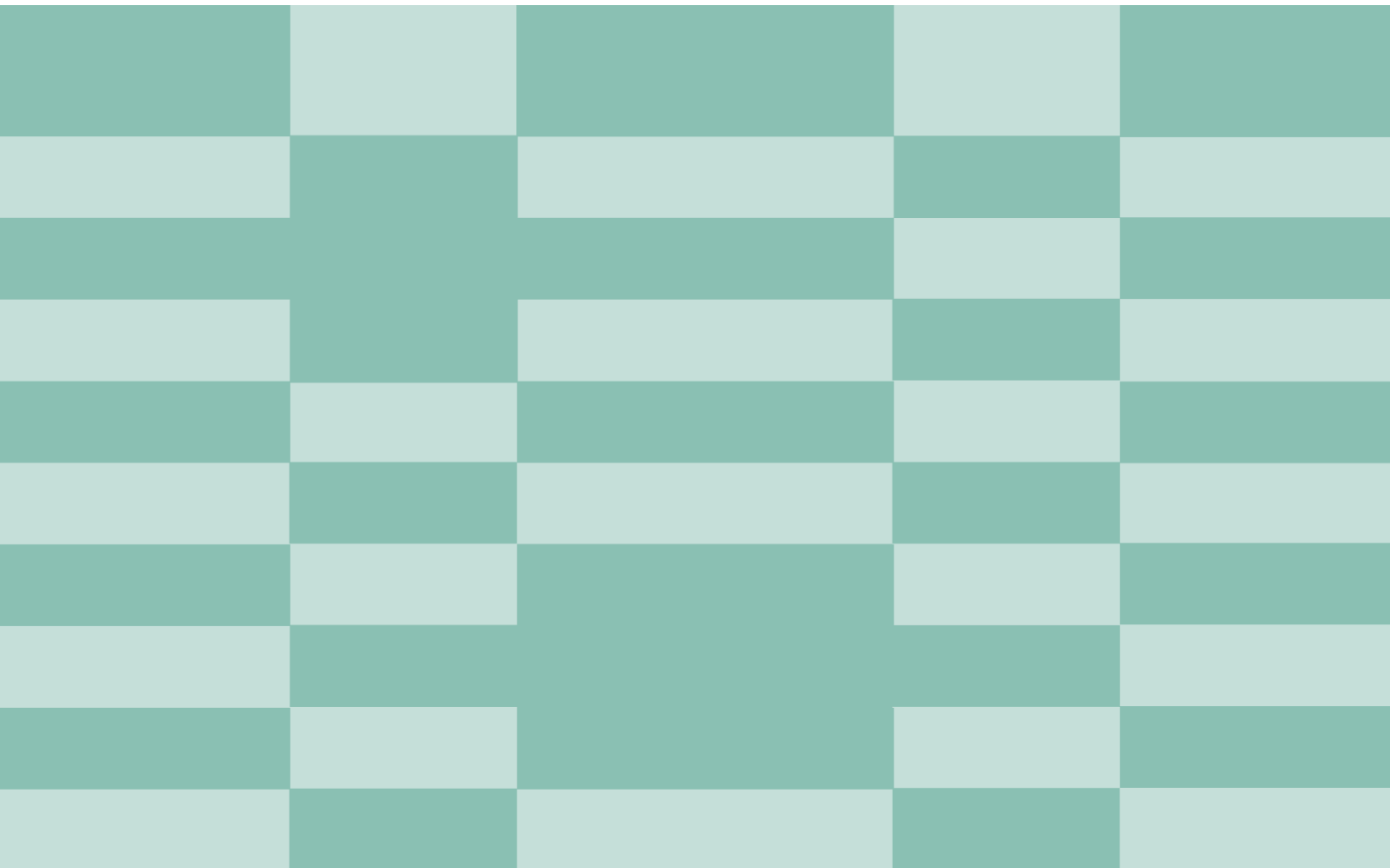


Omni Institute Report

Adams County Health Department

Youth Health & Well-being Assessment Planning

Thematic Analysis & Assessment Recommendations



Adams County Youth Health & Well-being Assessment Planning

Submitted to:

Suzuho Shimasaki

Adams County Health Department

For More Information

projects@omni.org

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Table of Contents

01	Background	
	Overview	4
	Existing Data & Efforts	4
02	Assessment Planning Approach	
	Methods	7
	Data Collection	7
	Data Preparation & Analysis	7
03	Key Results	
	Safety & Community Experience	7
	Unsafe Spaces in the Community	8
	Challenges Related to Unsafe Spaces	8
	Safe Spaces in the Community	9
	Implications for County-Wide Exploration	9
	Community Challenges, Support Systems, & Resources	10
	Sources of Support & Resources	10
	Barriers to Support & Resources	11
	Implications for County-Wide Exploration	12
	Youth Engagement Approaches	13
	Existing Spaces & Platforms for Youth Voice	13
	Engagement Strategies & Insights	13
	Data Utilization & Reporting Strategies	14
	Existing Data Sources Utilized	14
	Opportunities for Improved Data Sharing & Coordination	15
	Priority Assessment Issues & Populations	15
	Potential Uses for County-Wide Youth Assessment Data	16
	Data Formats & Presentation	17
04	Recommendations	
	Recommended Directions for the FY26 Assessment	18
	Appendix A: Interview & Focus Guide(s)	21
	Appendix B: Detailed Data Analysis Methods	25



● BACKGROUND

Overview

Adams County Health Department (ACHD) has identified an increasing need to better understand the health and well-being of youth across their communities. This calls for an exploration that extends beyond individual behaviors to closely examine the broader systems and conditions that shape youth outcomes.



In FY26, ACHD will be conducting a comprehensive Youth Health and Well-being Assessment to align and coordinate programs and teams across the department, center youth perspectives with their work, and provide a roadmap for funding and partnerships that work across both internal and external efforts.

In June of 2025, ACHD contracted with Omni Institute (Omni), a non-profit social science consultancy, to conduct a series of focus groups and key informant interviews to gather insights from youth, school and behavioral health professionals, community resource specialists, and ACHD staff and leaders. These discussions were designed not only to elevate perspectives on core themes such as youth safety, engagement, future outlook, and systemic support, but also to inform the design and implementation of ACHD's FY26 Youth Health and Well-being Assessment. Participants were invited to reflect on the types of data that are often missing from traditional assessments, what would make this effort most useful and actionable, and how ACHD can ensure that the comprehensive assessment leads to meaningful decisions, particularly around funding programs and services, partnerships, and county-wide initiatives. This report synthesizes the insights gathered and shares recommendations for a grounded, community- and youth-informed methodology for the FY26 assessment.

