
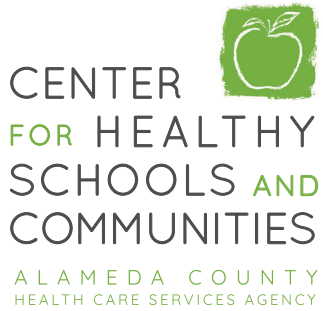




Unaccompanied Immigrant Youth in Alameda County

An Inquiry into the Experiences and Needs of
Unaccompanied Immigrant Youth and Their Families

CENTER 
FOR HEALTHY
SCHOOLS AND
COMMUNITIES
ALAMEDA COUNTY
HEALTH CARE SERVICES AGENCY



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Executive Summary



Unaccompanied immigrant youth (UIY) are minor children and youth who make dangerous journeys across borders to flee extreme violence, traumatic experiences, and economic deprivation in their home countries.

Most immigrant youth who enter the United States unaccompanied come from Central America, primarily Guatemala, as well as El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico. In partnership with local school districts and Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services, Alameda County Health Care Services Agency's (HCSA's) Center for Healthy Schools and Communities (CHSC) commissioned Bright Research Group (BRG) to conduct a research inquiry into UIY. This inquiry provides key findings regarding the experiences of UIY living in Alameda County, including what they see as their most pressing needs. This inquiry also considers the ecosystem of service delivery providers, community members, and educators who support UIY and their families in Alameda

County, and the contributions of the county partners. The purpose of this research is to enable greater alignment between UIY experiences and county-led supports.

This qualitative inquiry draws from key informant interviews with 14 CHSC staff and partners, school personnel, and providers throughout the county; six interviews with parents and caregivers of UIY in Hayward and Oakland; and focus groups with 30 youth (24 in Oakland and 6 in Hayward).¹ The interviews and discussions were conducted in English and Spanish.

¹ Providers who were interviewed include mental/behavioral health clinicians serving UIY through schools, community-based providers of various support services, school-based health center personnel, school district personnel, local researchers, and members of the faith community.



Findings

The extensive body of qualitative data collected for this study reveals that UIY situations vary in terms of protective and risk factors.

These factors affect the level of stability among UIY in Alameda County. When they arrive, with whom they are staying, what language they speak (Spanish or a non-Spanish), the speed at which they learn English, and their position in the legal system are highly determinative of their experiences. The key findings from this inquiry center on the risk factors associated with unmet basic needs, the protective nature of family relationships, and the complex ways that school can present both protection and risk. A clearer understanding of how to increase protective factors and decrease risk factors should help in allocating limited resources in a way that most effectively supports UIY success.

1. UIY are highly impacted by the housing crisis in Alameda County and federal immigration policy.

Interviews and focus groups revealed that UIY and their families are concerned with meeting basic needs, such as housing, legal representation, employment, and health care—though the need for stable housing seems to be paramount. Due to a lack of affordable housing in Alameda County, UIY face significant risk for homelessness. Some UIY live with their families in stable situations, while many others face high rents, overcrowded living situations with extended family members, and other forms of housing insecurity. Safety from detention and deportation also ranks among the most basic of UIY needs. The legal system is opaque and labyrinthine, and immigration attorneys who can provide free and low-cost representation are scarce. Achieving legal status is further complicated by increasing hostility from the federal government toward immigrants and narrowing opportunities for asylum seekers. Health care is also a primary concern. UIY commonly access medical and dental care through school-based health centers as well as community clinics. Access to dental care, reproductive health resources, immunizations, and other exams needed for immigration were valued by UIY.

2. UIY are motivated by economic opportunity and their families.

Engaged and supportive families are a significant protective factor for UIY. By the very nature of their status as youth, UIY have a need for adults in their lives to help them navigate systems and decision-making. The data indicate that, for many UIY, family relationships persist and are a key motivator for young people, regardless of whether they arrived unaccompanied or live apart from their parents. Youth continue to need family support, but the family situations in which they find themselves are often complicated. For example, some UIY reunite with parents whom they have not seen in years; some end up with distant cousins, aunts, or uncles; some live with a sibling who is legally an adult but cannot assume a parental role; and some are, in effect, fostered by people who aren't family members. Irrespective of their living situations, UIY tend to stay in touch with family, many of whom live overseas, in their home countries, or somewhere else in the US. These relationships continue to be important to them, despite what may be assumed by the label, "unaccompanied."

Youth are also highly motivated by a desire to work. They may feel compelled to earn money to contribute to their family, pay off debts, or simply afford the high cost of living in Alameda County. Activities or programs designed to engage UIY productively, such as youth leadership, cannot compete with the drive to earn an income. This primary motivator should be taken into consideration



when developing programming and supports for UIY, including educational and psychosocial programs.

3. Engagement in school is both a protective and a risk factor.

Connection to school can be a significant protective factor for UIY; and remaining in school has multiple practical benefits. Many youth view education as a portal to greater opportunity for achievement in the US. For most UIY, school is a way to engage with supportive and safe adults (teachers, coaches, counselors, and case managers), resources (school-based health centers, school-based mental health providers, referrals to supports), and peers. Schools are not, however, always optimally welcoming to UIY. Prejudice, pressure to join gangs, and unrealistic academic demands can make school an unfriendly environment. Combined with the need to earn an income, these factors prompt some UIY to leave school. For students for whom Spanish is a second language, schools and other systems can be particularly alienating. Disengagement from school can isolate youth from supportive peers and adults as well as access to health-promoting resources. At the same time, graduation from high school and postsecondary education are not necessarily within reach for many UIY, at least not within a short time frame.

Recommendations

Creating Greater System Alignment

These key findings, discussed above, have implications for how the ecosystem of supports for UIY, including county-led efforts through the Alameda County HCSA's CHSC and Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services, can better align resources to meet UIY's most pressing needs.

1. Meet basic needs through investment in case management, housing, and legal services.

A primary focal point of county-led supports has been to ensure that UIY (who have generally endured violence in their home countries and a harrowing journey to the US) have access to mental health services to help them feel supported and to help them learn how to cope safely. The inquiry found, however, that this type of support is not what most UIY are interested in. Unaccompanied youth have little appetite for talk therapy; and even those who do access it tend to stop after a session or two. Rather, the kind of one-on-one support UIY and their families are requesting is assistance in accessing and navigating resources to help them meet basic needs. Case management, focused on brokering access to housing and

legal support, aligns more closely with their needs. Housing presents the most significant gap in the system of supports in Alameda County. While many UIY access assistance through legal-aid organizations, there are inadequate resources to meet the need for legal representation—youth and families need help accessing other legal resources. A case-management approach could help ease some of these needs and enable UIY and their families to navigate bureaucratic systems more readily.

2. Recognize youth connection to family and peers as a strong protective factor.

The potentially protective nature of UIY relationships with their families should be recognized as youth are engaged in supports. The data from this inquiry suggest that many mental health providers tend to focus on supporting the young person as an individual versus working with the family unit. While work and other barriers often prevent families from accessing services, efforts to support youth in developing relationship skills and cultivating positive supportive relationships with the protective adults in their lives should be a priority. Unaccompanied youth may have made the journey alone, but most have ongoing family relationships that need attention. Services designed to support UIY should attend to the family dynamic, strengthen family relationships, and build peer and other informal supports.



