



Do Detroit youth feel hopeful about their future? Results from our pilot survey

By Andrea Anderson, PhD

Since launching the [Opportunity Agenda for Detroit Children](#), we have been eager to develop robust metrics to document what may be our most important indicator of progress: **the extent to which youth are hopeful about their lives and their futures, and whether they perceive the world before them as one full of opportunity**. Our theory of change and our values point to youth perception of hope and opportunity as both a *precondition* to academic performance and social and emotional development, and as a *result* of engagement with caring adults at school and in their communities. It can be considered the most important way to assess the performance of the Opportunity Agenda. Our other two key metrics are milestone markers that assess the systems and supports surrounding young people: *Third Grade Reading Proficiency* and *Meaningful High School Graduation*.

About the Youth Perceptions of Hope & Opportunity survey

In 2019, we set out to develop an instrument that could be used with middle and high school students to assess youth perceptions of hope and opportunity—and the factors that both predict and derive from it. After numerous pandemic-related detours, our research partners were able to field the survey in the spring of 2020, providing much needed insight into what youth are thinking and feeling.

Two of our research partners collaborated to implement this study. [Youth Development Strategies, Inc. \(YDSI\)](#), a national expert in youth development program evaluation, partnered with [JFM Consulting](#), a Detroit-based research and evaluation firm that leveraged its trusted relationships with schools and youth providers to make this research possible. The team conducted a literature review to identify robust measures of key concepts and worked collaboratively with The Skillman Foundation to tailor survey items to the Detroit context.

Constraints imposed by the pandemic hampered our original plans to collect a representative sample of middle and high school aged Detroit youth. The research plan was thus adapted to make an immediate sample possible. To do so, we engaged [Connect Detroit](#) to recruit survey respondents from [Grow Detroit's Young Talent](#) summer youth employment applicants. In May 2021, over 6,700 students in grades 8-12 were invited to participate and incentivized to do so by being entered in a raffle to win one of 100 \$25 gift cards. After six weeks 2,067 young people completed at least half of the pilot survey, which took them less than 15 minutes on their mobile devices.

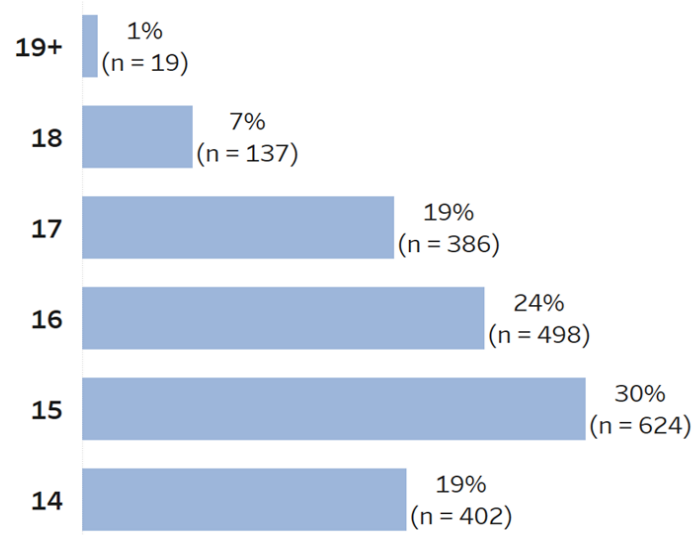


Figure 1a: Age Distribution of Survey Respondents

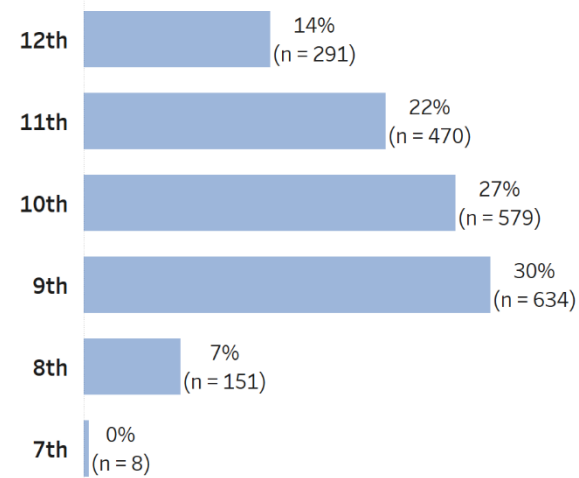


Figure 1b: Grade-Level Distribution of Survey Respondents

It is important to reiterate that this project was a pilot study. The stated purpose of the pilot was to develop and test the instrument for reliability and validity prior to launching a citywide survey of youth. That mission was accomplished, largely because of size of the respondent pool provided ample data for this type of analysis¹. **Despite the large sample size, we ought to approach interpreting the results with some caution. The participants in this study should not be considered a representative sample of Detroit youth.** These youth were involved in summer youth programming during a pandemic; at the very least, they do not represent the most disconnected youth. The pool also skewed older, with far more participants from high school than middle school. Consequently, since most of the high schools in Detroit are within the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), a larger proportion of students in the sample attend DPSCD schools as opposed to charters. In terms of other characteristics (gender, race, neighborhood) the respondent pool was similar enough to the demographics of the city at large that we feel comfortable using this pilot as a first step toward better understanding how youth are feeling.

