnight experiences.

Providers noted that they believe youth are also interested in opportunities to earn income to meet basic needs, access to mental health support beyond the crisis hotline and school counselor, and safe spaces where they can be vulnerable and feel affirmed.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

These focus groups highlighted several key factors that influence youth engagement in Howard County. First and foremost, youth emphasized the need for safe and engaging spaces where they can participate in activities without fear of being criminalized. Second, both youth and their families require a range of support, including financial assistance, transportation, access to food pantries, and mental health services. Finally, effective communication is critical, with participants noting the value of trusted adults, schools, and social media platforms as key channels for sharing information about opportunities and events.

CHAPTER 7: GAP ANALYSIS

A gap analysis is a strategic planning tool used to identify gaps and differences between an organization’s or system’s current situation and its desired state.¹⁰ This chapter identifies service gaps in the current state of youth engagement in Howard County based on information gathered from the literature review, logic model, resource catalog, YEP! and HoCo STRIVES program and performance data, and feedback obtained through the focus groups.

Table 4 presents an overview of the gap analysis, including Howard County’s current state, desired state, and the associated gaps. Each will be described in more detail in the following sections.

Table 4: Gap Analysis Overview

Current State	Desired State	Identified Gap
Over 60 programs or youth-serving organizations exist, but youth believe “there is nothing to do.”	Youth are aware of and can easily find opportunities for engagement.	Awareness Gap: Lack of youth-friendly communication or reliance on channels youth do not use.
Programs exist, but youth say offerings are not engaging or aligned with their interests.	Activities reflect youth culture, trends, and preferences.	Interest Gap: Programs may not be designed with youth input or may be limited to certain domains.
Transportation and cost are barriers; some programs are geographically concentrated and/or fee based.	Youth can attend programs without major logistical barriers.	Access Gap: Geographic inequities, transportation challenges, lack of evening/weekend options, financial barriers.
Providers of youth programming report limited coordination between their organizations.	A connected ecosystem with shared outreach and aligned goals.	Coordination/Collaboration Gap: Programs operating in isolation, lack of central communication hub.
Recent incidents of violence have caused youth to feel unsafe attending events in public spaces.	Youth have trusted and welcoming environments where they feel physically and emotionally safe.	Safety Gap: Lack of safe, youth-friendly spaces where youth can gather informally without fear of violence or being criminalized.

¹⁰ Kim, S., & Ji, Y. (2018). Gap analysis. In R. L. Heath & W. Johansen (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Strategic Communication*. John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119010722.iesc0079>

AWARENESS GAP

While Howard County offers a wide range of youth engagement opportunities – demonstrated by the 60+ programs and youth-serving organizations included in the resource catalog – focus group feedback highlights a persistent perception among some youth that “there is nothing to do.” As a result, many young people continue to look outside of the County for activities and spaces that feel welcoming, interesting, and accessible.

Focus group participants, including both youth and providers, emphasized that effective communication is critical to connecting young people with existing opportunities. **Social medial platforms** such as Instagram and TikTok, along with **school-based communication channels** (e.g., flyers, announcements, bulletin boards, teachers), were consistently identified as the most effective ways to reach youth.

Importantly, focus group feedback suggests that communication strategies could be tailored by age groups. For younger students, information shared through schools and parents or caregivers is most effective. For older youth and teens, social media remains the preferred method for learning about available programs and events.

To enhance visibility and awareness of existing opportunities, the YES! Council and Howard County should consider **employing a varied, age-responsive communication strategy that leverages these channels to better reach and engage youth** across Howard County.

INTEREST GAP

Findings from the analysis of YEP! and HoCo STRIVES program data indicate that many of the funded programs in Howard County are oriented toward academic support and career development. While these offerings provide valuable skills and should be maintained, focus group feedback revealed a **gap between what youth find engaging and what is currently available**. Young people consistently expressed interest in activities centered on the arts, music, outdoor recreation, and sports.