Monarch migration mural, San Leandro, CA. Photo: sanleandro.org. Artist: Rigo 23

3. Focus on peer support, gang prevention, and mental health consultation to create welcoming schools for UIY.

Currently, CHSC's work to build the capacity of school and district personnel to support UIY is a highly valued resource in the county. The inquiry suggests that more work is needed, particularly in Oakland, to create schools that are welcoming, supportive, and safe for UIY. This means investing in gang prevention and intervention; addressing the needs for connectedness, peer relationships, and social support; and building staff understanding of implicit bias and trauma-informed approaches, particularly as they relate to UIY. The fact that youth can access multiple school-based supports, often in Spanish, is vital. However, additional resources for students who speak Mam and other native, non-Spanish languages are needed.

Additionally, school staff may need to consider how they can support unaccompanied youths' self-identified academic and employment goals, given that these young people face myriad conflicting needs when it comes to staying in school. Messaging around high school graduation and postsecondary education does not resonate with many UIY. Some need help accessing alternative educational or vocational pathways, strategies for avoiding economic exploitation and/or accessing community resources, and support once they leave school. New investments and programming should take into account the primary motivators expressed by these youth: relationships with family and the drive to earn an income.

Conclusion

This study found widespread recognition that UIY draw from deep stores of personal resilience. Escaping unsafe situations in their home countries, braving the journey to the US, and enduring sometimes inhumane treatment at the border accelerate their path to adulthood. But life within the US comes with a suite of new challenges. On the basis of the needs identified by UIY, their families, and system stakeholders, county-led supports should recognize the key UIY motivators of earning an income and maintaining healthy relationships as they work to prioritize the following: a) meeting UIY's basic needs first through case management, including but not limited to housing and legal needs; b) recognizing and maximizing UIY's supportive adult and family relationships; and c) making schools more hospitable places for UIY so they don't become alienated from the protective resources that they can access there.

Introduction

The Current Climate

Unaccompanied immigrant youth (UIY) are minor children and youth who make dangerous journeys across borders to flee extreme violence, traumatic experiences, and economic deprivation in their home countries. Most immigrant youth who enter the US unaccompanied come from Central America, primarily Guatemala, as well as El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico. Alameda County has the second highest percentage of UIY in California and the eighth highest in the country.

Since 2014, over 2,200 UIY have been apprehended at the border and released to sponsors in Alameda County, with 504 reported in the last fiscal year alone (2017–2018). For the past three years, the Trump administration has fomented a national climate that is unsympathetic and at times outwardly hostile toward immigrants.

In a few short years, this administration has threatened the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, banned nationals of eight countries from entering the US, restricted the conditions under which immigrants can qualify for asylum, reduced refugee admissions to the lowest levels in 40 years, sent troops to peaceful border cities, effectuated substantial increases in ICE encounters and arrests, and executed a practice of separating children from their parents at the border.² Additionally, the administration and the president himself have made repeated threats of massive ICE raids and used inflammatory language (e.g., referring to immigrants and asylum seekers as being part of an “invasion”) in order to engender a climate of fear among immigrants—documented and undocumented alike.³

² https://ballotpedia.org/Timeline_of_federal_policy_on_immigration,_2017-2020; <https://www.govexec.com/management/2019/07/how-ice-enforcement-has-changed-under-trump-administration/158766/>

³ <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/trump-s-anti-immigrant-invasion-rhetoric-was-echoed-el-paso-ncna1039286>

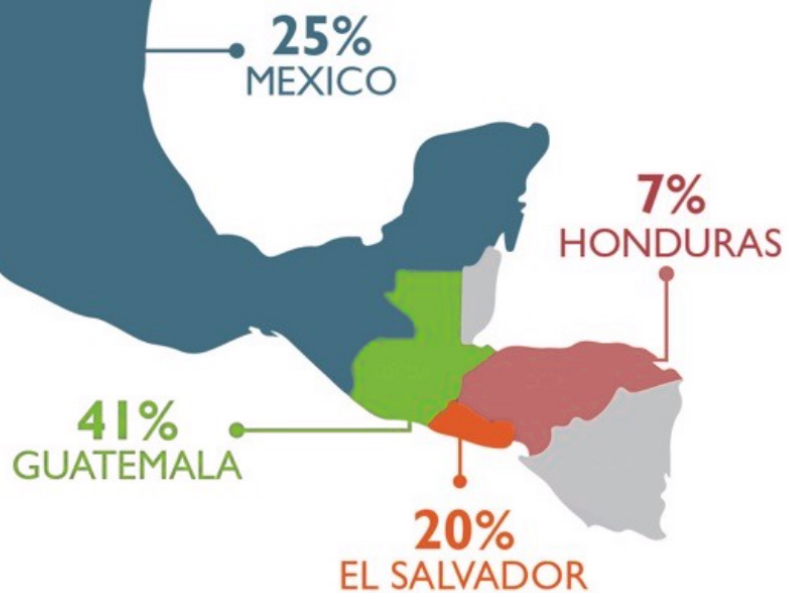
Our Response

In recognition of these circumstances and in partnership with local school districts and Alameda County Behavioral Health Care Services, Alameda County Health Care Services Agency’s (HCSA’s) Center for Healthy Schools and Communities (CHSC) aims to provide targeted support to UIY in schools. CHSC provides customized training, coaching, and consultation to build the capacity of district staff, educators, and service providers to support UIY. CHSC convenes local providers to create a supportive network for UIY and their families and oversees a UIY Care Team that provides direct services to UIY at schools in Alameda County.

The county commissioned Bright Research Group (BRG) to conduct a research inquiry into UIY to learn about their experience living in Alameda County and to seek to understand their most pressing needs and hopes for the future, including how these things may be changing as a result of the current political climate. This inquiry also sought to document the ecosystem of providers, community members, and educators who are coming together to support UIY and their families, to learn about the contributions of CHSC to this ecosystem, and to hear about the ways in which families are engaged in these services. This report provides a summary of key findings related to these topics.



Alameda County UIY Countries of Origin



CHSC's Investment in UIY Programs

Alameda County has a long history of expanding access to health care services for populations which would not otherwise receive quality care. CHSC's initiatives draw from a Social Determinants of Health approach—a public-health framework that posits that living conditions, institutional power, and social inequalities directly determine risk, protective factors, morbidity, and mortality.⁴ Through its school health programs and partnerships, CHSC aims to address urgent health and education inequities and to create opportunities for all young people so they can cultivate their strengths, resiliency, and promise.

⁴ http://barhii.org/download/publications/barhii_sdoH_indicator_guide_v1.1.pdf

As part of its School Health Initiative approach, CHSC implements a targeted strategy for serving UIY. This support is designed to increase school and district knowledge of these young people's unique needs and strengths and to assist districts in building a system of clinical and nonclinical supports to promote their success and well-being. Immigration policies, such as family separations at the border and ICE actions targeting undocumented or mixed-immigration-status families, have produced a number of negative consequences for UIY and their families.