Headlines from the Survey

The findings from the survey are largely positive, but point to important ways that adults must lean in even more to support youth in Detroit:

¹ We intend to hold focus groups of middle and high school students to review these data and offer insights that will improve our understanding of our findings.



- **Youth in Detroit have an incredible sense of optimism and agency** (defined as the belief that they have control over their lives). This is particularly powerful given the larger context of the pandemic and heightened awareness about persistent racial inequities taking place when the survey was administered.
- **The presence of caring adults in youths' lives—outside of their parents and caregivers—boosts young people's sense of hope, and their feelings about college preparedness.**
- **Young people have multiple relationships with caring adults outside of their families, but the number of these relationships declines as kids get older, suggesting that high school kids have fewer of these important relationships at the very time in their lives that they need them most.**
- **Young people feel ready to pursue college, but we know from other data that levels of academic preparedness is quite low.**

The next section explores each of these highlighted finding in more detail.

Youth Perception of Optimism

Despite participating in this pilot study while COVID-19 was still raging, results suggest that young people in Detroit are largely optimistic. When asked “By the end of the year I think life will be better for me,” the overwhelming majority (92%, n=1,945) reported high levels of optimism about their own future. Not surprisingly, when asked “By the end of the year I think life will be better for my community and for race relations (two separate items),” a much smaller proportion of youth (60%, n=1,275) were optimistic about the months ahead.

