



Foundations for Engaging Young People

A Beginning Guide to Meaningful Youth
Engagement in Health Outreach Efforts

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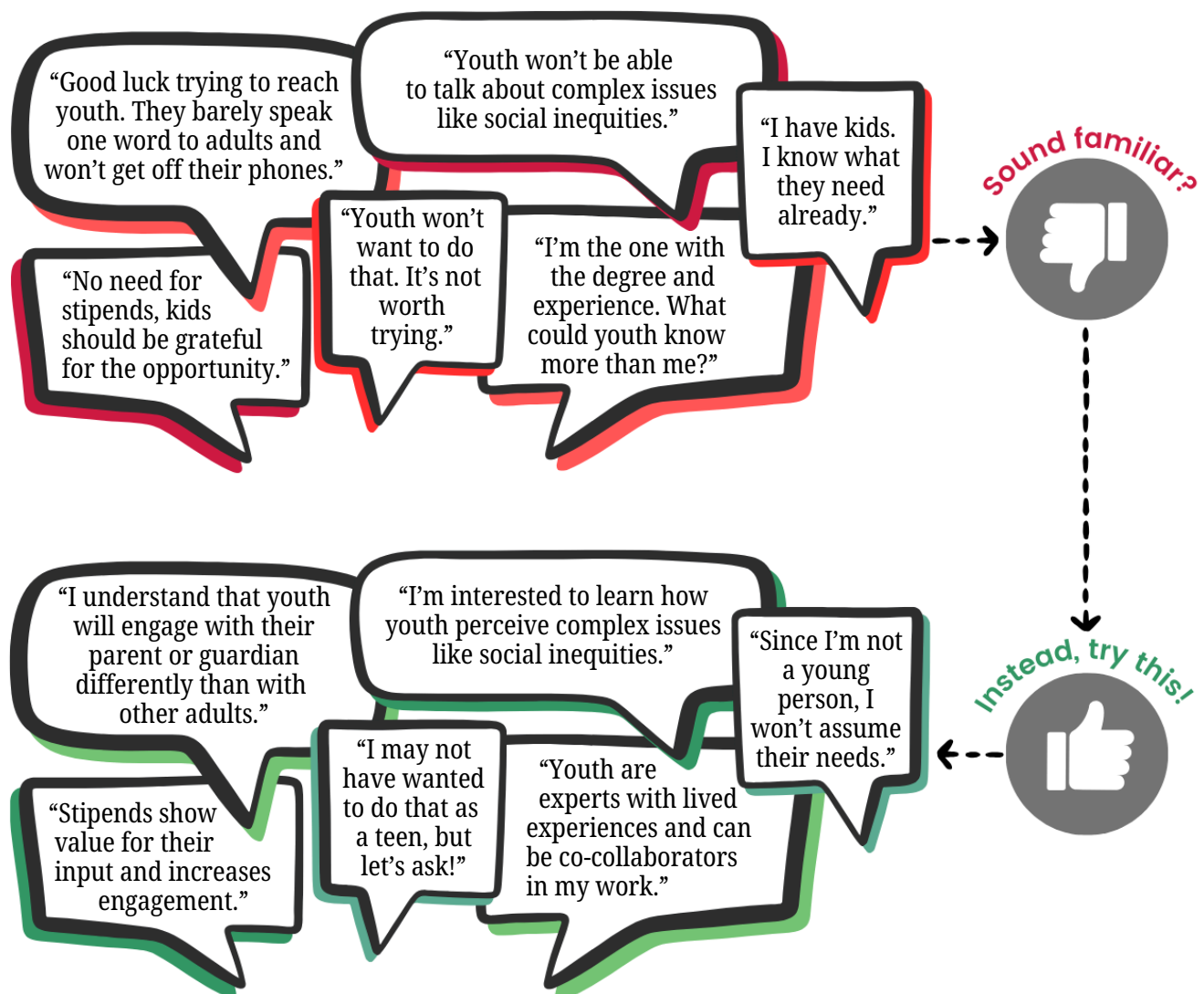
Back to Basics

Engaging the community is a core public health practice. Community engagement helps us build better assessments, analyze data more effectively, and develop stronger programs and policies.

Even though young people are directly impacted by health programs, they are often left out of planning, design, and evaluation. We need to challenge the biased assumptions that lead some adults to exclude young people, as this exclusion hinders innovation and prevents youth programs from achieving their full potential.

See examples below:

* Observational or anecdotal data recorded by UW-Madison Educators.