CHSC is working to provide services and supports that are responsive to these policy changes. Specifically, they have invested in the following supports for UIY in five local school districts (Fremont, Hayward, Newark, New Haven, and Oakland):

- Behavioral health consultants and a UIY specialist at the school-district level to link UIY to services.
- A county-wide UIY care team comprised of four clinicians and two case managers to provide school-based mental health and case-management services.
- Active linkage of UIY to school health centers.
- Earmarked funds to support social-emotional needs.

Methodology

Purpose of Inquiry

The purpose of this inquiry was to learn about the experiences of unaccompanied immigrant youth and their families in Alameda County, including their most pressing self-identified needs and strengths. It also sought to understand UIYs’ experiences accessing support through CHSC and other providers in the county. The inquiry was guided by the following questions:

- What are the needs, strengths, and experiences of UIY and their families in Alameda County?
- How does the ecosystem of supports that exist in Alameda County, including CHSC, meet those needs and leverage UIY strengths?

It is worth noting that the interview and discussion questions were expressly designed to avoid revisiting traumatic experiences. The questions, therefore, did not attempt to probe the violence in their home countries from which youth and families had fled, nor did the questions address the

arduous or demeaning experiences they endured during their journeys. Some interviewees volunteered information along these lines, but their traumatic experiences were not the focus of the inquiry.

Gathering Data

As listed in Figure 1, data-collection activities consisted of:

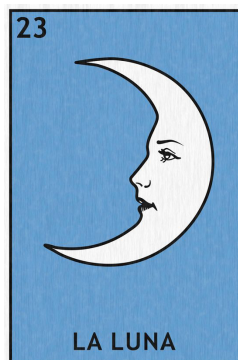
- Focus groups with 30 unaccompanied youth (24 in Oakland and 6 in Hayward). Youth participants were between the ages of 14 and 19 and in grades 9 through 12. Duration was 90 minutes. Youth were provided with a meal and a \$20 gift card for their participation, which was voluntary.
- Key informant interviews with 14 CHSC staff and partners, school personnel, and providers throughout the county. Duration was approximately 1 hour.
- Six interviews with parents of UIY in Hayward and Oakland. Duration was 15 minutes to 1 hour.
- Telephone interviews with non-family caregivers. Duration was approximately 1 hour.

Data collection occurred between January and June 2019. All conversations with youth, families, and caregivers were held in a private and confidential setting and facilitated by staff in Spanish. The topics of the questions included daily life and routines; experiences with school; problems or challenges faced at school, work, and in the community; access to services and supports; hopes and dreams for the future; and interest in opportunities such as youth leadership. Notes were recorded on a computer or on paper during the sessions, translated into English, and then analyzed for key themes.

Prior to conducting this evaluation study, BRG also interviewed six members of CHSC’s UIY Care Team and reviewed client data. Those findings informed the development of a brief entitled “Sanctuary and Success: Taking Action for Alameda County’s Unaccompanied Immigrant Youth,” Center for Healthy Schools and Communities, 2019. (Available at: <http://ahealthyschools.org>).

Figure 1. Number and Type of Study Participants

Stakeholders	# of Participants
Youth	30
CHSC staff, partners, and providers	14
Parents	6
Non-family caregivers	4
Total	54



“I know that living here is better for me. When I was living in El Salvador, I was at risk. There were a lot of gangs, and I was threatened. They threaten a lot of people. But for me, I couldn’t even go out of the house...I feel a lot safer here. I knew life here would be safer and better, and that part has been true for me.”

—Youth Participant

Profiles in Determination

Arrival

UIY and their families described the harrowing journeys they made to flee violence and seek economic opportunity. Youth expressed a common hope that hard work and education would lead to a better life in the United States for themselves and their families. Although researchers did not focus their questions on the conditions that prompted youth to leave their home countries, some youth nevertheless discussed the violence they were fleeing and the hope that the US would provide a safer life. Most UIY did not speak in detail about their journey to the US or what they had left behind. Rather, they focused on their experiences navigating their current life in California.

Family Separations at the Border

Youth, family members, and providers often recounted the harrowing journeys that youth had endured in order to immigrate to the US; some youth spent time in sub-standard detention facilities or were forcibly separated from their parents at the border.

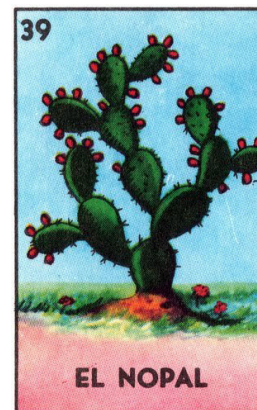
Current immigration policies, including family separation and policies making it harder for asylum seekers, are exacerbating existing barriers for UIY and their families. The Trump administration's family-separation policy divides children from their parents and reclassifies them as "unaccompanied." As a result, the number of younger children who enter unaccompanied is increasing. Several parents interviewed through this inquiry had traveled with their children to the US/Mexican

border where they were separated, detained, and processed separately. For some, the detention was brief, whereas others spent weeks or longer separated from their families. The conditions under which they were held were harsh on both the body and psyche.

Parents and children continue to suffer the psychological and emotional impacts of those experiences. One young parent had a security bracelet placed on his ankle while he was in a detention facility; although he had left the facility two months ago, he did not know how to get it removed. He was unable to find work as a result. Others described the trauma, fear, and emotional hardship they and their children continue to grapple with.

Despite the increasingly hostile immigration landscape, parents, like their children, remained hopeful that life in the US will allow for greater educational and economic opportunity. UIY are optimistic about their future and eager for information, resources, and relationships that can help them successfully navigate life in the US. They are motivated by a desire to help their families, learn English, and progress economically. Youth, parents, and providers alike pointed to the courage, resolve, maturity, and determination required for youth to immigrate to and thrive in this country.

Providers were struck by young people's enthusiasm, drive, and resilience. As one provider explained, "Whereas our program participants are typically engaged, UIY were super-engaged, asking a lot of questions about how and why."



"When my wife crossed the border, she was separated from the kids. Fortunately, they were able to get back together again, but it's still hard for everybody."
—Parent

"We know his parents through Facebook, back in [his home country]. We would have calls on FaceTime. He comes from a strong family background that raised him to be a really nice kid. They're still working behind the scenes to make sure he does well."
—Caregiver

"When I crossed the border, they put me in the 'perrera'—a small cell where they give you a small aluminum blanket. I was in that cell by myself. I had been walking all night long when I arrived, and when I was getting checked in, I leaned against a bench and started to fall asleep. An officer came and yelled at me to stand. I sat up, but I was so sleepy that I couldn't help it and started to slide again. The officer came back and kicked me with his boot in the shoulder so hard... the experience in detention was really difficult, and I still to this day dream about it."
—Youth Participant



“[Our being here] is for a better life for the kids. And the kids are quick to adapt. It’s not the same for us as it is for them. The kids are here to study and be better and have a better future. It’s too late for us, but we’re here to support them and help them get to that point.”

—Parent

“What helps me most to stay motivated is to think about my family, that they’ll be proud of me if I pull through and make something of my life.”