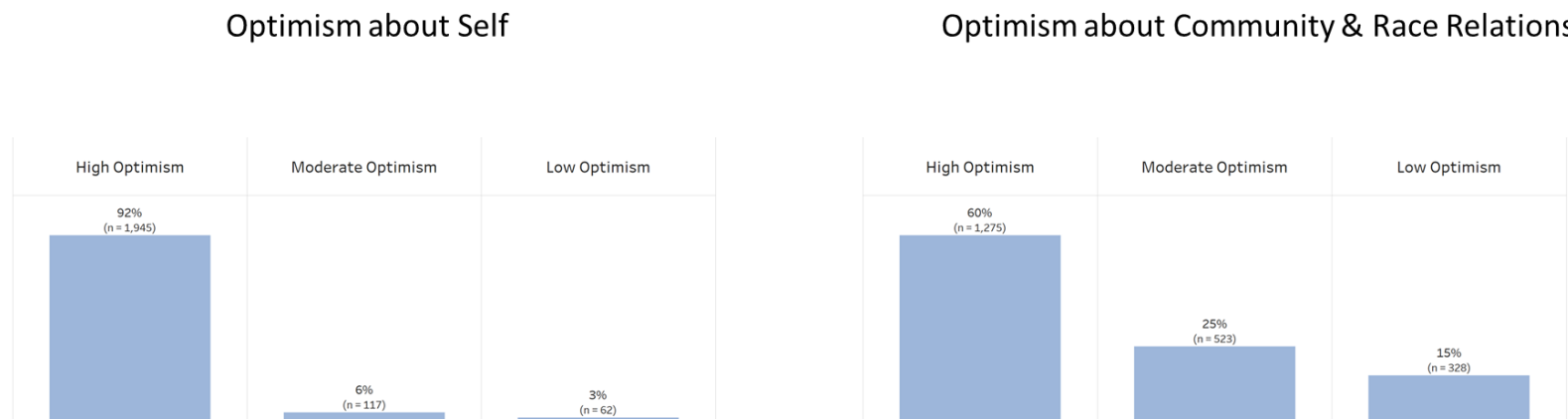


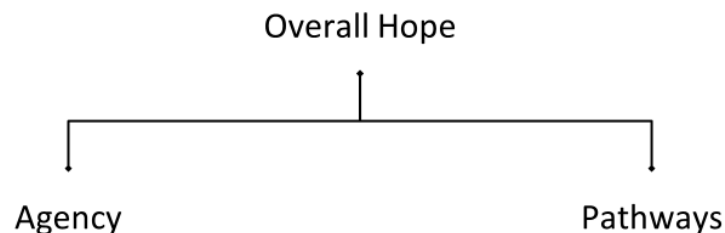
Figure 2; Youth Perception of Optimism

Youth Perception of Hope

Results from the measure of **Hope**² are a bit less encouraging. Hope, defined by measuring Agency (how they feel about their ability to control their lives) and Pathways (what they know about how to create their desired future) is known to influence the outcomes of young people while they are students and after they complete high school. Our analysis found that only 28% of youth had “High” levels of hope, while just over half (52%) had scores that we considered “Mid-range” or “Low.” The fact that many young people – largely young Black and Brown people—in Detroit have a strong sense of agency is encouraging, but work remains to scale up the supports required to instill this sense of hope into an even larger proportion of our young people.

☆☆ Perceptions of Hope

Children’s Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1997)



Hope – Overall Composite

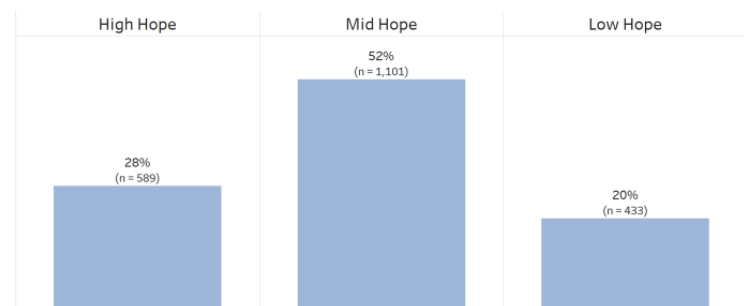


Figure 3: Youth Perception of Hope

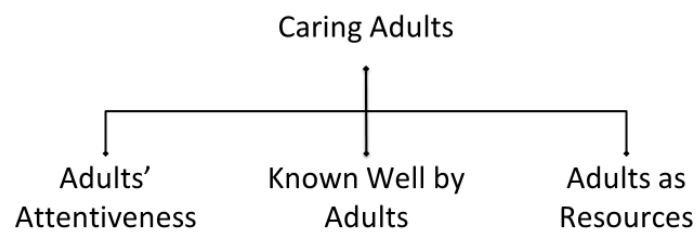
Youth Perceptions of Caring Adults

Young people benefit from relationships with caring adults outside of their own families who are important sources of emotional support, so we wanted to understand how the presence or absence of caring adults correlated with the other youth outcomes. Our measure of **Caring Adults** has three dimensions: (a) the degree of adult attentiveness; (b) the extent to which youth feel that there are adults who know them well; (c) and youth perception of adults as resources or sources of support. It is encouraging that most of the youth in this sample (55%, n=1,149) have high scores on

² The team identified a widely used measure of Hope that has been used in youth research since 1997, “The Children’s Hope Scale.” A selected list of citations related to this scale are in the Appendix. Note that all other measures on this survey were developed for this project.

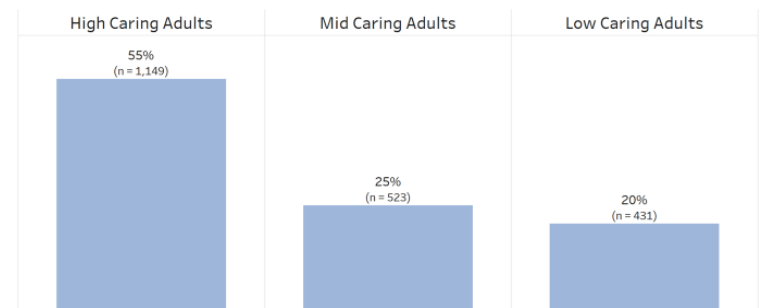
the **Caring Adults** scale. What should concern us, however, is the fact that slightly less than half (45%, n=954) reported moderate or low numbers of caring adults in their lives. We explore the strong correlation between number of caring adults, hope and youth perception of college readiness below.