Plan your outreach or programs for youth just as thoughtfully as you would for adults. Remember, both youth and adult community members want to:

- ✓ Engage in shared decision making alongside local leaders
- ✓ Be valued as a stakeholder
- ✓ Be change-makers for their community in positive ways


“It’s a common misconception that young people aren’t interested in advocacy or they aren’t interested in putting forth effort to create change.”
- Yasmeen Patrick, young person from Racine, WI

Removing barriers to participation is important for all community engagement, including with young people. Here are some ways to recruit youth:

- ✓ Include budget for stipends, food, and transportation (such as cab fares, bus passes, or gas cards). Consider ways to partner with schools to offer class credit or volunteer hours.
- ✓ Connect with trusted adults who work with youth regularly. Ask about their programming and focus.
- ✓ When reaching out, keep your message simple. Cover three points: (1) Describe the initiative or program; (2) Explain why youth involvement is important; (3) Mention any incentives you can offer.
- ✓ Reach out to youth who could gain personally and professionally from this opportunity, such as those in the arts, youth with limited leadership experience, or justice-involved youth.
- ✓ Set up an easy way for interested youth to get in touch with you.



Not sure who to connect with?
Start by reaching out to:

- ✓ School Counselors, Social Workers, Support Staff, School Clubs (Black Student Unions, Latino Student Unions, Student Councils, Health Clubs)
- ✓ Community Centers
- ✓ Libraries
- ✓ Youth-Serving Organizations
- ✓ Don't forget your local UW-Extension office! 

If you are unsure, contact your local UW-Extension office. Educators there can connect you with local contacts, initiatives, and best practices for positive youth development.

Small Actions, Big Impacts

Youth councils and coalitions can help shape health outreach work, but they require resources that many health departments lack. Community organizations and schools are often stretched thin, too. Asking them to manage programs or grant funds can add extra strain and doesn't build long-term sustainability into health outreach. Young people want to know their efforts made a difference and see real results. No matter the information you need, small, one-time engagements can have a big impact if you engage youth meaningfully.

Meaningful engagement with youth looks like:

- ✓ Youth are able to explain what the program is, its purpose, and why it matters.
- ✓ Youth know how their input will shape the work.
- ✓ Youth feel their contributions are valued and incorporated.
- ✓ Youth receive follow-up showing how their input made an impact.

“Have youth host roundtables within their schools or community organizations. All you have to do is come and listen to what they say.” - Jayvyn Graves, young person from Middleton, WI

“Recruiting youth just to check a box is tokenism. Include us. Include our voices.” - Mallory Ninabuck, young person from Marathon, WI

“Engaging youth in task forces, coalitions, policy advocacy, co-designed projects or research effectively utilizes youth to better their communities and gain diverse perspectives, while also paving the way for future leadership and roles within youth. Adults gain important insight and feedback from youth to improve current projects.” - Shanyce Hutchinson, young person from Madison, WI

“Learn and adapt! No one is perfect and gets it right on the first try. Make sure to continuously ask youth what they like or don't like about the method you're using to engage with them, and listen and adapt throughout the entire project.” - Olivia Feng, young person from Winnebago, WI

Examples & Strategies

Engagement Type	Project Activities	Strategies & Takeaways
Survey	High school students provided recommendations regarding their county's Youth Risk Behavior Survey administration and engagement, to improve data accuracy and increase youth awareness of how the survey impacts program, policy, and funding efforts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Did not create a new program from scratch by coordinating with an established youth group ✓ Youth input informed the work and improved it ✓ Engagement was simple, could grow in the future
Focus Group	A focus group was held at the Juvenile Detention Center in Dane County to ask for recommendations about a new Teen Center development. Youth provided input for what resources and programs should be offered.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ A vulnerable youth population was engaged and felt connected to their community ✓ Youth input informed the work and improved it ✓ Met with youth once, followed up with supervisor for any updates
Research * more details provided on the next page	Youth Wellness Team members from PATCH identified substance misuse and infant mortality as key issues that young people can address. They conducted research and recommendations for youth engagement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Youth could choose the issues they wanted to address (the topics were different than what adults expected) ✓ Youth provided research and data that supported local county efforts ✓ Was done completely virtually across the state
One-Time Program	High school students engaged in needs assessments, action planning, and worked together with a local artist to design posters to raise awareness of the risks of vaping and reduce e-cigarette use among Wisconsin teens.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Youth were given stipends, food, and transportation for participating ✓ The arts bolstered creativity and innovation for improving health outreach efforts in innovative ways ✓ Worked with youth not affiliated with a health program
Recurring Youth Coalition	High school students identify issues impacting youth in their county. They establish funding priorities, review grant proposals, and recommend funding from County and City grants to support youth-led programs and projects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Collaborative partnership between three organizations (shared funding, time, resources) ✓ Recurring program allows for set deliverables, flexibility with youth schedules ✓ Addresses barriers through stipends, transportation assistance