Existing Data & Efforts

ACHD is actively engaged in and has planned an array of data collection, analysis, and engagement efforts aimed at improving youth health and well-being across the county. These initiatives include surveys, mapping, listening sessions, and systems-level collaborations, all reflecting a shared commitment to working across demographic and geographic lines.

The overarching aim is to align these data-driven efforts with concrete decisions around policy, funding, partnerships, and programming. Central are questions that elevate youth voice and experience, particularly concerning youth safety, future outlook, engagement and belonging, and access to systemic supports.

Multiple initiatives across the county focus on gathering direct input from youth, families, and communities. These are all detailed in Table 1 (see following page).



Table 1. Current Initiatives Related to Assessing Youth Health and Risk and Protective Factors

Type	Initiative	Description
Surveys	Shared Risk & Protective Factor (SRPF) Community of Practice Matrix	Mapping of ACHD programs, projects, and initiatives taking a structured SRPF approach to behavioral health, violence, and chronic disease
	Teens for Change (TFC)	Past youth community surveys and hot spot mapping
	State Tobacco Education and Prevention Partnership (STEPP)	Surveys and student focus groups on nicotine policy and suspension alternatives (27J, APS)
	Healthy Beverage Partnership	Parent focus groups on sugary beverage consumption and related topics
	State Tobacco Education and Prevention Partnership (STEPP)	Safe Zones Surveys
	Youth with Special Health Care Needs Assessment	Needs assessment for youth with special health care needs
Mapping & Cross-System Analyses	Violence Prevention Assessment Team (VPAT)	Map of youth experiences and perceptions of safety in the community and schools
	Youth Risk Assessment Center (YRAC)	Map of services and support across the county
	Adams County Behavioral Health Workgroup	Cross Department behavioral health services and program mapping
	TFC Hot Spot Mapping	Identification of youth-identified hot spots, or areas of increased risk for victimization
	SRPF Analysis of Health Kids Colorado Survey Data support (<i>planned</i>)	Planned analysis of Health Kids Colorado Survey Data



Program & Initiative Highlights	Strengthening Families ARPA Project	Early childhood Focus with multi-agency alignment (ECPAC, ACHD, ACHS)
	Co-Responder Evaluation and Sustainability Project	Evaluation of the co-responder model's impact and sustainability
	ARPA-funded Behavioral Health/School Grants	Increase behavioral health services and supports for schools and community organization
Youth & Community Input via Surveys, Scans, & Listening Sessions	VPAT Youth Engagement Sessions	Sessions with GRASP/Libby to gather youth input on violence prevention
	VPAT Youth -Serving Organization Sessions	Sessions with youth-serving organization specifically Commerce City
	VPAT Youth Gathering Spaces Mapping	Identifies youth gathering spaces outside of schools
	Youth Resource List Creation	Compiling/sharing youth-focused resources
	STEPP	Focus groups and listening sessions focused on nicotine and tobacco policies
	Behavioral Health Program Interviews	School-based provider interviews focused on behavioral health services and supports
	Tobacco Focused Community Assessment	Conducted in 2023 and updated in 2024
	Overdose Data Scan, Alcohol Data Scan	Broader public health data relevant to youth overdose risk, morbidity and mortality
Systems Analysis & Strategic Planning	Adams County Behavioral Health Services and Supports Assessment: A Blueprint for Action	Comprehensive assessment and recommendations for improving behavioral health services and supports in Adams County including schools
	VPAT Potential Future State Analysis	Policy and justice-system interaction analysis for youth



● ASSESSMENT PLANNING APPROACH

Methods

Omni used a qualitative approach that involved one semi-structured interview with a community resource specialist and five facilitated focus groups with youth, school and behavioral health professionals, and ACHD staff and leaders. This section summarizes the research methodology used by Omni throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Data Collection

Across the one key informant interview and five focus groups, Omni engaged 18 participants representing a range of perspectives. Discussions focused on core themes including youth safety, community engagement and belonging, future outlook, systemic supports, and planning around data and assessment approaches for the FY26 Youth Health and Well-being Assessment.

To guide these conversations, Omni collaborated with ACHD to develop a semi-structured interview guide, tailored to the different participant groups. Two versions were created: one for school and behavioral health professionals, as well as ACHD staff and leadership; and another for youth participants. Both versions addressed shared topics, including *Youth Voice & Future Outlook*, *Safety & Community Experience*, and *Support Systems & Resources*. The youth version included an additional section on *Community Challenges and Supports*, while the professional/staff version included questions related to a section titled *Data and Assessment Approaches*.

All sessions were conducted over Zoom, lasted around 90 minutes, and upon completion, were transcribed and prepared for analysis. Both versions of the interview guide are provided in Appendix A.

Data Preparation & Analysis

Upon completing data collection on June 30, 2025, all data were cleaned in preparation for analysis. To analyze the data, we used a combination of *topic modeling*, which identifies patterns or themes in the text by grouping words into topics based on how frequently they co-occur across interviews, and *structured content analysis*, which identifies how frequently key themes appeared across interview transcripts. This complementary approach provides a structured view of which topics were most prominent across different parts of the interviews and grounds thematic findings in predefined categories of interest, while offering both confirmatory and exploratory insights into the qualitative data. For further details on data cleaning and analysis, see Appendix B.

● KEY RESULTS

Safety & Community Experience

Focus group and interview discussions with youth, school and behavioral health professionals, and ACHD staff revealed a nuanced understanding of youth safety within their communities. Participants described how safety is shaped not only by physical environments across Adams County but also by institutional practices, social dynamics, and individual, identity-based experiences.