—Youth Participant

“I’ve met kids who are reunifying with their parents, and that turns out to be either great or really bad. Or just fine. And some kids have been kicked out and ended up in foster care or homeless shelters...A lot of these kids didn’t have a connection with their parents growing up, but rather with other relatives, and the relationship building when they reunite is hard... Reunification is not always a happy outcome. It’s really complex.”

—Provider

Rebuilding

Family Relationships and Living Situations in a New Country

Family relationships, while important and motivating to youth, are also a source of stress and instability for many. Youth highly value their relationships with their parents, siblings, and extended families and are motivated by a desire to contribute to their families. While some unaccompanied youth described their families as a source of love, support, and hope, others struggled to establish or maintain productive relationships with the parent or relative with whom they were living. Stability in family relationships, providers suggested, enabled youth to focus on higher-level priorities, such as learning English, staying in school, and/or attending to their health-care needs.

Arriving unaccompanied and living apart from one’s parents does not necessarily mean relationships with parents and families are severed for youth. Many UIY and their families remain connected across countries and borders through technology, regardless of their living situations. Youth use video calls, social media, and text messaging to maintain these relationships. However, many UIY spoke of the difficulties of feeling isolated from their friends and family members and acculturating to “the way things are here.”

Reunifying with One or More Parents

Some UIY reunified with one or both parents; some were separated at the border; and others joined a parent who had been living in the US for some time. For those youth who reunified after a long absence, re-establishing relationships while acculturating to American culture was often challenging for the family. Depending on the quality and frequency of contact prior to their arrival, many youth, parents, and providers reported positive reunification stories, while others described the adjustment to family life as very difficult.

While family is a clear motivating factor for young people, the family unit often experiences high levels of stress, economic pressure, and instability when the young person rejoins the family. Parents cited the process of acculturating to the language, finding work, navigating legal and educational systems, and parenting to be their biggest challenges in providing stability to their children. Parents described working long hours and multiple jobs while also trying to be good parents. Providers and youth agreed that young people who are able to live with one or both parents are able to more easily avoid gang involvement, dropping out of high school, or homelessness.

Youth Living with a Relative

Many UIY do not reunify with a parent but come to live with another relative, such as an uncle, aunt, or older cousin. These youth must adapt to the expectations of their host family while also grieving the life they left behind and navigating new relationships. UIY work to take advantage of educational and economic opportunities and, at the same time, try not to draw attention to themselves that could negatively impact their immigration status. Many relatives expect youth to contribute economically to the household to help with the high cost of rent in Alameda County. Providers recounted stories of UIY who were living on their own after being asked to leave a relative's home for a number of reasons—unmet expectations, financial, overcrowding, sexual harassment (particularly for girls), or an inability to establish a positive relationship. Youth in this situation must find alternative housing or face homelessness.

Youth Living with a Caregiver

Caregivers, who took in an unaccompanied youth through their relationship with their church, were also interviewed about the experience. One family described a highly successful experience with a young man who is now over 18. He came to live with them in high school, quickly adapted to family life, and is currently attending community college and learning English. Another family reported a less successful placement of a young woman who left their

“They come with love, compassion, vulnerability, and big dreams.”

—Alameda County UIY Service Provider



home after a few months. This caregiver said that cultural differences, trauma, and a lack of strategies for integrating the young person into family life undermined the host-youth dynamic. Families such as this one wanted to be able to access a peer or professional to help them understand the youth they were supporting and ways they could help the youth navigate the complex bureaucratic systems in which they were enmeshed.

Youth Living on their Own

Youth living on their own face the greatest challenges with housing, social isolation, and basic needs. These UIY value building relationships with teachers, peers, and service providers, such as coaches, school staff, and peers, as sources of encouragement and tangible supports. Some providers play the role of parent or family member in the lives of these UIY as a way to mitigate social isolation among youth who are living without their family members.

“I worry about making sure they are well fed. I’m working a lot. And I’m tired. I have another daughter, but she’s back home. She’s 16. I’ve been away most of her life. I don’t have a lot of experience being a dad, to be honest. I’m trying to be a good dad. But I don’t know what I’m doing. I have been away, gone for so long.”
—Parent

“Some of the most dire needs are housing. So much of my work is finding youth a place to live... case-managing the living situation is a lot of work.”
—Provider

Risk and Resilience

Factors for UIY

While life in the US is hard for many UIY, those who live with a parent, have received asylum, speak Spanish and some English, and/or have resided in the US for more than a year reported greater stability and less risk for homelessness, school dropout, and gang involvement.

Prejudice against immigrants, learning English, and acculturating to life in the US make life challenging for most UIY. Many UIY and their families found daily life in Alameda County to be more stressful than they expected, with the first year being the most precarious. The daily routine for many youth

consists of attending school while also working part- or full-time and navigating housing instability, family relationships, legal challenges, and safety concerns. Risk and protective factors, such as legal status, living situation, primary language, and family relationships, all affect the young person’s stability. Living with a parent, speaking Spanish or English, and/or living in Hayward all appear to be protective factors that influence a young person’s stability. On the other hand, youth who live in Oakland and speak a non-Spanish language, such as Mam, were especially concerned about their physical safety and gangs in school. Figure 2 below lists three archetypical profiles of UIY in Alameda County and captures various risk and protective factors affecting stability.

“We are put down a lot. A lot of people think that because we came from another country, we’re thieves or criminals. But we came to work. Learning the language is so hard. And some people come with their siblings and leave their parents back home. They feel lonely. They come to work and study. It’s so stressful.”
—Youth Participant



Figure 2. Profiles of UIY Who Participated in the Inquiry

High Risk	Moderate	Low Risk
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent arrival—less than one year • Mam or non-Spanish language as first language • Unstably housed (with non-relative caregiver or in a rented room) • Attending school but at risk of dropping out or has dropped out • Working part-time or full-time under the table • Has not obtained legal representation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the US for more than one year • Spanish speaker • Living with relative • Attending school • Working part-time but prefers to spend time in school • Has legal representation, with an asylum case pending 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the US for more than one year • Spanish speaker with emerging English capacity • Living with one or both parents • Attending school and possibly interested in postsecondary education • Not working or working part-time • Has obtained asylum or a visa
* More typical of youth in Oakland	* More typical of youth in Hayward	* More typical of youth in Oakland