Caring Adults



23

Caring Adults – Overall



30

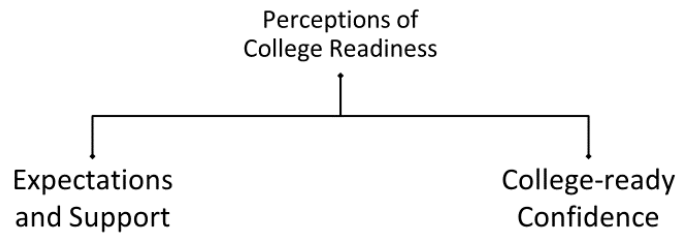
Figure 4: Youth Perception Caring Adults

Youth Perception of College Readiness

We are keenly interested in understanding how young people are feeling about their options after high school. One of the most important aspects of this is whether young people feel ready for college. We explored two dimensions: youth perceptions of whether adults expected them to attend college and supported those expectations; and the level of confidence youth have about their readiness for college. The results suggest an almost even split, with 35% (n=666) having optimal levels of **Perceived College Readiness**, 27% (n=524) scoring in the intermediate range, and 38% (n=723) reporting scores that we categorized as “at risk.” As we will see when we dig into these data a bit more, both **Hope** and access to **Caring Adults** are strongly correlated with optimal levels of **Perceived College Readiness**. And as we will show, there is a troubling gap in Detroit youth’s perception of college readiness and actual academic readiness (defined as surpassing a 1060 on the SAT).



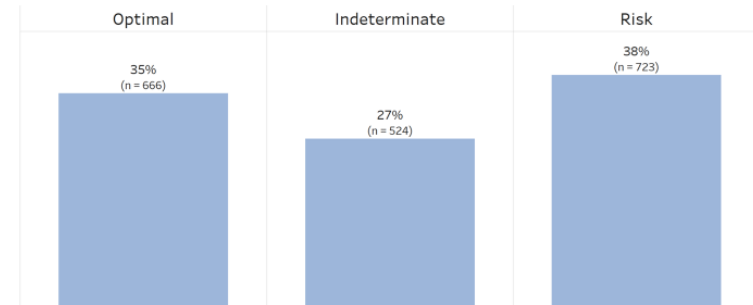
Perceptions of College Readiness



38



Perceptions of College Readiness – Overall



44

Figure 5: Youth Perception of College Readiness

Taking a Deeper Look at Critical Themes

There are several salient themes in this data that we will pay attention to as we deepen our efforts to support youth in Detroit during the ongoing pandemic. First, we will explore more deeply the way that **Hope** was measured, and the factors that appear to differentiate hopeful youth from those who are less so. Then we will explore more deeply relationships between **Caring Adults, Hope**, and other positive attitudes. Finally, we will look at **Youth Perceptions of College Readiness**, and contrast that with data about their academic readiness for college.

Agency Varies by Age and is Influenced by Relationships with Adults

“Despite the pandemic there is a story we rarely hear: young people in Detroit—in this case, aged 14-17, predominately Black and Brown—have an incredible sense of optimism and a sense of hope in their lives and possibility.”

- Angelique Power

The survey measured two dimensions of *Hope*: *Agency* and *Pathways*. To measure *Agency*, the survey asked questions such as, “I think the things I have done in the past will help me in the future,” and “I think I am doing pretty well.” To measure *Pathways*, the survey asked questions like, “Even when others want to quit, I know that I can find ways to solve the problem,” and “I can think of many ways to get the things in life that are most important to me.” Arguably, hope is an important aspect of anyone’s success, and the Opportunity Agenda’s ultimate success can be judged by the extent which young people have the experiences and supports—in and out of school—that nurture the development of a hopeful outlook on life.

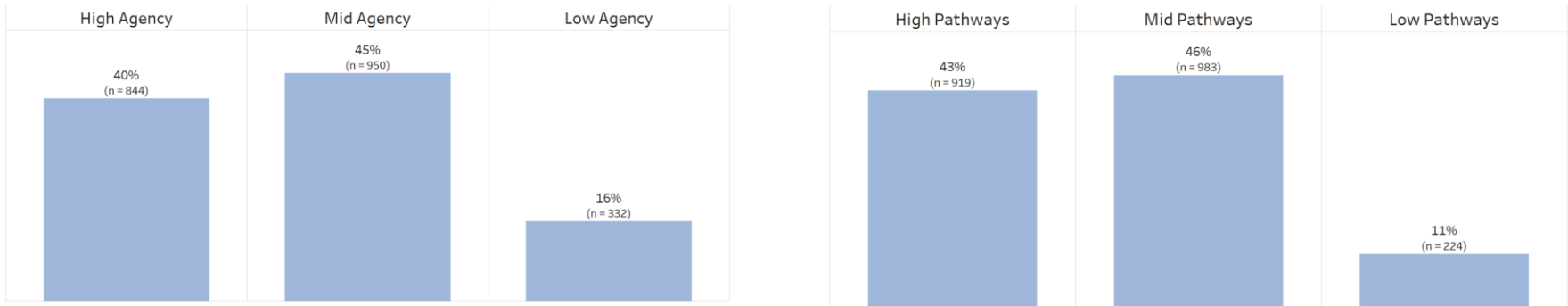


Figure 6: Unpacking Hope: Agency & Pathways

When we tease apart the two components of *Hope* and look at *Agency* and *Pathways* individually, a few important patterns emerge. While similar proportions of young people had high scores for *Agency* (40%, n=844) and *Pathways* (40% n=919), the scores on *Agency* differ by race/ethnicity and are correlated with where students live³.