Unsafe Spaces in the Community

Several adult participants noted that schools, while intended to be safe spaces, can contribute to youth feeling unsafe. One adult participant described concerns raised by youth about harsh disciplinary policies and the behavior of school resource officers, who were perceived by youth as “targeting” specific students. Another adult participant referenced local juvenile crime data to support concerns that some youth bring weapons to school in response to feeling unsafe. Several adult participants identified that there were specific areas in the county where youth frequently report feeling unsafe. Three adult participants also noted that some youth feel unsafe in their homes, often due to fear of their parents or experiences of instability and conflict within the household. One adult participant specifically highlighted that LGBTQ+, migrant, and immigrant youth are especially vulnerable to feeling unsafe.

“I guess some kids kind of think that **safety or getting help is like, frowned upon**. Like they think, oh, I don't need help like I can just figure this out on my own. And I feel like that's also a message that's kind of taught, either through like parents or friends or social media.”

— Adams County Youth

Challenges Related to Unsafe Spaces

Both youth and adult participants identified a range of challenges that negatively impact youth safety and well-being in Adams County. Two adult participants pointed to cultural norms and the lack of affordable childcare as barriers to safety and positive community experiences. One youth participant highlighted a stigma around asking for help, which they noted as being reinforced by social media, family, and peers. Trust and comfort, particularly related to confidentiality and mandated reporting, were recurring worries, with several adult participants noting that youth are reluctant to seek help due to concerns over how their information would be shared. One adult participant noted that basic physiological needs like food, water, and shelter are not always met for youth in the community, which can have a profound impact on feelings of stability and safety.

In addition to these more localized challenges, several participants, both youth and adults, described broader political and policy-related concerns that contribute to youth safety and community experience in Adams County. Issues such as school attendance and truancy were noted as being tied to current uncertainty surrounding immigration-related policies. Slowdowns in public insurance enrollment and issues related to HIPAA, release of information (ROI), and other cross-system (local and state) confidentiality were raised as barriers that complicate access to care and services for youth and families. This is a particular challenge for immigrant and mixed-status families, where fear and delays in getting services add to existing hardships.

One adult participant noted that youth are becoming increasingly aware of how to navigate traditional assessments, and voiced concern that if an online assessment were to be used in the FY assessment to collect youth input, some youth might intentionally tailor their responses to avoid additional questioning, which could limit the usefulness of results and make it difficult to accurately assess needs and provide appropriate support. This was seen as part of a broader challenge around online safety and digital engagement and the limitations of current screening tools in capturing authentic youth perspectives. It is important to note that this concern was raised by an adult participant, and we did not follow up with youth directly to understand their views on this issue.



Safe Spaces in the Community

Despite the challenges shared across the interview and focus groups, participants highlighted several positives and *protective factors* that support youth safety and well-being in Adams County. One youth described feeling safe at school due to a strong, trusting relationship with their teacher, an important counterpoint to concerns raised above by some adult participants about schools as unsafe spaces for youth, and one that highlights the power of individual relationships. One youth participant also named the local library as a safe environment. Recreation centers were also described as safe, well-attended spaces by one adult participant, where youth can gather and engage in positive, youth-focused activities.

Risk Factors: characteristics at the biological, psychological, family, community, or cultural level that are associated with a higher likelihood of negative outcomes

Protective Factors: characteristics associated with a lower likelihood of negative outcomes or that reduce a risk factor's impact

Beyond physical spaces, participants named a wide range of community-based youth programs and people who contribute to youth safety and well-being. Of note were the Denver Youth Program, GRASP, Boys and Girls Clubs, and Compound of Compassion, as well as school-based health clinics like Kids First Pediatrics. Several participants emphasized the value of relationships with trusted adults, including parents, family members, teachers, and school staff, in helping youth feel supported and safe. Mental health resources like the *iMatter* hotline were seen by one adult participant as important tools in the community.

Implications for County-Wide Exploration

Our findings from the focus groups and interview highlight several critical areas related to youth safety and community experience that warrant deeper exploration in the upcoming county-wide assessment:

- First, we uncovered **varying perceptions in how youth experience safety** across community environments, suggesting a need for geographically and demographically representative data collection efforts. The FY26 assessment should consider targeted outreach in areas identified by participants as higher-risk, with **attention to the experiences of groups at higher risk**—including LGBTQ+ youth, justice-involved youth, immigrant and mixed-status families, and youth living in unstable or unsafe home environments.
- Second, **youth contrasted with adult participants** in terms of their perceptions related to school safety, which highlights the importance of directly elevating youth voice in future data collection

“I think that we are facing a really horrible potential that we're going to be losing a lot of Medicaid and SNAP funding. Housing is expensive, you know...there's just so much adults can't do. And so how are youth going to do it? **How are youth going to eat, go to the doctor, and live somewhere safe and healthy when we're not providing that funding?** So, I think unfortunately, political factors are a huge driving factor in youth not thriving...”

— ACHD Staff



efforts. Youth-led or -informed survey tools, qualitative methods (e.g., focus groups, interviews), and methods allowing for anonymous feedback may help uncover more authentic reflections, especially given concerns about youth "gaming" assessments to avoid unwanted follow-up, as noted above.

- Finally, there were several positive experiences reported by participants that point to existing **strengths in the community that the upcoming assessment can build on**, including the opportunity to leverage safe spaces, programs, and adults in youth lives. Recreation centers and libraries, mental health hotlines like *iMatter*, youth advisory councils, and community-based organizations all serve as protective factors and spaces of safety and support in the lives of young people and can be leveraged both as recruitment hubs for the FY26 assessment and as areas for potential investment and collaboration across the county.

Community Challenges, Support Systems, & Resources

Several themes related to community challenges, support systems, and available resources emerged throughout the focus group and interview discussions. Participants described a wide array of supports that youth in the community rely on, as well as gaps and inconsistencies in access to those supports across different parts of the county.

Sources of Support & Resources

Many of the supports noted by participants as promoting youth well-being across Adams County were also described as safe spaces for youth, reinforcing the connection between safety and access to trusted people, places, and programs. Participants consistently noted that community-based organizations serve as an important source of support for youth, particularly those with youth-based programming, such as the Denver Youth Program, GRASP, and Compound of Compassion. More broadly, programs for youth offered through Boys and Girls Clubs, recreation centers, and school-based health clinics like Kids First Pediatrics were noted by adult and youth participants for providing support.

Youth advisory councils, such as those in Brighton and Northglenn, were also mentioned by one adult participant as a place where youth go to both get support from trusted peers and adults and share their voice on events in the community.