This gap is further supported by the literature on Positive Youth Development (PYD). Evidence shows that programs incorporating PYD, such as music-based activities, arts programming, and environmental or outdoor service opportunities, play a critical role in fostering an adolescent’s personal, social, and emotional growth. These types of activities encourage intrinsic motivation,

promote self-reflection, and strengthen emotional well-being, aligning closely with the interests and needs identified by the youth in the focus groups.

Focus group feedback also brought to light a broader concern: youth often communicate the types of activities they want, but their input is not always translated into action. Providers noted that youth preferences are solicited but not consistently implemented. Younger participants also expressed that they do not always feel respected or heard by adults in decision-making positions. The youth engagement literature highlights that **when young people are engaged as active partners in the design and implementation of programming, participation increases and outcomes improve.** Meaningful youth involvement provides opportunities to build practical skills, develop leadership, and work collaboratively with adults.

To better align programming with youth interests and to elevate youth voices, the YES! Council and Howard County may consider **implementing ongoing, structured approaches for gathering and integrating youth feedback.** This could include regular **youth-led focus groups, youth ambassadorships, or youth summits,** ensuring that young people have recurring opportunities to shape the programs intended for them.

ACCESS GAP

A lack of transportation and activity costs are barriers to participation for young people. Activities are geographically dispersed across the County limiting the ability of youth – particularly those without access to a car – to walk, bike, or use convenient public transportation to reach programs.

Analysis of YEP! Grants data further illustrates this access gap. The majority of funded programming is concentrated in Columbia, Ellicott City, and Elkridge, meaning that youth living outside of these areas may have fewer nearby opportunities or face longer travel times. This geographic distribution compounds the challenges expressed in focus groups, where young people frequently cited transportation as a key obstacle to participation.

Financial barriers also contribute to limited access. Both providers and youth reported that activity fees can be cost-prohibitive, as some families are facing financial hardships that further contribute to the inability to participate.

To help address these challenges, the YES! Council and Howard County should **explore ways to leverage YEP! and other grant funds to reduce or remove these barriers,** for example, by

supporting transportation to activities or covering participation fees for youth and families who need assistance. These strategies could expand access and ensure that more young people across the County are able to participate in opportunities that align with their interests.

COORDINATION/COLLABORATION GAP

Focus group discussions with providers revealed a **gap in coordination and communication among youth-serving organizations in Howard County**. Providers reported that, at present, there is limited collaboration across programs and few mechanisms for sharing information about upcoming activities or available resources. Providers expressed that a centralized calendar would help reduce duplication efforts, strengthen partnerships, and make it easier for cross-promotion.

Providers also discussed the need to have more opportunities for **connection with the school systems** to better advertise youth events and share information with families. The literature on youth engagement and violence prevention highlights the value of strong community partnerships, particularly with academic institutions, as they can enhance violence prevention efforts by bringing together diverse stakeholders, reaching more at-risk youth, and building community capacity. Howard County has begun to move in this direction, as evidenced by the educational institutions receiving YEP! Grant funding (e.g., Wild Lake High School Boosters, Thunder Hill Elementary PTA). However, focus group feedback suggests that the relationships between these and other educational institutions and community organizations could be strengthened to increase the reach and visibility of youth programming.

To that end, it is recommended that the YES! Council and Howard County **expand its reach beyond current grantees to build a broader, more interconnected network of youth-serving organizations**. This could include a county-wide survey of organizations or implementing a network analysis to better understand how programs currently interact, where communication pathways exist, and where additional collaboration may be beneficial.

SAFETY GAP

Safety emerged as a significant concern among youth and providers during the focus groups. Older youth in particular described feeling unsafe or unwelcome in community spaces. They referenced recent incidents – such as the Columbia Mall shooting and fears of violence at community events like the Fourth of July celebrations at the Lakefront – as factors that

discourage them from participating in local activities. Providers echoed these concerns, noting that young people often experience over-policing and over-criminalization in public spaces.

Providers also raised concerns related to inequitable access to information about activities, noting that parents and guardians who are already connected to resource networks are more likely to hear about opportunities. As a result, certain demographic groups may be unintentionally left out. Additionally, providers highlighted disproportionate school discipline practices that affect some student groups more than others, which can further add to feelings of marginalization and reduce engagement in community-based activities.