³ The research team looked for differences in each scale across gender, age, grade, race/ethnicity, and zip code. We highlight only those that were significant or illustrative.

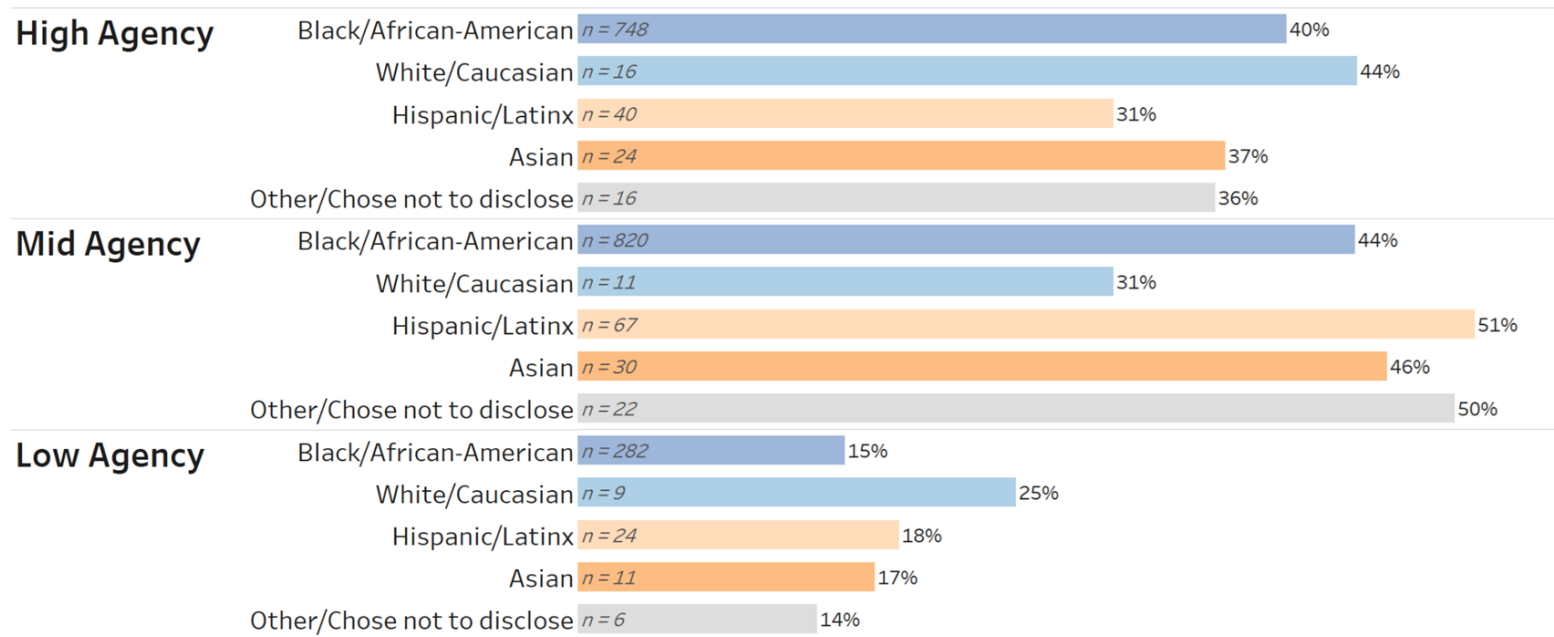


Figure 7: Agency Differs Across Racial/Ethnic Groups

This data (Figure 7) suggests that Hispanic/Latino youth are the least likely to report **High Agency**, and Black youth are least likely to report **Low Agency**. It is difficult to interpret the data for White and Asian groups in the sample because of their small numbers relative to the rate of Black and Latino participation in the survey.

We were also interested in whether young people who reside two priority zip codes (48205, which has the highest violent crime rate in the city and 48288, which is the Cody Rouge neighborhood) would report different levels of Hope than their counterparts in other parts of the city. Figure 8 shows that while a larger proportion of students in Cody Rouge report **High Agency**, the proportion of youth who report **Low Agency** is relatively similar across geographies. It is notable that the students in the high-crime areas of the city are only slightly more likely to be in the **Low Agency** category and are not that different from their peers in other neighborhoods in terms of **High Agency**.

