Presented with even the highest quality programming or the best-aligned systems designed to make connections with school and the workforce, opportunity youth will continue to struggle with disconnection if the supports available to them outside of these structures fail to meet their basic needs. Healthy adolescent development is dependent on proper nutrition, especially in early childhood, yet more than one in six children — disproportionately Black and Latinx — lived in food-insecure households in 2017. [68] Stable housing is a comparable protective factor, yet approximately 30% of people experiencing homelessness are under the age of 24, and one in 10 young adults between 18 and 25 years of age experience some form of homelessness each year. Among these youth, many of the same populations at greatest risk of disconnection — including LGBTQ+, foster, and justice-involved youth — are at disproportionate risk for homelessness. [69]
As the pandemic has surged, so, too, has need: as of February 2021, an estimated 31 million children lived in households struggling to cover basic expenses, with the risk for Black and Latinx families double that of their White and Asian American peers. Federal safety net programs have the potential to fill the gap, but insufficient funding levels and age-based eligibility requirements—which create barriers for youth and fail to account for the blurred lines between dependence and independence—too often result in a significant number of vulnerable young people facing multiple barriers to care, with significant gaps for parenting youth, youth with disabilities, and those transitioning out of foster care or the juvenile justice system. Compounding this, few youth affected by trauma — including the chronic stress associated with food and housing insecurity — have access to adequate mental health services. Studies indicate that children and youth with health care coverage have improved outcomes in health, education, and economic success, with comparable outcomes for public and private programs. Yet, in 2020, 4.3 million children under the age of 19 were uninsured for the entire year.

To fully engage opportunity youth in reconnection efforts and lessen the risk of disconnect for future generations, stronger support services are needed to ensure healthy, supportive, and stable environments for youth who have been historically underserved by all levels of government. For the one in three opportunity youth living in poverty, adjustments to entitlements such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children — which served just half of all eligible low-income individuals in 2017 — are critical; equally important are renewed investments in rental assistance programs like housing choice vouchers as nearly 40% of low-income individuals are homeless or dedicate more than half of their income to rent. Additional investments in and amendments to Medicaid would have a significant impact on medical coverage for opportunity youth, who are enrolled at a rate twice that of their connected peers. Medicaid is particularly crucial in providing a large proportion of mental health and substance use disorder services for populations most at risk of disconnection — especially homeless youth — but such services are limited by behavioral health carveouts, billing restrictions, and inadequate payment rates for mental and behavioral health services.
Stronger essential services are needed to ensure healthy, supportive, and stable environments for youth who have been historically underserved.

The Department of Agriculture can...
- Strengthen and increase investments in WIC and SNAP and explore opportunities to expand youth coverage, including extending pandemic-era eligibility for college students.
- Extend pandemic-era expansion of the National School Lunch Program to provide breakfast and lunch to all students free of charge throughout the school year and during summer programming.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development can...
- Strengthen low-income supports—including housing choice vouchers and resources for individuals experiencing short-term housing instability—to meet the full needs of homeless youth and families with children.
The Department of Health and Human Services can...

- Encourage states to avail new opportunities to use Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program to address the social determinants of health, including reimbursing for and encouraging the use of ICD-10 Z codes to document beneficiary needs related to these determinants.

- Strengthen oversight and enforcement of the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act to ensure that Medicaid, CHIP, and commercial insurance plans remove barriers to providing timely, comprehensive mental health care and adequately reimbursing providers.

- Limit and rescind Section 1115 waivers granted by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services that allow states to limit and restrict eligibility, cut benefits, or cap funding, including block grants, work requirements, lockouts, exclusions for mental health and substance use disorder treatment, and elimination of retroactive coverage.

- Confirm that states fully implement the statutory changes to Medicaid included in the Substance Use Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment for Patients and Communities Act to ensure that youth Medicaid eligibility is not terminated upon incarceration and that youth are enrolled upon release.

- Invest in and expand the integration of evidence-based behavioral health, mental health, and addiction treatment services in pediatric primary care settings leveraging the Health Resources and Services Pediatric Mental Health Care Access Program, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration grant programs, and child and adolescent mental health workforce expansion.
Congress can...

- Ensure that the Medicaid program receives adequate federal funding by increasing the Federal Medical Assistance Percentage.

- Allow states to cover services for Medicaid beneficiaries who are incarcerated during the 30 days preceding their release to facilitate post-release coverage and access to care.

- Strengthen investments in civil legal aid and other access-to-justice functions under the Department of Justice to help reduce barriers to benefits and entitlements.

The Department of Education can...

- Increase grant funding for high-quality afterschool and summer learning programs for students in all grade levels, prioritizing those in rural settings.
REFERENCES