This safety gap must also be understood within the broader context of rising youth violence in Howard County post-COVID-19. As documented in recent media reports,¹¹ the uptick in youth-involved incidents has promoted countywide concern and a mandate to better understand and respond to the needs of young people.

The literature underscores the urgency of addressing these safety-related challenges. Research shows that **exposure to violence, whether direct or indirect, can have lasting effects on emotional regulation, social functioning, and school engagement**, thus highlighting the importance of trauma-informed care in program design and delivery (Hamilton, 2024). **Trauma-informed services**, delivered through free or low-cost programs, **can serve as low-barrier entry points for mental health support and help increase mental health literacy** among adolescents.

Furthermore, the literature emphasizes that staff who work in youth programs can play a critical role in program quality and youth outcomes. **Ensuring that youth-serving professionals receive training in complex trauma and community violence exposure** can strengthen their ability to support young people and foster safe and trusting environments. Positive relationships with caring adults also function as key protective factors, helping youth build resilience in the face of instability at home, school, and in their communities. Evidence from faith-based electronic mentoring programs reinforces this point, demonstrating improvements in self-regulation and school engagement among participating youth.

Alongside structured, trauma-informed programming, youth expressed a strong desire for an informal space where they can gather freely and feel safe, such as a free or low-cost recreation center or similar community hub. These environments can provide opportunities for connection and unstructured socialization, serving as a compliment to more formal program offerings.

¹¹ See, for example, Olaniran, C. (2025, April 1). *Howard County launches new council to tackle youth violence*. CBS Baltimore. <https://www.cbsnews.com/baltimore/news/howard-county-youth-violence-council-maryland/>.

To strengthen efforts in Howard County, the YES! Council may also **look to successful youth violence prevention models in other regions**, such as CDC-funded Youth Violence Prevention Centers (YVPCs), Chicago’s BRAVE program, and Cleveland’s Summer Youth Employment Program. These initiatives illustrate how multi-sector partnerships, trauma-informed approaches, and community-based programming can reduce risk factors and enhance safety for adolescents.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

The findings from this evaluation show that Howard County is currently home to many youth-serving organizations and a wide range of programming; however, gaps related to awareness, interest, access, coordination/collaboration among programs, and feelings of safety in the community limit the extent to which young people can fully benefit from these opportunities. Findings from the focus groups, program data, and the literature all suggest a need for better communication about opportunities, youth input on programming, reduced financial and transportation barriers, trauma-informed services, and more extensive collaboration between program leaders.

By expanding opportunities in the above areas, Howard County can meaningfully enhance the experiences of its young people and encourage more widespread participation in its youth programming. The recommendations developed through this evaluation were designed to inform the YES! Council's final report to the County Executive and help shape a refined strategy that elevates youth voices, builds community capacity, and promotes positive engagement among adolescents across Howard County.

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APPENDIX B: YOUTH FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

Howard County Evaluation of Youth Engagement Focus Group Guide for Howard County Youth

Audience: Youth attending a Howard County Teen Kick Back or Homewood Center.

Recruitment: See consent statement document.

Frequency: Two focus groups this summer.

Approved by UBalt IRB August 5, 2025.

INTRODUCTION (10 MINUTES)

Introduction: Hello, my name is _____. I am the moderator for this 90-minute group discussion. Our purpose today is to understand if you and others your age feel engaged in Howard County and what makes you feel included or excluded here. Our purpose today is to understand what activities and services you and young people you know take part in, how you learn about things to do, and what types of activities or services you would like to see available to young people in Howard County.

Agenda: You will be doing several things during this session, including participating in a group discussion and spending a few minutes jotting down your thoughts prior to answering some of the questions.

Acknowledgment: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group.

Disclosures: This session is being recorded so we have an accurate record of what was said, not who said what. I also have _____ assisting me today. Their job is to be another set of ears and help with notes and exercises as we go along.