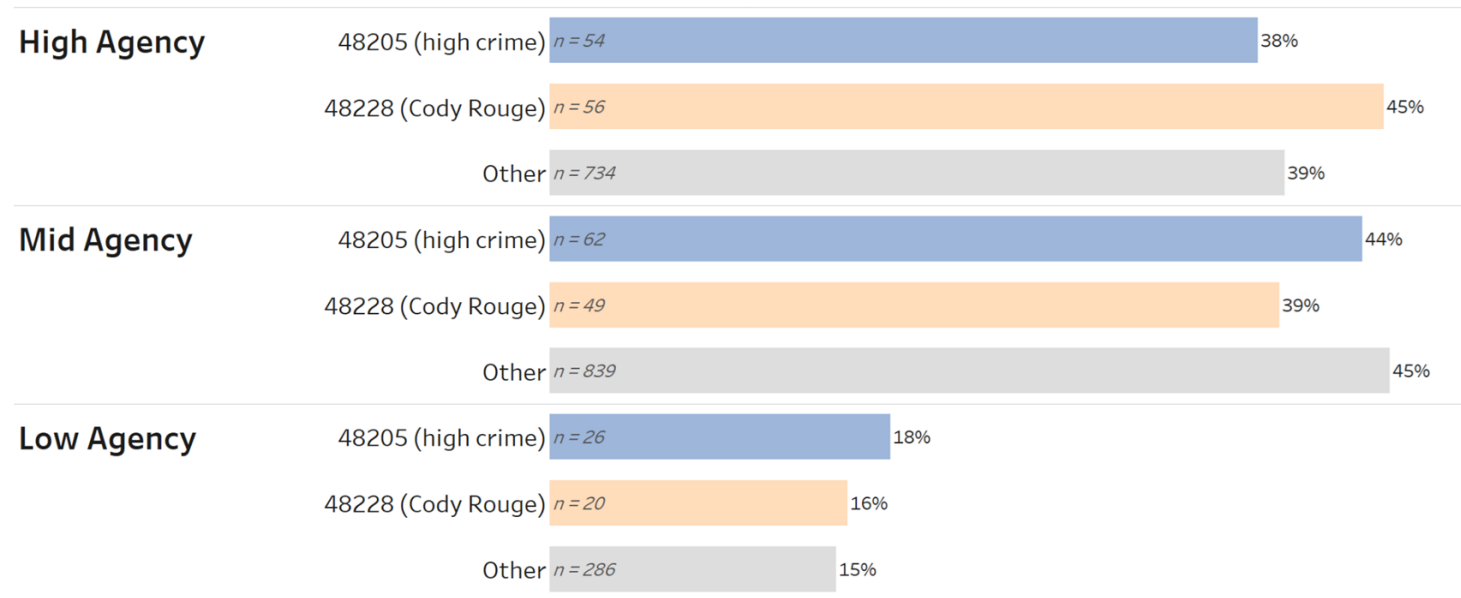


Figure 8. Agency Differs Across Neighborhoods

A third trend in the data on **Agency** supports our belief that caring adults are key to the development of a hopeful outlook in young people. Figure 9 shows a strong correlation between **Agency** and **Adults as Resources**, which captures whether young people have an adult they can talk to if they are upset about something, or whether young people feel that they can turn to adults in their lives for advice about personal problems. Among youth with **High Agency**, 68% (n=575) had high numbers of caring adults they view as resources⁴. Correspondingly, a sizable proportion (41%, n=135) of those youth who were low on the **Agency** scale reported low numbers of **Adults as Resources**. While the study was not designed to ascertain causality, the pattern in this data suggests strongly that having adults in one's corner as a resource during difficult times, or as a sounding board when times get tough, is an important element in young people developing their own sense of agency.

⁴ Note that the percentage of youth in "high" and "low" categories will not equal 100% because we focused the exploratory correlations on only the youth in these two categories.