Many participants emphasized the role of trusted adults, including parents, grandparents, other family members, teachers, school counselors, and church leaders. Friends were frequently mentioned by both youth and adult participants as being the first line of support, especially when youth were hesitant to approach adults. Several adult participants also noted that the internet is fast becoming another source of support and connection, though this was mentioned alongside concerns about both digital safety and fears that technology is replacing meaningful, real-life human connection, especially for youth who are enrolled in online schools.

“Our **school-based health clinics in our Adams County schools** are **really trusted with youth** from the conversations that I've had with the healthcare providers in the school-based health centers. They have strong relationships with youth.”

— ACHD Staff



In terms of mental health and emotional support and resources, adult and youth participants again highlighted *iMatter*, as well as Safe2Tell, as accessible options for youth in need of support. One youth participant also noted that their school offers supplemental supports through peer-to-peer tutoring, mental health awareness weeks, and events that embrace all voices and promote community connection, such as trunk-or-treat nights and pantry drives. Several participants, youth and adults, highlighted extracurriculars and the adults who lead them, including sports, elective classes, student councils, and volunteer programs such as Youth Academy, as being important sources of support and belonging in the community. One youth noted a summer program for Hispanic youth that promotes college readiness as a source of support for their classmates.

“I did track throughout my whole years of high school, and a lot of the kids there were just very supportive, because they got that support mindset from the coaches. So we're like, yeah, like, good job, even though I wasn't even the best...they were always cheering for me. As well as like kids in electives in my elective classes, like painting or weightlifting. I feel like being able to do what you love around people that are doing the same thing will always be really supportive. I think another one was also like hanging out with like a good influence of kids. A lot of the kids that were in Student Council really made me feel like I belonged.”

— Adams County Youth

Barriers to Support & Resources

Several adult participants described barriers to accessing support resources, including poor attendance by youth at in-person events, limited transportation options to connect youth to resources in rural areas of the county, and challenges in disseminating safety and support resources and information effectively.

Concerns about access to behavioral health services were also raised. Two behavioral health participants noted a shortage of Spanish-speaking therapists in the community and schools. They emphasized that systemic and cultural challenges make it difficult for bilingual therapists and behavioral health providers to enter and stay in the field, including low pay, lack of professional support, and licensing pathways that are not well-suited for culturally representative providers. As a result, bilingual therapists face disproportionate caseloads and burnout, while youth from Spanish-speaking households are left with limited access to culturally responsive care. One adult participant also shared a concern about negative or neutral experiences with systems like Child Protective Services, which can lead to mistrust and discourage future help-seeking.

Across several interviews involving both adults and youth, mistrust emerged as a recurring theme. Participants described mistrust in schools—both from youth and families—as well as a general lack of confidence in systems that are intended to support youth. For some families, particularly from Spanish-speaking homes, there was a perceived disconnect from school systems due to language barriers and limited understanding from parents on how services can be accessed. Other adult participants described more general disengagement among parents, noting they may be either not fully informed or not actively engaged.



Similar to challenges related to safety in the county, several participants pointed out political and systemic barriers to support and resources. Several adult participants mentioned concerns over immigration policies, which they noted may be contributing to school absences. They noted that indicators like chronic absenteeism are being tracked in schools, but the root causes of those indicators, such as trauma, housing instability, and fear of exposure, are often overlooked. They voiced concerns over overcrowded and overwhelmed schools, especially as it relates to limited staffing and resources for mental health support for LGBTQ+ youth and marginalized populations, particularly in the southern part of the county (south of the 120th Ave corridor).

“There's just a **sheer lack of services to start with**, and then the ones that are here are very siloed. And it's like, what's that warm handoff between home, school, and community? So, we think about a kiddo in crisis, where is that first touch? **There are a lot of people that want to do resource and referral**. But there's just not a lot of people that are doing the actual support.”

— Youth Resource Specialist

Another theme that emerged as a challenge to youth support and resources was a lack of continuity across the support system in Adams County, from initial crisis identification to referral and follow-through with services. One adult participant highlighted that while school systems refer students to services, there is often no formal structure or process for ensuring that referrals lead to engagement and ongoing care. Finally, the absence of a coordinated transportation system across the county was cited as a persistent access problem by several adult participants, particularly for low-income families and rural youth.

Implications for County-Wide Exploration

Those barriers described by participants above point to several important considerations for the upcoming county-wide assessment:

- First, the FY26 assessment should be designed to address **systemic and structural challenges** to participation, particularly those related to transportation access, language barriers, and concerns around confidentiality. These barriers are not only relevant to accessing services and resources throughout the community but also affect who is able to engage in data collection efforts in meaningful ways.
- Second, the assessment should take into consideration the **geographic differences** in available supports, particularly in the southern parts of the county and in rural areas. Targeted outreach to these sub-communities, with culturally responsive methods and materials, will help ensure that the voices of overlooked or marginalized youth and families are included.
- Third, the FY26 assessment should be designed with surfaced issues related to **mistrust** in schools and support systems in mind, **especially among Spanish-speaking families, immigrant communities, and LGBTQ+ youth**. Data collection should seek to better understand the roots of this mistrust and identify opportunities to rebuild confidence through stronger relationships, transparency, and continuity of care.
- Finally, the assessment should incorporate questions or methods that explore the impact of **online schooling, social media, and digital behavior** on youth connection and access to support and



resources. Youth in online or hybrid learning environments may be particularly isolated, and their experiences are likely underrepresented in traditional data collection efforts.

Youth Engagement Approaches

Participants shared valuable insights into strategies for effectively engaging youth and reaching populations facing greater challenges. They reflected on what has worked in the past, offered creative and culturally responsive ideas for outreach, and highlighted the importance of designing data collection efforts that are both meaningful and accessible. The following themes and strategies will help inform the approach to youth engagement in the upcoming county-wide youth assessment.