Overview of the Trump Administration's Changes to Policies on Immigration

November 9, 2017	The administration canceled the Central American Minors program, which, since 2015, had enabled certain children to join their parents in the US from distressed nations on the basis of their refugee status.
April 2018	The Trump administration began a policy to prosecute all parents caught crossing the US/Mexican border and to separate and detain any children who were with them, with the attorney general stating this would be the “most effective” way to deter undocumented crossings. Notably, the administration put in place no structure for the eventual reunification of families.
March 9, 2018	The ACLU filed a lawsuit. After public pressure, on June 20, 2018, the president signed an executive order ending the practice.
June 26, 2018	A federal court ordered the government to reunite all families that had been separated by the practice. In early 2019, several news outlets reported that the practice had continued—illegally. While the official practice is now to detain families together, parents and children are generally incarcerated in separate wings, cells, or cages. The exact number of children who have been subjected to this practice is unknown due to a lack of record keeping by the Trump administration. The administration has admitted to having separated 2,737 children; but there are reports, which the administration cannot refute, that this number underestimates, by several thousand, the number of children affected. It is believed that thousands of children are still in ICE custody.
January 29, 2019	The administration began a policy that returns asylum seekers to Mexico in violation of Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), passed by Congress, as well as US treaty obligations to protect refugees. On February 14, 2019, the ACLU, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the Center for Gender and Refugee Studies filed suit. On April 8, 2019, a federal court blocked the policy; but on May 7, 2019, an appeals court granted the administration permission to continue to forcibly return asylum seekers to Mexico while the case is pending.
July 15, 2019	The administration sought to make asylum seekers who first passed through another country ineligible for asylum at the US southern border. The rule would also have applied to children who have crossed the border alone. On July 16, 2019, the ACLU filed suit. On July 24, 2019, a federal court blocked the rule.
July 22, 2019	The administration announced that it will dramatically expand the authority of the Department of Homeland Security to quickly deport immigrants without due-process protections if they cannot prove they have been in the US for two years. On the same day, the ACLU promised to sue.
As of June 9, 2019	A daily average of 52,500 immigrants are being detained in more than 200 detention centers across the country—up from about 34,000 under the Obama administration. Seven children and 17 adults to date have died in ICE custody under the Trump administration.

Understanding UIY Needs

Basic Needs

UIY and their families prioritize basic needs, such as income and housing, and resolving legal challenges.

The most pressing self-identified needs of UIY and their families is finding a stable and safe place to live, earning money to pay for food and housing, learning English, sending money home to their families, paying off debts, and resolving legal challenges. When asked about higher-level needs, such as going to college, treating or addressing trauma via mental health supports, or accessing youth-leadership opportunities, many youth emphasized that they were focused on achieving basic levels of security. All UIY talked about the need to earn money to support themselves and their families as a primary motivator.

Almost unanimously, providers identified a lack of affordable and stable housing as a primary source of pressure experienced by UIY, particularly those who are here living on their own or with a relative/caregiver. In order to pay for housing, unaccompanied youth work long hours, which leaves them exhausted, unable to manage their schoolwork, and isolated from supports.

This recognition of the primacy of basic needs evokes Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, a motivational theory in psychology that suggests that basic needs lower in the hierarchy must be satisfied before individuals can attend to needs higher up, such as psychosocial connection, creative expression, and educational achievement.⁵

⁵ Maslow, A.H., "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370-396.

Impact

Changes to Federal Immigration Policy on UIY

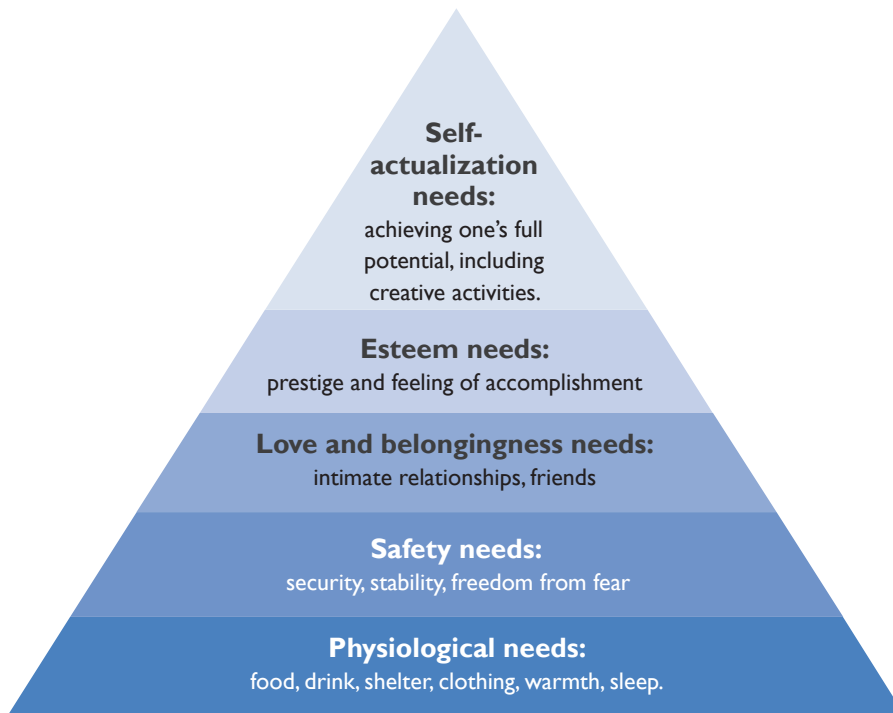
The need for legal representation to support UIY with their asylum claims far outstrips supply.

Many UIY who were interviewed through this inquiry sought asylum upon entry to the US but were unclear about exactly what they needed to do to effectively navigate the US immigration courts and legal system. Fear of detention, deportation, and lack of protection against employer exploitation makes access to legal representation a high priority for youth and their families. Caregivers reported that they were pretty much on their own in supporting youth under their care throughout the immigration process.

There was a shared perspective among UIY, families, and providers alike that the possibility of receiving asylum is more difficult under the current administration than in previous years. Those UIY who had received asylum were able to find legitimate employment and focus on their educational goals. While many youth had accessed legal support from legal-aid organizations, there was a general sense that the need for legal services far outmatched the available supply.

"Legal needs are paramount, and it's a scary time. People who came over a few years ago would get asylum, but now the standard is higher. So that makes it harder for the kids."
—Provider

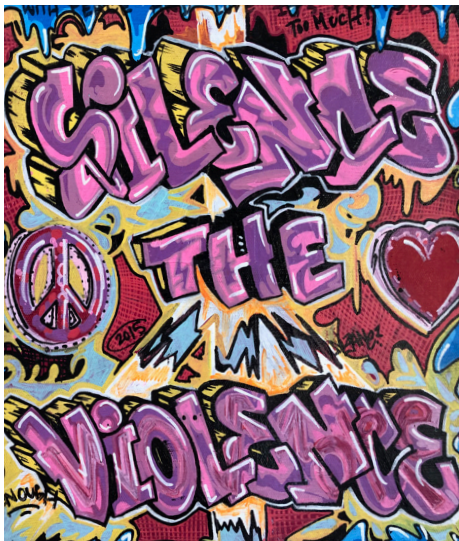
Figure 3. Hierarchy of Needs



Safety

When it comes to physical safety, youth are worried about detention and deportation. Additionally, youth reported a fear of gangs, drugs, and exploitation by employers.

UIY, particularly those in Oakland, reported being assaulted, robbed, and forced to join a gang at school. These youth were surprised by how unsafe the schools were. Many shared positive memories about “life back home,” noting that while the streets in their communities may have been unsafe, their homes and schools were generally safe. They did not have to worry about being offered drugs or being pressured to join a gang while at school. One youth noted that UIY stand out and are vulnerable because they do not know how things work here.



UIY described instances in school where they were racially profiled or wrongfully accused of being involved in a gang or illicit activity on the basis of how they looked, where they came from, or who their friends were. Some providers who work with UIY also identified preventing gang involvement as an important area for investment, noting that youth may have been involved in a gang back home, while others joined or were pressured to join a gang when they arrived.