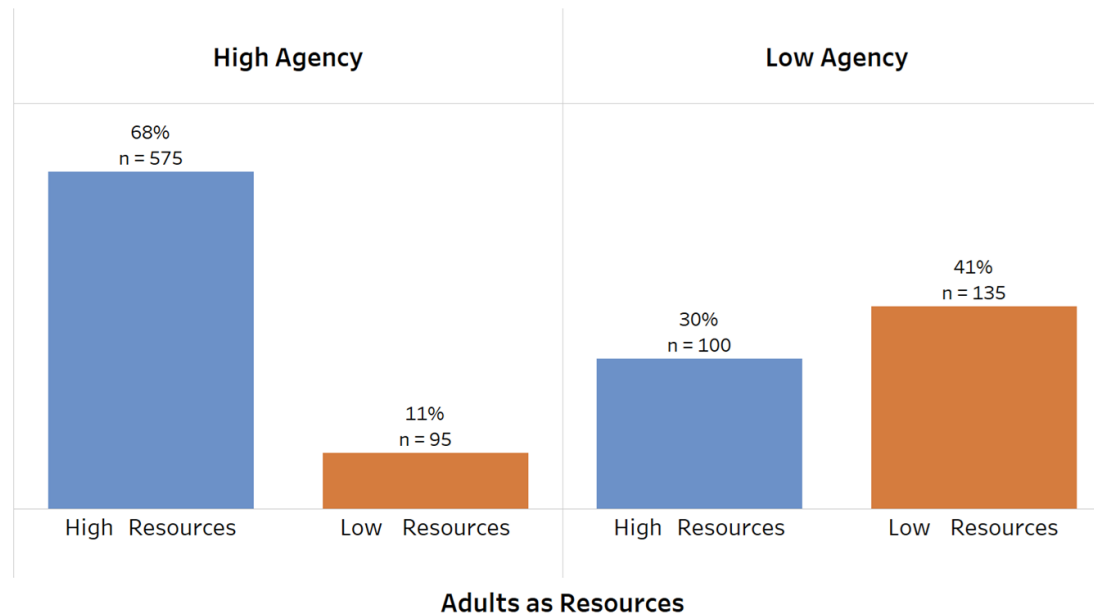


Figure 9. Youth Agency & Adults as Resources

There are Reasons to Celebrate Youth Access to Caring Adults, and Reasons for Concern

We have seen that most of the youth in this study have access to caring adults outside of their families, which bodes well for them developing a hopeful outlook. When we dug a bit deeper into the data on ***Caring Adults***, we found that young people in the Cody Rouge neighborhood were more likely to report high numbers of caring adults than youth residing in 48205 or other areas of the city (Figure 10). These youth from Cody Rouge were also least likely to report that they had low numbers of caring adults. Given the range of supports at Cody High School and in the neighborhood overall, this suggests that many youths there are forming these important connections. The fact that youth in 48205, the zip code with Detroit's highest crime rate, are the least likely to report high numbers of caring adults (and most likely to report low numbers of caring adults) may support the argument that more investment in youth serving programs should be targeted to this part of the city.