Existing Spaces & Platforms for Youth Voice

Participants identified several existing avenues through which youth are currently engaged or where their voices are elevated. These trusted platforms can be leveraged to build partnerships and design engagement strategies for the broader assessment effort:

- **Youth Advisory Boards and Councils:** Both youth and adult participants referenced youth-led groups affiliated with the ACHD and others across the county. These groups support youth-initiated projects, including creative prevention efforts designed by and for young people.
- **Youth-Serving Providers & Spaces:** Organizations such as Reaching Hope in Commerce City and Ralston House in Arvada were named as strong examples of youth-serving providers that prioritize voice and choice in their programming. Programs such as the Crisis Walk-In Center and Community Uplift Partnership (CUP) were also highlighted for their ability to capture authentic youth voice, particularly among populations that may not engage with more traditional services.
- **Schools and Education Professionals:** Schools were described as vital sources of insight, with counselors, social workers, school resource officers, and administrators holding both empirical and anecdotal knowledge. As one adult participant shared, “There they have a treasure-trove of information, both empirical as well as anecdotal.”
- **Faith-Based Communities:** Adult participants emphasized culturally significant spaces such as mosques, temples, and churches. One participant noted the recent opioid prevention work in the District Attorney’s office as a local example of effective engagement strategies for engaging with faith-based communities.

“Adams County youth are super resilient...they are these, I mean, really cool youth, and they have a lot to bring to the table. And I do think that their experiences are unique, and **we need to hear their voices**, and what they need...”

— Adams County Youth Provider

Engagement Strategies & Insights

Participants shared past approaches that have been effective, as well as specific strategies and ideas that could be employed for the FY26 assessment. These insights emphasize the importance of culturally responsive, flexible, and youth-informed engagement. Ensuring that youth are fairly compensated for their time and expertise was emphasized as a core principle of meaningful engagement, whether through cash, gift cards, or other relevant incentives. Key insights included:



- **Compensate** youth participants appropriately. Provide **larger prizes** in addition to universal incentives like cash/gift cards. Offer **raffles** and **giveaways**, including high-interest items like tickets to Elitch Gardens, Water World, or Meow Wolf
- Utilize **youth-led and inclusive** approaches, enlisting youth in data collection activities. Approaches such as the TEGA Project (Technology-Enabled Girl Ambassador) led by Girl Effect could be revisited as a locally-utilized example of young people being trained to collect and analyze their own data using rigorous methodology, producing published findings
- Engage **community-based organizations** that already have strong, trusted relationships with youth, as well as **sports teams, trusted coaches, and youth leaders**
- Prioritize **anonymity**, particularly for sensitive topics
- Keep **surveys** short and mobile/text friendly
- Create opportunities for **community-based experiences** that integrate engagement and data collection, such as youth-centered events held in fun, relevant spaces
- Conduct **1:1 conversations** led by **trusted adults** already connected to youth
- Utilize **social media polls** on specific topics
- Use **video testimonials** as an alternative to asking youth to speak publicly in front of adults, a potentially powerful approach recently utilized in suicide prevention efforts
- Ensure youth have **opportunities to review and respond** to how their input is being interpreted and used

“We don't just want to capture what young people say, but we also want to give it back to them and say, ‘**Is this accurate? Is this captured correctly?**’... because a lot of young people feel like, ‘**Okay, we're giving you this input, but where does it go?**’”

— ACHD Staff

Data Utilization & Reporting Strategies

Adult participants emphasized that access to high-quality, usable, and shareable data is essential for informing youth services and ensuring effective planning and coordination across the County. They shared insights into how data is currently used to better understand emerging needs, guide resource allocation, and tailor interventions to specific populations and communities. They also shared a few insights for improving data sharing and utility across systems.

Existing Data Sources Utilized

Adult participants identified a range of data sources they currently access and utilize to inform youth programming and services. Some sources are dedicated specifically to youth, while others are broader datasets from which youth-related information is disaggregated and analyzed. Many of these data sources and initiatives reflect those that were shared with Omni prior to beginning data collection (see Table 1). The data sources on the following page were specifically noted by participants:



- American Community Survey (ACS) data
- ACHD Data (Violence Prevention Action Team Data and summary reports on service needs and gaps specifically mentioned)
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention National Violent Death Reporting System
- County-level Hospitalization Data for Youth
- County-level School District Suspension and Expulsion Data
- Healthy Kids Colorado Survey
- Municipal-level Crime Data
- Panorama Education Data
- Recovery Capital Index (RCI) via Young People in Recovery
- Rocky Mountain Partnership (formally Adams County Youth Initiative) data
- Safe2Tell Data Dashboard
- Tobacco Free Colorado data
- Youth Resource & Assessment Center Data

Opportunities for Improved Data Sharing & Coordination

Adult participants also expressed a need for more streamlined data sharing agreements across agencies and systems. Many described challenges in accessing relevant information and data about youth, particularly clinical data and risk/protective factor data.

Data sharing was emphasized as critical to improving the quality-of-service provision for youth. Information-sharing across service providers continues to be a longstanding core challenge for effective coordination of care, as the system is set up to meet legal requirements while reducing the capacity of cross-agency coordination. Release of information (ROI) issues can create barriers for direct staff to support youth holistically, as there is a lack of coordination and information-sharing across systems. Even when agencies secure proper ROIs, they frequently face additional obstacles (e.g., each agency requiring their own ROI), which can delay or prevent access to critical information. While these barriers are rooted in legal and privacy protections, they can lead to service disruptions and missed opportunities to ensure the safety and well-being of youth and those around them. Without timely and coordinated information-sharing, providers may be unaware of important aspects of a youth's history (e.g., prior system involvement, behavioral health needs, or prior safety issues/incidents), making it difficult to assess risk and plan appropriate care. Colorado Access was noted as having launched a workgroup in 2024 to explore improving information-sharing across agencies, though participants were unclear about the outcomes of that initiative.