Example: Youth Researchers

From 2023–2024, the youth authors of this guide provided feedback for UW–Madison Extension’s “Youth Advocates for Community Health” action planning curriculum. Through this process, youth researched health equity issues in their local counties (Brown, Dane, Marathon, Racine, and Winnebago) and identified substance misuse and infant mortality as topics that impacted all five counties. Together, they created this guide to inspire and inform local and Tribal Health Departments to begin meaningful youth engagement work, as well as gave recommendations on how youth should be directly involved in addressing substance misuse and infant mortality across the state:



- ✓ UW–Extension partnered with PATCH to recruit youth through a trusted adult
- ✓ Stipends were provided for attending virtual monthly meetings – and youth reported wanting to meet more frequently
- ✓ Youth reported pride in their teamwork, communication skills, understanding of health equity issues in their counties, and direct support to health departments
- ✓ Youth identified new areas for health departments to engage youth

Substance Misuse

There were 3,331 alcohol related deaths in 2022 ([DHS](#)). Waukesha, Racine, and Rock Counties had the highest number of deaths. Substance misuse among youth is associated with sexual risk behavior, experience of violence, poor mental health, and suicide risks. Additionally, alcohol use among Wisconsin youth remains higher than the national average ([YRBS, 2023](#)).

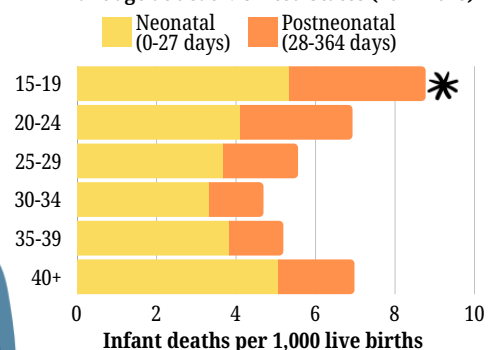
Infant Mortality

Teenagers in the US aged 15–19 had the highest infant, neonatal, and postneonatal mortality rates in 2017–2018, with **Black teens having the highest rates**. According to the WI Interactive Statistics on Health, Wisconsin has the highest Black infant mortality rate in the nation, with Racine County having the highest rates.

“We know from social determinants that our communities shape our health outcomes. What would happen to outcomes if teens were part of the conversation to address infant safety? As siblings, in health class, in parenting classes, or CPR/AED First Aid trainings?”
- Shanyce Hutchinson, young person from Madison, WI

“Peer to peer initiatives help educate youth about substance misuse and harm reduction. Often, police come in to intimidate youth about drug use, instead from a place of empathy and understanding.” - Jayvyn Graves, young person from Middleton, WI

Infant mortality rates, by maternal age and infant age at death: United States (2017-2018)



Adapted from: [NCHS Data Brief, no 371](#). National Center for Health Statistics, 2020

Next Steps & Resources

Now that you have read this guide, you have the tools and support to start engaging youth. Remember that small actions can have big impacts and there is no single formula for success. For more support such as detailed guides, resources, and toolkits—see below:

[Youth Advocates for Community Health Workbook](#)

UW-Madison Extension

Support for: planning a youth-led community health project, conducting needs assessments with youth, action planning

[Youth Advisory Council Toolkit](#)

PATCH, DHS Adolescent Health Team

Support for: designing a successful program, meeting structure, facilitating meetings with youth

[Youth Engagement Evaluation Toolkit](#)

Ministry of Children & Family Development, University of Victoria

Support for: understanding your organization's readiness for youth engagement, recommendations for improvement

[ENGAGE Toolkit](#)

Johns Hopkins Center for Adolescent Health

Support for: designing and building a Youth Advisory Board for your organization, strategies and examples of success

Need support or have questions? Reach out to your local UW-Madison Extension Office, or the MCH Youth Health Team:

Email: youthhealth@extension.wisc.edu

[UW Extension Website](#)

[MCH Title V Technical Assistance Website](#)

Citations

Sulzle, C., Kohout, D. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

Tomlin, BD, McAdams, RM, Zapata, JY, Kaluarachchi, DC. High Black infant mortality in Wisconsin: factors associated with the ongoing racial inequity. *J Perinatol*. 2021 Feb;41(2):212-219. doi: 10.1038/s41372-020-00906-6. Epub 2020 Dec 18. PMID: 33339984.

Woodall, AM, Driscoll, AK, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, & National Center for Health Statistics. (2020). Racial and ethnic differences in mortality rate of infants born to teen mothers: United States, 2017–2018. In NCHS Data Brief (No. 371).

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