

Youth-Centered Recovery

At this point in the Era of COVID, everyone working in the nonprofit sector is certain that things need to happen now to begin getting communities back on track. Unfortunately, that is the extent of certainty for most. We see the impacts on the economy, on physical and mental health, on community engagement, on inequality; we feel it most in our homes. These obstacles have grown to form one of the largest hurdles ever faced by our communities, and we will not get past it by ignoring it nor by avoiding the risks necessary to resource our recovery. In our collective recovery efforts, we need to focus on our youth whose social, emotional, and learning environments have been turned upside down.

Youth must be at the forefront of community recovery and flourishing. Engaging and investing in youth has direct and substantial impacts on the entire community. Those potential impact results exist unrivaled by any other philanthropic action that could be taken. Through research paired with our own experiences over the past decade, the five most salient reasons for youth philanthropic engagement in community recovery are: increasing positive youth well-being; enhancing the interconnectedness of community problem-solving; strengthening the social, economic, and political standing of a community; creating imperative structural change; and fostering lasting change.

1. Increasing positive youth well-being

Research shows most youth feel hopeless, helpless, and isolated. Ten years of improved social mobility has been erased, crushing their goals, and causing them to reevaluate their future in a negative light.¹ They know injustices that impact youth have historically been ignored, their thoughts trivialized, and their voices censored.² Providing autonomy through philanthropic engagement can reengage them with their peers and with the community. Latest research shows psychosocial well-being of youth may be the most important indicator of success in community recovery.³

2. Enhancing the interconnectedness of community problem-solving

Because social problems are generally symptomatic of systemic problems, interconnecting the resources of public, private, and charitable sectors to create positive change is unequivocally the correct strategy.³ Interconnectedness also applies to hearing and connecting the collective voices of the community's citizenry. Youth must be part of that dialogue, otherwise they will end up being the casualties of change rather than primary influencers of change.

3. Strengthening the social, economic, and political standing of a community

Engaging youth in significant philanthropic leadership roles at their formative age sustains the growth of the nonprofit sector by making them more engaged as adults.⁴ This type of positive context has also been seen to act as an opposite to stereotypical peer pressure, where youth build each other up instead of bringing each other down.⁵ Abstract social issues trigger defeatist attitudes; shifting to local tangible connections through youth has been shown to increase civic and political engagement, as well as initiate long term social, economic, political change.⁶ According to the United Nations, investing in youth directly advances the socioeconomic development of a community; not investing in youth triggers substantial economic, social, and political costs.⁴

4. Creating imperative structural change

Integration and empowerment of youth in philanthropy helps close large structural gaps by using a broad inter-generational focus in problem solving to address power inequalities.⁷ As the most diverse generation ever, this allows youth to challenge systemic inequalities. By analyzing their connected histories through a sociopolitical systemic lens, they can bring significant and necessary change to the community.²

5. Fostering lasting change.

Ensuring lasting change by focusing on the sustainability of initiatives created by and for youth amplifies impact and minimizes risk.¹ Without collaborating with the leaders of the future, any potential progress will be short-lived. Bringing youth into the recovery dialogue is critical to the long-term effort it will take to make our communities vibrant again. They are the ones who will be living with our decisions the longest.

We believe empowering youth in this manner to be the most critical component in not just helping youth recover, but in helping our communities recover. As John F. Kennedy said, “There are risks and costs to action. But they are far less than the long-range risks of comfortable inaction”. Change without youth is ephemeral, and structural change without youth is impossible. Right now, we need to listen to them and do the right thing. It just might mean the future of our country.



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