Priority Assessment Issues & Populations

Adult participants suggested a number of issues and topics that could be explored through the county-wide youth assessment, many of which reflect key service gaps, emerging issues, or opportunities to elevate underrepresented voices. These included:

- **Access to care** issues to better understand youth service journeys, as well as barriers to services, including those that may not be identified as such by youth (e.g., caring for siblings, needing to work)
- **Resource navigation** and how youth access resources across fragmented systems
- **Vaping and substance use**, with a need for more current data reflective of on-the-ground realities



from the youth perspective

- **Community strengths and protective factors**, including benevolent childhood experiences
- **County-level ACES data** and related context and implications
- **Youth health, mental health, and sexual health** issues
- **Parental involvement** and its impact on youth outcomes
- **Harm reduction** awareness and practices

Participants emphasized the need to capture the spectrum of youth experiences in Adams County, including cultural, geographic, and system-involvement variation. Adult participants raised concerns about traditional school-based surveys missing those most in need and stressed the importance of deliberate, inclusive outreach to ensure the most marginalized youth (or those who are often the least likely to engage) have opportunities to share their voices. Specific populations mentioned included:

- Youth from **broadly representative communities**, including BIPOC youth and immigrant communities, with particular attention on outreach for those hesitant to participate due to the current political climate
- Youth experiencing known **disproportionate outcomes** (e.g., Latino/Hispanic males experiencing educational gaps or exposure to violence)
- Youth in **foster care**
- Juvenile **justice-involved** youth
- Youth not engaged in services or **not attending school**, outside traditional supports and systems
- **Rural** youth
- Youth deeply involved in **faith-based communities**
- Youth who have experienced **crime or maltreatment**

“We have such a diverse county... and especially when we're talking about young people and the **cultures and subcultures** within youth culture.”

— ACHD Leadership

Potential Uses for County-Wide Youth Assessment Data

Adult participants shared several ways that assessment findings could be utilized across the county to strengthen services, inform decision-making, and improve coordination at both the programmatic and systems levels. They emphasized that the assessment has the potential to offer critical insights that support data-driven planning, whether through frontline service design, organizational strategy, or broader public health and community initiatives.

A few adult participants noted that county-level youth assessment data could be used to identify trends and focus more deeply on communities at higher risk. Assessment findings are also expected to play a key role in resource allocation, helping agencies and organizations determine how to distribute supports and services in alignment with identified needs across different populations and geographic areas. In addition, participants shared how the findings could directly inform and refine programming, such as shaping the focus and delivery of violence prevention or health education efforts. Beyond informing service and program development, one adult participant emphasized the potential for the assessment findings to



support system-level coordination. By identifying gaps and opportunities for improved data-sharing and alignment, findings could serve as a catalyst for stronger collaboration across agencies and systems serving youth.

Data Formats & Presentation

In addition to the utilization of assessment findings, adult participants shared a range of insights for how data could be presented to ensure relevance, ease of access, and action. One adult participant highlighted the importance of ensuring alignment with existing county and organizational plans, such as the Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) and other internal or cross-agency strategic frameworks. A common and strongly emphasized theme across adult groups was the importance of incorporating qualitative narratives to elevate youth voice and ensure the lived experiences behind the data are not overlooked. Participants stressed that presenting youth stories alongside quantitative findings would not only humanize the data but also build greater trust and engagement with assessment findings. The 2017 Denver Youth Health Assessment was cited as a strong example of integrating youth narratives in a way that brings the data to life and centers the voices of those most impacted by the issues examined.

Another priority mentioned was the ability to disaggregate data by geography. A few adult participants emphasized the utility of exploring findings at the neighborhood or community level to better understand key issues and observed challenges. Geographic specificity was also noted as critical for aligning assessment insights with place-based strategies and community-driven planning. Interactive and flexible data tools were also mentioned, such as a user-friendly dashboard that would allow filtering by topic or population and generate customized reports. As one adult participant explained, “Rather than receiving isolated numbers or one-off reports... having data systems that allow users to pull and combine different data points, run cross-sectional analyses, and explore how outcomes shift in response to specific changes.”

Another recommendation included the creation of a system map or organizational overview outlining the many agencies and collaborative efforts serving youth across the county. This would help stakeholders better understand the ecosystem of youth services, identify gaps or overlaps, and coordinate efforts more effectively.

Finally, adult participants highlighted the need for ongoing mechanisms to gather youth input beyond the assessment itself. Recognizing that youth needs and perspectives shift rapidly, they stressed the value of creating structures for continuous feedback to ensure that services remain responsive, equitable, and informed by the voices of young people themselves.

“Historically, the folks that we might need their voices more, might be the **least likely to share their voices** or want to participate in something like this...”

— ACHD Staff



● RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommended Directions for the FY26 Assessment

Insights gathered from focus groups and interviews underscore the importance of designing the FY26 assessment in ways that are action-oriented, centered on youth voice, informed by community realities, and aligned with system-wide needs. Participants expressed a shared commitment to capturing the lived experiences of young people across Adams County, especially those who are often unheard in traditional data collection processes. The findings point to critical opportunities for the FY26 assessment to go beyond surface-level indicators and instead tell a deeper, more nuanced story of the experiences of young people in Adams County.



Honoring youth voice and lived experience. Across conversations, participants consistently emphasized the need for qualitative, narrative-rich approaches that uplift the real experiences of young people, especially youth from marginalized backgrounds. Youth-led and youth-informed methods were strongly recommended to build trust, reduce fears about surveillance and assessment participation, and promote more authentic engagement and information-sharing overall.



Selecting priority issues and populations. The FY26 county-wide assessment can use the priority populations and content areas identified in this initial exploration as a foundation, while remaining responsive to additional insights gathered directly from youth as the assessment is launched. Participatory methods and youth-led engagement will help ensure that the assessment reflects the most urgent issues and most impacted populations.



Elevating distinct perspectives on key issues. The initial discussion regarding safety issues made clear that perspectives differ widely between youth and adults, external environments (e.g., schools, homes, neighborhoods), and identity (e.g., LGBTQ+, immigrant youth, Spanish-speaking youth, justice-involved youth). To ensure that the assessment captures accurate and meaningful information about important issues, it will be essential to create safe, culturally responsive spaces where youth feel comfortable sharing their unique insights and experiences.



Overcoming barriers to engagement through trust-centered approaches. Participants, youth and adult alike, surfaced that mistrust in institutions, particularly among immigrant families, LGBTQ+ youth, and other groups with historically higher risk, can significantly hinder both engagement in the assessment and access to critical services. Assessment efforts must be attuned to the concerns of those navigating heightened fear and vulnerability in the current political climate and designed to build trust through transparency, privacy protections, and culturally responsive approaches.



Exploring geographic differences in access and participation. The assessment should explore geographic differences in access to youth services, particularly in rural areas and the southern parts of the county. Participants stressed that certain communities have access to fewer resources, requiring specific outreach and addressing logistical barriers to participation.