Youth and providers cited bullying and sexual exploitation/human trafficking as additional safety concerns. Mam and other non-Spanish-speaking UIY are bullied or targeted by American-born Latin@ youth within the schools as well. Young women are also at risk of being trafficked or sexually exploited.

“One of my teachers helped me a lot to come out of the closet and live my truth. That’s something I would have never been able to do in my country because people there are more closed-minded.”
—Youth Participant

“I had problems with other students harassing me at school. When I complained about having problems, the school [didn’t believe me]. I don’t appreciate getting in trouble for things that I am not a part of.”
—Youth Participant

“I was harassed here the first day of school. They wanted to force me to use drugs and smoke weed, but I didn’t come here for that. I didn’t come to this country to be in gangs. I want to live.”
—Youth Participant

Engagement in School

School can provide young people with access to resources and supportive adults but can also expose them to gangs, violence, and prejudice. UIY face a number of conflicting needs when it comes to staying in school.

Many UIY share the American value of education as a pathway to economic prosperity. These youth emphasized that they came here for a better life; some advised future UIY to stay in school, avoid drugs and gangs, and “make a better life for yourself and your family.” Youth emphasized the importance of learning English and recommended that any school with a large newcomer population offer ESL courses. Some UIY enjoyed school and planned to pursue higher education in the future, whereas others planned to leave school to work.

When it comes to staying in school, UIY face a number of barriers and conflicting needs. Some youth came

“For me, leadership would mean to make decisions for other people—hopefully, good decisions. I think it’s a good thing for some people to do. But I wouldn’t like to do that....I just want to focus on being better, feeling better...I worry that there are too many racist people out there, and I wouldn’t want to be talking about my life or what I’ve been through.”
—Youth Participant

here to earn money and stated that going to school simply didn’t contribute to that goal. Youth experience tremendous economic pressures, from having to send money home to families, to paying a “coyote,” to covering living expenses. This motivation to earn an income has led some youth to drop out of school. UIY and providers identified additional factors that made staying in school a challenge:

- Being unlikely to graduate by age 18 due to limited formal education in their home country or a lack of credits.
- Being unable to pass classes due to limited English proficiency.
- Feeling unsafe due to assault, bullying, and/or gangs.
- Having an undiagnosed learning disability.
- Lacking knowledge about how to navigate the educational system.
- Speaking Spanish as a second language.

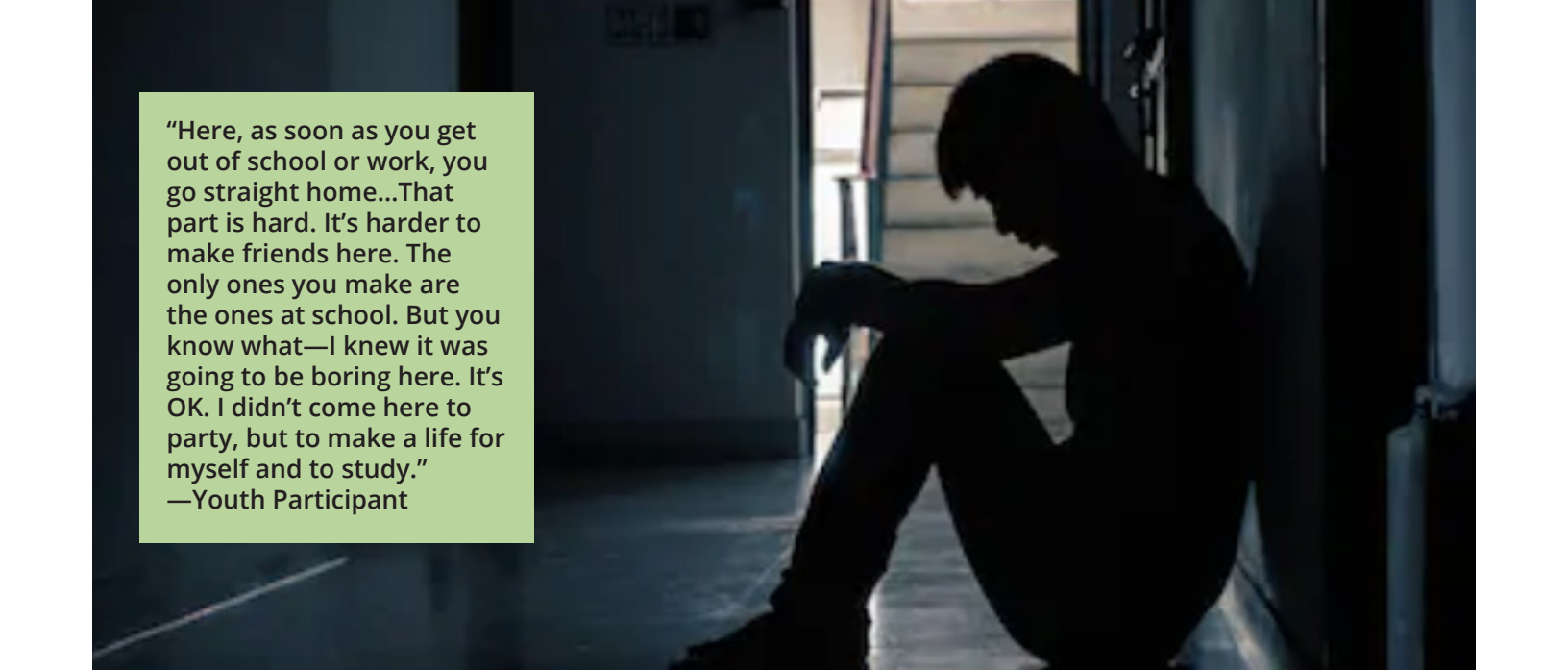
Providers offered diverse perspectives about strategies to reduce the risk of dropping out among UIY. Some felt that more should be done to address the identified barriers to school engagement noted above, whereas others argued that the economic realities will always win and that schools should support youth in avoiding economic exploitation, accessing vocational training, or pursuing alternative educational pathways. Other providers emphasized that the belief that everyone can or should go to college does not align with UIY’s experiences and priorities. Youth also emphasized the importance of having the support of family members when it comes

to staying in school. As one Hayward youth participant noted, “Most of my friends who have left school are the ones who are here alone, without anybody to support them.”

For some UIY, schools are the center of community and support despite concerns about gangs, violence, and drugs. Schools are where youth who find themselves isolated from their families and communities of origin begin building community through peer friendships and supportive adults on campus. The UIY and providers who were interviewed for this inquiry concurred that teachers, counselors, and school-based providers can be a valuable source of information, resource, and caring relationships. When youth leave school, they often lose their connection to the resources and supports that are housed within the schools.

UIY access school-based health services and community clinics.