Guidelines:

I have a couple requests:

1. I would greatly appreciate it if everyone would turn off their phone ringers and keep their phones off the table. If you have an emergency, please step out of the room.
2. Please talk one at a time.
3. Talk in a voice at least as loud as mine.
4. Avoid side conversations and contribute to the group discussion.
5. Please help me make sure that no one talks too much or too little.
6. Please be respectful of everyone's opinions.
7. Share what you think and feel even if you disagree with someone else.

Overview:

Has anyone been in a focus group before?

Each focus group runs a little differently. I'd like to share how our focus groups work. The value of a focus group is in the interaction between the participants in a discussion. It is important that everyone shares their perspective or experiences on these topics. While this is a small group, you each represent other people who share your experience, so we want to hear from everyone.

As we go along, I would like you to keep the following in mind:

1. The idea behind focus groups is to gather your opinions and ideas, so it is important that everyone contributes to the discussion.
2. I don't expect that you will all agree with each other, and I want to hear everyone's opinions and thoughts.
3. There are no "wrong" answers to the questions that I will be asking, so please share openly.
4. Feel free to respond to something that another participant has said.

Confidentiality:

Our notes and the report we produce for this project will keep everyone anonymous.

Because you may know each other from outside this group, please respect each other's opinions and do not share what we discuss outside of the focus group.

You already received your consent forms, but as a reminder, participation in this focus group is voluntary. You do not have to respond to every question, and you are free to leave at any time.

Recordings will be securely stored at Schaefer Center and will be sent to a transcription company to prepare a transcript for use by the research team. Outside of the transcription company and research team, your individual responses will not be shared with outside groups, including the people who work here at the Kick Back or S.T.A.N.D. program {this will be customized for the location of the focus group}. However, the research team may use short, direct quotes in the report without identifying information. Your name will not be linked to anything in the report.

I will be facilitating the discussion that you will be having with each other. My job is to keep things going and to make sure we are covering the topics that I have been asked to cover.

Facilities:

Please feel free to get up as needed, but let's only have one person leave the room at a time. Water is located _____. Food is located _____. Restrooms are located _____.

SELF-INTRODUCTIONS (10 MINUTES)

Please introduce yourself to the group and tell us the following:

- What is your first name or your preferred name?
- What's something you like to do in your free time?
- How long have you lived here in Howard County?

Begin audio recording.

QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTIVITIES IN HOWARD COUNTY (10 MINUTES)

1. Let's start by talking about some of the activities you and other you people like you to do in Howard County.

ACTIVITY: Before we jump into the discussion, please take a few minutes to jot down three of your favorite things to do in Howard County. Everyone grab three sticky notes and write one activity on each sticky note along with a word or phrase about why you like the activity.

When you are done, please place your notes on the easel pad.

Ask about one or two – what they like about it, who is in charge of that activity or place and how they learned about it.

2. Do you or your friends regularly participate in activities or events outside of Howard County?
 - a. If so, what types of events are they? What do you like most about these events?
 - b. Do you know if similar events are offered in Howard County?
 - i. If so, why do people go to events outside of the county when similar events are offered here?

3. Where do you and your friends go to just hang out without having to spend money?

PROBE: Are those places accessible/available to everyone your age in Howard County?

QUESTIONS ABOUT OTHER ACTIVITIES (10 MINUTES)

4. Are there events or activities in Howard County that you or other people your age would like to participate in, but are unable to?
 - a. If so, what are the events or activities?
 - b. What are some of the reasons why people can't participate in these activities?

PROBE: Do reasons include cost, location, transportation, scheduling, don't know anyone there?

QUESTIONS ABOUT SERVICES AND NEEDS (10 MINUTES)

5. What are the biggest challenges for people your age in Howard County?

PROBE: Why is this such a problem?

PROBE: What are your ideas for how this can be solved?

6. What are some of the activities that you or other young people wish were available to them in the county?

PROBE: What about places/activities to support mentorship or to talk about what to do after finishing high school or career exploration?

PROBE: What about activities or resources to help with personal issues such as problems at home or conflict with others?

PROBE: What about resources to support mental health and wellness? Peer discussion groups, nutrition classes, community gardening, etc.