Aligning across data collection and planning efforts. The FY26 assessment should aim to integrate with existing strategic frameworks and data systems across the county to ensure alignment and shared language. This includes coordination with efforts such as the Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP), school district planning, behavioral health priorities, and youth-focused initiatives. Aligning the assessment with these existing frameworks will reduce duplication, reinforce shared goals, and enhance the likelihood that findings will inform decision-making and collaboration across sectors.



Building upon community strengths. Participants noted a number of existing assets that could be leveraged to support both engagement and ongoing youth wellbeing. Trusted programs, recreation centers, libraries, culturally grounded community organizations, and youth advisory councils were all highlighted as protective spaces and/or hubs that can serve as both recruitment points for the FY26 assessment and potential sites for further investment or collaboration.



Utilizing a responsive assessment design. To ensure the FY26 assessment is responsive and embraces all voices, several key design and engagement considerations should be prioritized. Youth should be meaningfully involved in shaping and implementing the assessment, helping to ensure that the content, approach, and methods reflect their lived experiences and priorities. Culturally and linguistically responsive materials and outreach—such as Spanish-language options and engagement through trusted messengers in community settings—will be critical for reaching populations with a variety of perspectives. In addition, the assessment must maintain a strong focus on confidentiality and safety, particularly for youth involved in immigration or justice systems, who may face heightened risks or fears. Finally, the use of flexible data formats that promote cross-system coordination and allow for continuous learning and improvement will help ensure that findings are actionable and widely utilized.



Maintaining youth engagement through feedback loops. Youth engagement in the assessment should not end with data collection but rather include mechanisms to engage youth participants in the interpretation of findings, allowing them to review, validate, and respond to what was learned. This approach reinforces transparency, builds trust, and helps ensure that data interpretation and use remain grounded in youth experience. Ongoing feedback loops can also empower young people to shape future actions and foster a greater sense of ownership in community change.



Appendices



Appendix A

Interview & Focus Guide(s)

Introduction

[Omni Facilitator introduces themselves, then provides the following introduction]



This focus group/interview is designed to plan for a Youth Health and Well-being Assessment in Adams County. We're speaking with key staff, partners, and community members to better understand the lives and well-being of youth in Adams County. In addition to learning about youth experiences, we also want your input on how we collect and understand this information—what data we need, what's missing, and what would make this assessment useful to you and your community. What we learn from you today will help us to plan for a larger assessment that will happen later this year.

School & Behavioral Health Professionals, ACHD Staff & Leaders Version

Warm Up

1. Briefly share your role, roughly how long you've worked in your role, and how your work connects to youth in Adams County?
 - a. Probe: What kinds of programs or services are you involved in that engage with or impact youth?

Youth Voice & Future Outlook

1. Currently, what are some ways (if any) that youth are given opportunities to share their voices? How do you think youth want to engage in their communities?
 - a. Probe: Do you think youth perspectives influence decisions that are made? Why or why not?
2. What approaches or methods have been most effective in engaging youth voices in the past, and what existing forums or platforms are youth already using to share their perspectives?
 - a. Probe: Examples: student advisory boards, peer councils, online, community events, community centers, faith-based organizations, etc.
3. What kinds of data or stories do you think are most important to collect to understand how youth are doing in Adams County?
 - a. Probe: From your perspective, are there things that are overlooked or left out in typical assessments, either in terms of who's included or what's measured?

Safety & Community Experience

1. How might you describe how youth feel in terms of safety (physical, psychological/emotional, within relationships, etc.) in their communities? In their homes? Their schools?
 - a. Probe: Are there differences by geography (e.g., rural vs. urban) or demographic groups?



2. What cultural or community-specific dynamics do we need to consider when asking about safety?

Support Systems & Resources

1. From your perspective, who do youth go to for support (health/medical, emotional, mental health, academic, etc.)?
 - a. Probe: (If responses are only that they go to their friends/family) Are there any notable trusted adults in the community? In schools?
 - b. Probe: Are there particular questions we should be asking to uncover hidden or emerging sources of support or stress?
 - c. Probe: What supports are missing to effectively connect youth with available/needed resources?
2. What does it look like when a young person is thriving in Adams County? What factors help make that possible, and what tends to get in the way?

Data & Assessment Approaches

1. What data sources do your organizations typically turn to when designing your programs and services?
2. What kind of data do you wish existed but are missing/lacking/limited?
3. Are there opportunities to better align or connect data across departments or organizations when it comes to youth well-being in Adams County?
 - a. Probe: What strategies have worked—or not worked—in trying to align data systems?
4. How do you see your organization or community using the findings from the upcoming assessment?
 - a. Probe: Are there decisions, funding, programming, or planning efforts you're aware of that this data could help inform?
5. In your work, what's the most helpful way to receive and use data like this?
 - a. Probe: Reports, dashboards, community forums, etc.

Wrap Up

1. If there's one thing you wish more decision-makers understood about youth in Adams County from your perspective, what would it be?
 - a. FOR ACHD Leadership Only, replaced question above with: If there's one thing you wish the Board of Health and Board of County Commissioners understood about youth in Adams County from your perspective, what would it be?
2. Given all we've discussed, what groups and topics should the upcoming assessment prioritize and involve, and how can we best reach those groups?
 - a. Probe: From your perspective, what would make the assessment as useful, inclusive, and actionable as possible?



Youth Version

Warm Up

1. Briefly share your name, your pronouns, what grade you're going into, and when you think about living or going to school in your community, what's something that stands out—either in a good way or something you think could be better?

Youth Voice & Future Outlook

1. Have you ever had the chance to give input or make decisions about something that affects you and your peers in the community?
 - a. Probe: What did you like about the process/experience? Could you tell me a little bit more about that? Would you want more of that?
2. What existing forums or platforms do you and your peers use to share your perspectives on things in the community?
 - a. Probe: E.g., student councils, advisory groups, school clubs, classroom discussions, social media, group chats, school surveys, focus groups/listening sessions, community centers, faith-based organizations, etc.
3. When you think about your future, how do you feel? Why?
 - a. Probe: Hopeful, stressed, uncertain, excited? What helps you feel supported in what's ahead?

Safety & Community Experience

1. Where or with whom do you feel safe or comfortable in your community?
 - a. Probe: What about these places or people make you feel safe/unsafe?
2. Are there things about your culture, background, or community that affect how you and your peers think about safety?
 - a. Probe: For example, do people from different neighborhoods, racial or ethnic groups, or life experiences see safety differently?