UIY were familiar with school-based health services, and many had accessed services both in school and through affiliated brick-and-mortar clinics. The ability to get immunizations and physical examinations required for legal cases through school-based and community clinics is an important benefit and need for UIY. Youth also were appreciative of dental services available through community clinics. Barriers to accessing care include concern about being a public charge and a lack of insurance. Other health-care needs identified by youth and providers included pregnancy prevention, dental care, health education, and reproductive health resources. One



“Here, as soon as you get out of school or work, you go straight home...That part is hard. It’s harder to make friends here. The only ones you make are the ones at school. But you know what—I knew it was going to be boring here. It’s OK. I didn’t come here to party, but to make a life for myself and to study.”
—Youth Participant

provider recommended that school-based health clinics consider offering the forensic psychological exam required for immigration.

Interest in youth-leadership opportunities is limited to youth who have received asylum.

Youth leadership did not emerge as a priority for any of the stakeholder groups, except those who had received asylum. When asked, UIY expressed limited interest in youth-leadership opportunities due to a lack of time in their schedules and a concern that engaging in political campaigns, advocacy, or community organizing would negatively impact their family or immigration case. A couple of youth who had received a visa or asylum expressed interest in youth leadership but said they would need to be compensated in order to participate. Youth leadership is clearly not an early intervention strategy for this population.

Providers pointed to Latino Men & Boys as a positive example of youth capacity building but were concerned that new programming would not take precedence over more pressing priorities (earning an income, learning English, and staying in school). As

providers cautioned, any youth-leadership programs designed for UIY would need to guarantee safety and provide adequate funds to justify time away from work. Providers shared tips and the barriers associated with compensating youth for participation in programming, including the following:

- Stipends must pay a minimum wage in order to compete with free-market employment.
- Many youth do not have a checking account and would need to be paid in cash or gift cards. This presents a barrier for many service providers and nonprofit organizations from an accounting perspective.
- Service providers and organizations are taxed on gifts over \$25 per person.
- Schools, service providers, and organizations cannot expect that youth will have the time or resources to volunteer.
- Rather than fund groups of UIY to engage in youth-leadership activities, consider funding individual youth who have achieved a level of stability and legal status to engage in existing youth-leadership programs (i.e., a scholarship or stipend program).

UIY value opportunities to play sports, have fun, and connect with others.

UIY have had to grow up quickly, and many display high levels of maturity for their age; however, as providers and UIY have both noted, youth have a need for fun, joy, play, and sports. Youth yearn for social connection and reminisced about life back home as “more fun.” Some providers alluded to the “adultification” that occurs as a result of UIY’s immigration journeys, family responsibilities, and the need to produce an income. UIY value opportunities to form social connections, have fun, and play sports through programs like Soccer Without Borders. A provider shared that the UIY she works with often go into her office to play cards and that young people appreciate breaks from the pressures of adulthood.

“I prefer to spend my time here working [instead of going to school] because that’s how I can help my family financially, and that’s why I came here.”
—Youth Participant

System Strengths and Challenges

Ecosystem of Supports

CHSC staff play an important role in the ecosystem of formal and informal supports for UIY.

While the needs, challenges, and vulnerabilities experienced by UIY and their families are numerous and exceed the capacity of existing services, this inquiry found that CHSC plays an important role within Alameda County's ecosystem of informal and formal supports available to UIY and their families.



“Our biggest go-to has been the CHSC team. Since this role was developed in the center, it has been a huge resource.”
—Provider

“What I have that most people don't have is the relationships. People know that I really care, and they will go the extra mile for me. I benefit from formal partnerships as well as informal. I'm friends with tons of social workers who work in the schools and parent coordinators who have me on speed dial.”
—Community Leader

This ecosystem consists of various individuals, including teachers, counselors, coaches, and other individuals, as well as organizations and institutions, including legal-aid organizations, other county agencies, schools, school districts, brick-and-mortar community clinics, churches, and youth-/family-serving nonprofit organizations. Providers spoke highly of the role that the UIY Care Team, CHSC staff, and local clergy have played in addressing the immediate and long-term needs of UIY. Providers deeply value CHSC's thought partnership, resources, information, and problem-solving skills when it comes to supporting UIY.

Relationship-building and establishing trust are central.

CHSC's approach, which focuses on building relational trust, is supported by the results of this inquiry. UIY did not necessarily identify the organization that helped them but focused on the individual relationship they formed with their provider, pastor, teacher, counselor, or coach. Young people and their families rely on trusted individuals to get the help they need. Many UIY and their families tend to see schools and school districts as neutral and natural places to go for help with navigating resources, and they trust the people who work there. As one parent who was interviewed at a school-district family resource center put it, “This is the only place I know where to come for help.”

The coordination of resources seems to occur via a network of individual relationships versus a network of organizational or system-coordinated efforts. When a relationship is formed, a family or UIY can access additional support. For example, a young person formed a relationship with a teacher and then received support with housing. A soccer coach helped young people access legal resources, health-care services, and English classes.

Staff who work with UIY are inspired by their resiliency yet impacted by vicarious trauma.

Staff/providers are inspired by the strength and resilience that UIY display, but the stories of trauma and hardship also weigh on them. Providers emphasized that the journey to the US, the acculturation process, and the navigation of economic, social, and familial hardships force UIY to grow up quickly and draw on their own resilience to survive. At times, providers struggled to cope with vicarious trauma as they listened to young people's stories and supported them in solving current life challenges. Providers felt that it was important for the workforce who serves this population to have access to the skills and support to prevent vicarious trauma. They cited the importance of being able to bear witness to the hardship and trauma without trying to solve every problem a young person faces, being able to build on young people's strength and personal agency, and being able to set boundaries.

Many providers have formed caring relationships with young people, often outside of a formal provider role. The inquiry surfaced numerous examples of a teacher, coach, pastor, provider, or member of a nonprofit organization who accessed their own resources and networks, took in a young person, attended their graduation, or showed the love or care for a young person that would typically occur within a family.

Gaps in the System of Supports

Interviewees concurred that no provider, program, or system is capable of meeting all the needs of UIY.

The context in which UIY find themselves in Alameda County includes a county-wide housing crisis, a state-wide underfunding of education, and a nationwide attitude toward immigrants that is increasingly inhospitable. County, district, and local nonprofit agencies that are working to support young people find themselves squeezed between this reality and the depth of need that UIY present.

Youth prioritize basic needs, whereas many providers prioritize mental health services as the UIY's most pressing need.

The inquiry revealed a gap in perspectives among members of this ecosystem with regard to the most pressing needs among UIY. Many providers identified treatment of trauma, stress and mental health as the highest priority support for UIY, whereas UIY and their families were most concerned with basic needs such as food, shelter, and employment. Therapy is not a high priority for youth. The majority of youth expressed limited interest in accessing mental health treatment. Those who had received therapy shared mixed reviews—some found it to be helpful, while others did not. Young people pointed to limited time, competing priorities, and a lack of familiarity with therapy.

Some providers felt that untreated trauma and mental health challenges can interfere with achieving success in school, work, and relationships—and therefore should be treated first. Providers attributed trauma and mental health challenges to the experiences UIY endured during their journey to the US or in their mother country; and some clinicians held the view that many UIY are not able to maintain a job or housing because of trauma. Others disagreed, noting that the need for therapeutic services really depended on the young person's resiliency and protective factors as opposed to the specific traumatic experiences they have endured.



