

Understanding the Challenges Young People Face in Navigating the Safety Net

How can policies and programs work better for young people?

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HOW STRUCTURAL RACISM AFFECTS PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES WITH THE SAFETY NET

Black, Latinx, and Indigenous young people are more likely to have insufficient access to the resources they need for a stable foundation.

Structural racism shapes the constraints young people face and their need for support.

Racism shaped the basic design and assumptions that undergird safety net programs, which in turn shape young people's experiences as they seek assistance.

Safety net programs often do not address inequities caused by structural racism.

The years young people move from adolescence to adulthood—ages 14 to 24—are full of immense potential. This is the time when they get the education, skills, life experiences, and supports they need to take on increasing responsibility, form their identities, and learn how to succeed on their own. This transition requires a stable launching pad formed by support from their families and caring adults in their communities, resources to meet their basic needs, and opportunities to access quality education and employment.

For young people without sufficient income or family support to meet their basic needs—including food, housing, health care, and income—support from public safety net programs is essential. But the safety net has major gaps and access barriers that create challenges for people of all ages—especially for young people because of their age and developmental stage. This leaves young people without the stability they need to successfully move into adulthood.

We talked with young people who face these challenges (and people working at youth-serving organizations that connect young people to safety net programming and other supports) to understand their perspectives and experiences in navigating safety net supports, as well as their recommendations for how safety net policies and practices could better meet young people's needs.

KEY CHALLENGES YOUNG PEOPLE FACE ACCESSING THE SAFETY NET

Young people and staff members identified the following challenges:

Safety net policies and practices do not reflect the needs of young people. Policies and practices are designed for adults and do not account for young people's specific needs or life circumstances.

It is hard for young people to know what benefits exist or how to access them. Young people shared that they did not know what benefits and assistance were available.

Application processes are complicated and difficult to manage. Young people receive little support in navigating confusing and complex applications, rigid and difficult documentation requirements, and logistical and process complexities.

Programs and processes do not recognize the developmental and life stage realities of young people. This creates the following challenges:

- Navigating and following through with complex safety net processes can be challenging for young people.
- Self-advocacy can be challenging in systems where young people have little power.
- Young people may lack legal authority and face other age-related constraints.
- Punitive policies leave no room for mistakes.
- Safety net policies can undermine the relationships young people need.

Safety net programs do not sufficiently recognize mental health issues.

Young people often are unable to access the mental health resources they need, and safety net programs' rules and restrictions may cause more stress and anxiety and exacerbate underlying conditions.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

For an in-depth look into these challenges and solutions, see our report *Young People's Lived Experiences with Safety Net Programs* at <https://urbn.is/3lr0rnA> and our brief "Stabilizing Young People Transitioning to Adulthood" at <https://urbn.is/3tnRCxc>.

To explore other ways to help young people access and retain safety net supports, see our project page at <https://urbn.is/3DhNfYl>.

There are different stakeholders that have valuable things to contribute...I still want, and I still need, something from [adults]... if they do it with me, that gives me what I need to grow and build something great.
—A young person who has faced challenges accessing safety net supports

STRATEGIES TO MAKE SAFETY NET PROGRAMS WORK BETTER FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Applying a youth-centered lens to redesigning safety net policies and programs for young people, with a focus on providing stability, can help safety net programs better support young people during their transition to adulthood.

Simplify access and support young people in navigating safety net processes. Invest in navigators to work with young people; coordinate access to a range of supports across multiple agencies and community-based organizations; minimize and streamline paperwork requirements; and assess and address barriers to access and retention of benefits.

Empower and support young people in decisionmaking. Teach them how to navigate the process; respect their experiences, insights, and decisions; and include them in decisionmaking at the organizational and policy levels.

Replace punitive approaches with support and minimized burden. Approach young people's needs holistically; help them access mental health resources; develop systems of mutual respect and accountability; support young people even when they make mistakes; and focus on customer service.

Make structural changes to how the system supports young people. Staff and young people said fundamental, structural changes to the way society cares for young people—such as guaranteeing basic income, expanding program eligibility, and eliminating work requirements—are critical to helping them thrive as they transition to adulthood.

[Focus] on support that would make it so that youth don't have to hit rock bottom...to become eligible for these programs.

—A staff member of a youth-serving organization