Support Systems & Resources

1. When you or your friends are going through something tough, who and/or where do you turn to for support?
 - a. Probe: Are there programs, places, or people in your school or community that make it easier for young people to get help when they need it?
2. Are there certain young people who don't get the support they need? Who are they? What do you think gets in the way of some people getting help or access to resources or programs?
 - a. Probe: Do you see certain rules, systems, or attitudes getting in the way?
3. What helps you feel like you belong at school, in your neighborhood, or in other spaces you spend time in?
 - a. Probe: Are there certain people or programs that make you feel safe, empowered, included, etc.?



Challenges and Supports

1. In your view, how do you think trauma (like violence, loss, or big life changes) affects youth within your community?
 - a. Probe: Have you seen programs that try to respond to that in helpful ways? Are there programs that are especially good at respecting different cultures and experiences? What makes them especially good at it?
2. Are there any programs you know of that provide support for children and youth of all ages?
 - a. Probe: For example, some kids/families might have been supported through programs like the Early Childhood Partnership of Adams County—have you or anyone you know been part of something like that when you were younger? Or maybe programs like Teens for Change or mental health support through school — do you think those are helpful?
3. Are things different for students in rural areas vs. cities in Adams County? In what ways are they different?
 - a. Probe: How do you categorize where you live? [Note for Emily: this probe is intended to allow us to factor in whether youth are speculating or sharing from their lived experience.]

Wrap Up

1. If you could tell leaders or decision-makers in Adams County one thing about what youth need to thrive, what would it be?
2. If adults wanted to understand what life is really like for youth in Adams County, what would you want them to ask about or pay attention to?



Appendix B

Detailed Data Analysis Methods

Upon completing data collection on June 30, 2025, all data were cleaned and analyzed in R^1 . We began by fully reading the interview transcripts and preparing them for analysis. This involved pre-processing the data by removing punctuation and numbers, breaking the text into individual words, and filtering out common words like “the” and “and” that don’t carry meaning on their own. We also removed a set of additional words that were specific to this work but not useful for analysis, such as “Adams” and “County”. Once cleaned, we created a dataset that captured how often each word appeared in each interview.

Latent Dirichlet Allocation, Topic Modeling

To explore the data, we first implemented a technique called Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA)², also known as topic modeling, to identify patterns in the text by grouping words into topics based on how frequently they co-occur across interviews. We tested several different versions of the LDA model, each with a different, preset number of topics. To decide how many topics to retain given the data, we looked at a measure of model fit called *perplexity*. Lower perplexity scores suggest a statistically better fitting model, but to ensure topics captured the nuance of the interviews, it is important to also review topics manually. This review was conducted by an Omni Senior Research Manager.

Structured Content Analysis

Next, we conducted a qualitative analysis called *structured content analysis* to identify how frequently key themes appeared across interview transcripts. This process helped us examine the presence and distribution of specific issues. We began by developing a set of data dictionaries, each representing a concept or theme of interest in the evaluation. These included: 1) *Youth Voice & Future Outlook*, 2) *Safety & Community Experience*, 3) *Support Systems & Resources*, 4) *Community Challenges and Supports*, 5) *Data and Assessment Approaches*, and 6) *Insights for Decision-Makers*. Each dictionary consisted of a list of words or phrases commonly associated with that theme, drawn from prior research and grounded in review of the transcripts.

We applied a method called *keyword matching* to tag each word that aligned with one or more of the thematic dictionaries, allowing us to flag where and how often these themes appeared throughout the dataset. We then grouped the coded words by interview section and session type, counting the frequency of each theme. This provided a structured view of which topics were most prominent across different parts of the interviews and enabled comparisons across focus areas. This content analysis approach complemented the topic modeling by grounding thematic findings in predefined categories of interest, offering both confirmatory and exploratory insights into the qualitative data.

¹ R Core Team (2025). R: A language and environment for statistical computing. *R Foundation for Statistical Computing*, Vienna, Austria. <https://www.R-project.org/>.

² Blei, D. M., Ng, A. Y., & Jordan, M. I. (2003). Latent Dirichlet Allocation. *Journal of Machine Learning Research*, 3, 993-1022. <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.5555/944919.944937>



Preliminary Assessment Themes

To guide the county-wide youth well-being assessment, we began by identifying a set of issue-specific themes that were informed by prior research and grounded in the local context, evaluation priorities, and interview responses. This process not only highlighted areas of emerging needs or gaps but also confirmed priorities and issues for deeper exploration in the FY26 county-wide assessment.

Although the number of participants who raised specific themes (e.g., $n = 2$) was tracked and documented, these counts were not included in the final report due to the small, qualitative nature of the sample. As counts may not accurately reflect the broader prevalence of perspectives across the community, the report instead emphasizes the depth and broad representation of insights shared, highlighting recurring themes and illustrative examples.

Topic Modeling

The LDA model with 3 overarching topics struck a balance between statistical fit and human interpretability, while also offering enough detail to capture a range of perspectives without producing too many overlapping or overly narrow topics. For each topic, we identified the top twenty words most strongly associated with it mentioned by participants. After reviewing the content of each topic, we gave them descriptive labels and grouped them into broader categorical themes.

This process helped surface key themes across the interviews and guided our understanding of what mattered most to participants in their own words. This process also contributed to the development of the data dictionaries used to conduct the structured content analysis, the results of which are included in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Results of 3-Topic LDA Topic Model

Theme 1: Safety, Stressors, & Systems Navigation	Theme 2: Youth Support & Trust in the Community	Theme 3: Youth Well-Being in Daily Life
Top Terms: school, kids, data, health, parents, support, adults, care, safe, family, services, friends, police, assessment	Top Terms: youth, people, data, support, schools, voice, adults, talk, health, space, share, parents, information, team, safe	Top Terms: kids, health, youth, school, data, program, students, services, people, prevention, mental, feedback, survey

Content Analysis

To visualize how key themes surfaced across the interview and focus groups, we created a heatmap of keyword frequencies. This visualization illustrates which topics were most commonly discussed and how the focus of conversation varied across different groups and contexts. See figure 1 on the following page.

Figure 1. Heatmap of Key Theme Terms by Session Type