QUESTIONS ABOUT FEELING ENGAGED (10 MINUTES)

7. How do you or your friends learn about what is going on in Howard County such as available activities or services? *(Note: This does not include just hanging out with friends or local parties; it is about activities and services offered by your local community such as the government or nonprofits.)*

8. What suggestions do you have for Howard County about the best ways to communicate with teenagers about available activities, services or help?

9. Do you feel like you are part of a community in Howard County?

PROBE: What specifically makes you feel like part of a community or what makes you feel like you are not part of a community?

10. What stops you and other young people from doing things in Howard County or your local community?

11. Do adults in Howard County – not including your family and teachers – care about what you and people your age do when you are not at school?

FOLLOW-UP: What do they do that makes you feel that way?

12. Do you feel like adults in Howard County care about what you and people your age think about what is going on in Howard County and your local community?

FOLLOW-UP: What do they do that makes you feel that way?

CLOSING QUESTIONS (10 MINUTES)

13. If you had an idea about how to improve something in Howard County, who would you talk with or approach to share your idea and maybe have the change happen?

PROBE: What would be their response to your suggestion?

14. If you could change just one thing about Howard County to make it better for people your age, what would that change be?

CLOSURE (1 MINUTE)

Thank you for your participation in this focus group. You have provided important information and recommendations for us to consider. We appreciate your time.

APPENDIX C: PROVIDER FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

Howard County Evaluation of Youth Engagement Focus Group Guide for Howard County Providers

<u>Audience:</u>	YEP! Grantees.
<u>Recruitment:</u>	See consent statement document.
<u>Frequency:</u>	One focus group.

To be submitted to UBalt IRB.

INTRODUCTION (10 MINUTES)

Introduction: Hello, my name is _____. I am the moderator for this 60-minute group discussion. Before we get started, please take a moment to review and sign the consent form that was sent to you via DocuSign if you haven't already. We won't be able to begin the discussion until everyone has provided their consent, so I'll pause here for a moment to make sure that's complete.

Our purpose today is to learn from your perspective as providers who work with young people in Howard County. We want to understand what activities and services you see youth participating in, what factors contribute to their inclusion or exclusion, how youth typically learn about opportunities, and what types of activities or services you think would be most valuable for them.

Agenda: You will be doing several things during this session, including participating in a group discussion and spending a few minutes jotting down your thoughts prior to answering some of the questions.

Acknowledgment: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group.

Disclosures: This session is being recorded so we have an accurate record of what was said, not who said what. I also have _____ assisting me today. Their job

is to be another set of ears and help with notes and exercises as we go along.

Guidelines:

I have a couple of requests:

8. I would greatly appreciate it if everyone would silence their phones. If you have an emergency, please step away/ out of the room.
9. Please talk one at a time.
10. Talk in a voice at least as loud as mine.
11. Avoid side conversations and contribute to the group discussion.
12. Please help me make sure that no one talks too much or too little.
13. Please be respectful of everyone's opinions.
14. Share what you think and feel even if you disagree with someone else.

Overview:

Has anyone been in a focus group before?

Each focus group runs a little differently. I'd like to share how our focus groups work. The value of a focus group is in the interaction between the participants in a discussion. It is important that everyone shares their perspective or experiences on these topics. While this is a small group, you each represent other people who share your experience, so we want to hear from everyone.

As we go along, I would like you to keep the following in mind:

5. The idea behind focus groups is to gather your opinions and ideas, so it is important that everyone contributes to the discussion.
6. I don't expect that you will all agree with each other, and I want to hear everyone's opinions and thoughts.
7. There are no "wrong" answers to the questions that I will be asking, so please share openly.
8. Feel free to respond to something that another participant has said.

Confidentiality:

Our notes and the report we produce for this project will keep everyone anonymous.

Because you may know each other from outside this group, please respect each other's opinions and do not share what we discuss outside of the focus group.

You already received your consent forms, but as a reminder, participation in this focus group is voluntary. You do not have to respond to every question, and you are free to leave at any time.