“You try to build their natural supports in their life, and many times they see you as the go-to person in their lives. I go to their graduations. When I've had newcomers graduate, and I was the one and only adult there for them, it was both rewarding and bittersweet.”
—Provider

“Mental health is a priority. We may not be able to solve their immediate problems, but they have a safe space to talk about issues openly. If they need food, we can give them resources or give them food bags. Our focus is not on resolving every issue but helping youth with coping and managing competing priorities.”
—Provider

“What helps me [to stay in school] is thinking about how now I can send my family a little bit of money, but if I work hard and focus, I can later have a better job and help them more.”
—Youth Participant



The purpose of mental health services, one provider suggested, is to establish a trusting relationship; create safety; support youth with their basic needs; provide love, care, and protection; and set boundaries. Others saw one-on-one time as an opportunity for social-emotional learning and skill building or for a brief check-in. As one provider put it, “The biggest tool (we can offer) is self-regulation and learning how to deal with stressful situations and with other people.”

However, the inquiry surfaced skepticism among some about the value and purpose of mental health supports. The data indicate that the average number of hours of service for UIY who access mental health services is two (i.e., one or two sessions). Providers concurred that brief services are not particularly beneficial to UIY and that some youth need more than eight hours of therapy to address their mental health needs. One session will not change a life unless it is focused on solving basic needs through case management.

Others emphasized that therapy does not respond to the cultural or linguistic preferences of UIY, especially those who do not speak Spanish as their first language, and recommended that the county incorporate more peer support, mentoring, case management, and group work into its mental health strategy.

While young people are motivated by a desire to contribute to their family, and while stability in family relationships is a strong protective factor, family engagement in services and supports is limited.

While strong family relationships are both protective and motivating to young people, the data suggest that available services and supports primarily target the individual, with the exception of some school-based supports. Data from this inquiry suggest that most mental health supports focus on supporting the young person individually as opposed to working with the family unit. Similar to UIY, families are working multiple jobs and simply do not have time to access traditional services. Some parents have accessed services and supports through the schools or Family Resource Centers co-located at district offices. One caregiver reported a very positive experience with school-based supports and resources, noting that clinic staff and counselors had helped the young man under their care access dental care at a community clinic and complete the requirements for graduation. Another caregiver reported negative

experiences with accessing school-based and community support: “There were a lot of times I would reach out to the school team, and I wasn’t treated like anyone who mattered.”

Providers pointed to limited capacity to engage girls and non-Spanish-speaking UIY.

Providers noted that many of the formal programming opportunities are geared toward boys and Spanish speakers, urging the county to make more intentional investments in programming for girls and non-Spanish speakers. At the focus group at one school in Oakland, half of the participants were girls, and close to half of the participants spoke Spanish as a second language. An analysis of clinical data suggests that girls are more likely to access mental health supports, albeit for brief engagements. It is unclear whether the number of unaccompanied girls in the county is increasing or if there are important differences in mental health service participation with respect to gender in existing programs. Therefore, more research is needed to understand whether there are gaps by gender. Providers confirmed that there is very limited capacity to serve the linguistic needs of UIY who speak Mam and other non-Spanish languages—a population that has surged in recent years.

Findings and Recommendations

This inquiry sought to understand the experiences and most pressing needs of UIY and their families in Alameda County and how these align with the current approach to supporting this population.

Findings

Youth and their families come to the US fleeing violence and in search of educational and economic opportunities. UIY are impacted by the lack of affordable housing in Alameda County, inhumane and restrictive immigration policies, and the high cost of living in the Bay Area. While they may have entered unaccompanied, UIY are highly motivated by a desire to contribute to their families and access economic opportunity. The first year of living in the US is the most difficult for many UIY, as they have to navigate challenges related to housing, immigration status, employment, and education. While youth value education as a pathway to economic prosperity, engagement in school can be protective but can also expose young people to gangs, racism, and prejudice. The need to earn an income, unsafe schools, and barriers to graduation due to limited English proficiency are all factors that contribute to high school dropout among UIY. There are insufficient low or free resources for legal representation.

UIY are bolstered by their relationships with family members, caring adults, and the formal and informal ecosystem of support within the county. Schools are a natural place for UIY and their families to access community resources. CHSC plays an important role within the ecosystem of support. CHSC staff and the UIY Care Team are a place for providers and organizations to receive assistance in solving immediate and long-term challenges for UIY. Center staff are seen as key facilitators of cross-agency collaboration. This inquiry suggests that, while therapy can strengthen coping skills and resiliency, young people have limited interest in therapy, and family engagement in services is limited. As the UIY population changes, there is limited capacity to meet the linguistic needs of those whose first language is not Spanish and a potential gap in engaging girls in formal programming.

Recommendations

Meet basic needs through investment in case management, housing, and legal services.

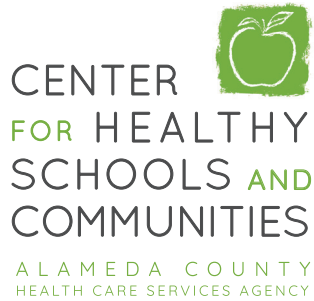
- In allocating resources to support UIY, prioritize case management over therapeutic mental health services in order to help UIY and families resolve basic needs. Mental health consultation can be provided to educators to help school systems be more responsive to UIY.
- Support county-wide efforts to create more housing opportunities for UIY and their families.
- Expand access to legal-support organizations to ensure that UIY have access to legal representation during this time of increased persecution of immigrant populations in the US.

Recognize youth connection to family and peers as a strong protective factor.

- Ensure that programming designed to support UIY recognizes strong family relationships and work/employment as primary motivators for UIY.
- Consider investing in peer-navigation and support strategies for both UIY and families.

Focus on peer support, gang prevention, and mental health consultation to create welcoming schools for UIY.

- Support investments in gang intervention and violence-prevention efforts for this population.
- Encourage school personnel to connect youth who are unlikely to graduate with alternative educational pathways and community resources while also promoting the value of educational attainment.
- Conduct a gender analysis of participation in formal supports (e.g., mental health, athletic/recreational programming) to determine whether there are significant differences by gender.



About Us

As part of Alameda County Health Care Services Agency, the Center for Healthy Schools and Communities (CHSC) has worked for over 20 years with school districts, community partners, youth, families, and policymakers to build school health initiatives that create equitable conditions for health and learning. Together we have developed 28 school health centers, expanded behavioral health supports to over 190 schools, built and lead operations of the REACH Ashland Youth Center, supported youth wellness and family partnership initiatives, and implemented targeted equity strategies for youth furthest from opportunity. Our school health programs and partnerships address urgent health and education inequities and create opportunities for all young people to cultivate their strengths, resiliency, and promise. We focus on supporting the physical health of students – knowing that students can't learn if they are sick, hungry, or absent from school. But we also focus on other aspects of wellness that youth and families need to thrive: social, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, environmental, and occupational. For more information about CHSC's work, including tools and tips for engaging in school-based, school-linked health, please visit achealthyschools.org



School Health Works

CHSC's School Health Works is a collection of resources and tools for health and education leaders to build school health initiatives that transform public systems and support all children so they can thrive.