Recordings will be securely stored at Schaefer Center and will be sent to a transcription company to prepare a transcript for use by the research team. Outside of the transcription company and research team, your individual responses will not be shared with outside groups including Howard County. However, the research team may use short, direct quotes in the report without identifying information. Your name will not be linked to anything in the report.

I will be facilitating the discussion that you will be having with each other. My job is to keep things going and to make sure we are covering the topics that I have been asked to cover.

SELF-INTRODUCTIONS (10 MINUTES)

Please introduce yourself to the group and tell us the following:

- What is your first name or your preferred name?
- What agency/organization do you work with and what is your role?
- What's something you like to do in your free time?

Begin audio recording.

QUESTIONS ABOUT ACTIVITIES IN HOWARD COUNTY (10 MINUTES)

15. Let's start by talking about some of the activities you see young people in Howard County participating in.

ACTIVITY: Take a moment to think about the youth you work with. What are three activities or programs they are most involved in? These could be after-school programs, community events, sports, arts, or anything else that comes to mind.

You can jot them down on a piece of paper for yourself just to organize your thoughts.

**Once you're ready, I'll ask each of you to share one activity that stands out, along with a word or short phrase about why you think youth participate in it.
(Continue until each person has shared all three or as time allows.)**

16. Do young people you work with regularly participate in activities or events outside of Howard County?
- a. If so, what types of events are they? What do you think youth find most appealing about these events?
 - b. Are you aware if similar events are offered in Howard County?
 - i. If so, why do you think youth choose to participate in events outside of the county when similar ones are available here?

17. Where do you see young people in Howard County going to just hang out without having to spend money?

PROBE: Are these places accessible/available to all youth in the county? If not, what barriers do you see?

QUESTIONS ABOUT OTHER ACTIVITIES (10 MINUTES)

18. Are there events or activities in Howard County that you think young people would like to participate in, but are unable to?
- a. If so, what are the events or activities?
 - b. What are some of the reasons why youth cannot participate in these activities?

PROBE: Do reasons include cost, location, transportation, scheduling, or not knowing anyone there?

QUESTIONS ABOUT SERVICES AND NEEDS (10 MINUTES)

19. What do you see as the biggest challenges facing young people in Howard County?

PROBE: Why do you think these issues are such a problem for youth?

PROBE: What ideas do you have for how these challenges can be addressed?

20. What are some activities or resources you think young people in Howard County wish were available to them?

PROBE: What about places or programs that support mentorship, career exploration, or planning life after high school?

PROBE: What about activities or resources that help with personal challenges, such as problems at home or conflict with others?

PROBE: What about resources that support mental health and wellness – such as peer discussion groups, nutrition classes, or community gardening, etc.

QUESTIONS ABOUT FEELING ENGAGED (10 MINUTES)

21. How do you see young people in Howard County learning about activities or services? *(Note: This does not include just hanging out with friends or local parties, but rather activities and services offered by the local community such as government, schools, or nonprofits.)*

22. What suggestions do you have for Howard County about the best ways to communicate with young people about available activities, services, or support?

23. From your perspective, do young people in Howard County feel like they are a part of a community?

PROBE: What factors make youth feel like they belong, and what factors make them feel excluded?

24. From your perspective, do adults in Howard County – beyond family and teachers – show that they care about what young people do outside of school?

FOLLOW-UP: What behavior or actions have you observed that make youth feel supported or not supported by adults in the community?

25. From your perspective, do adults in Howard County show that they care about what young people think regarding activities, services, or issues in the county and local community?

FOLLOW-UP: What behavior or actions have you observed that make you feel that their opinions are valued – or not valued – by adults in the community?

CLOSING QUESTIONS (10 MINUTES)

26. If a young person had an idea about how to improve something in Howard County, who would they likely talk to or approach to share their idea and potentially make a change?

PROBE: What response do you think youth would receive from these adults or organizations?

27. If you could change just one thing about Howard County to make it better for young people, what would it be?

CLOSURE (1 MINUTE)

Thank you for your participation in this focus group. You have provided important information and recommendations for us to consider. We appreciate your time.