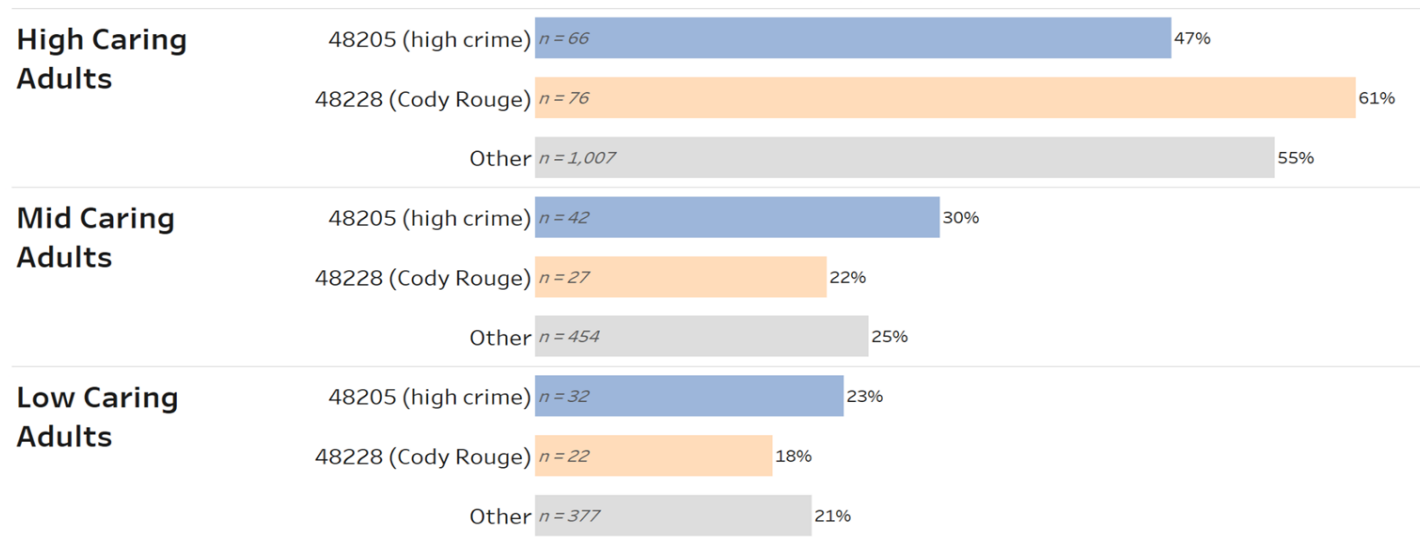


Figure 10. Number of Caring Adults by Zip Code

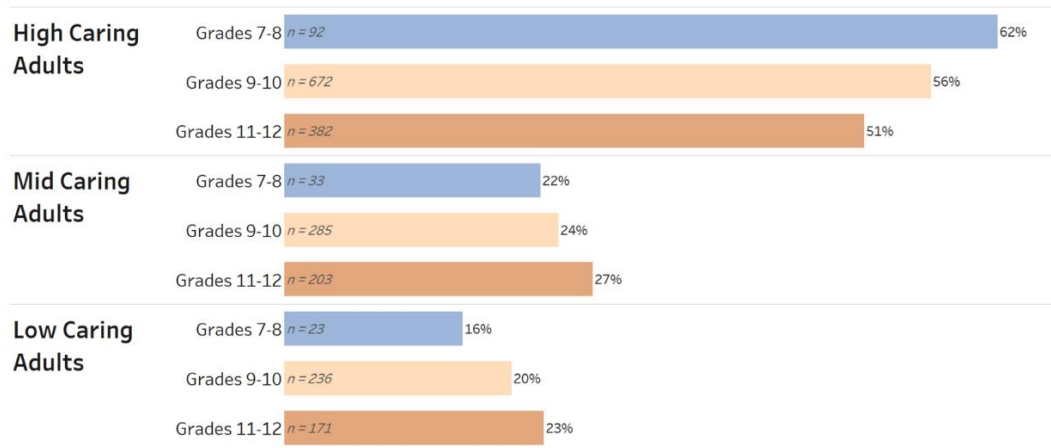


Figure 11. Caring Adults by Grade Level

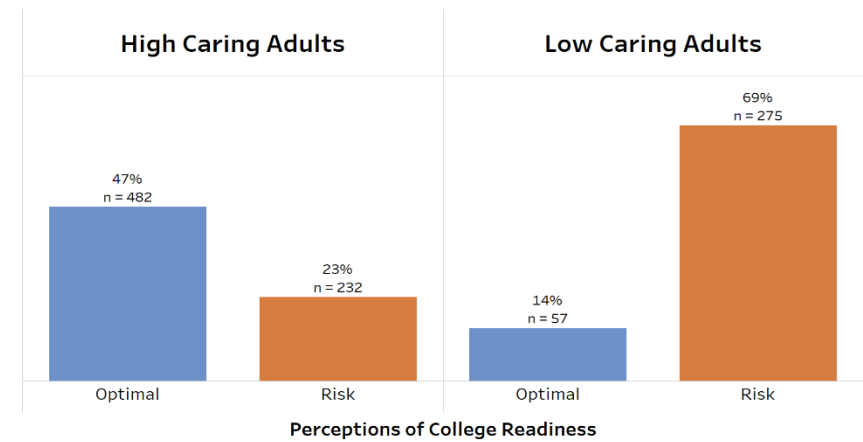


Figure 12. Caring Adults & Perceptions of College Readiness

There is a trend in this data that is a cause for concern. As illustrated in Figure 11, the proportion of youth who report high numbers of caring adults declines as they progress through school. While 62% (n=92) of the 7th and 8th graders in this study report high numbers of caring adults, only 56% (n=672) of their middle school peers do⁵. Disappointingly, an even smaller percentage of the high school youth in this sample (51%, n=382) have high numbers of caring adults in their lives. We ought to be concerned to see this pattern: almost a quarter of high school students (23%, n=171) reported low numbers of caring adults, a larger percentage than any other grade band. The drop off in access to caring adults among high school students is troubling, particularly given the strong correlation between **Caring Adults** and **Perception of College Readiness**.

Figure 12 shows a strong correlation between high numbers of caring adults and optimal levels of perceived college readiness. The extremes tell the story: 47% (n=482) of the youth with high numbers of caring adults in their lives also have optimal levels of perceived college readiness, while 69% (n=275) of young people with low numbers of caring adults fall into the “risk” category on the **Perception of College Readiness** scale. This suggests strongly that caring adults are an important, while certainly not the only, factor in preparing students for college, first through emotional support, and then through instrumental supports that would translate into *actual* college readiness.

There is a Troubling Mismatch Between Youth Perception of College Readiness and the Rates of Academic College Readiness

One of the critical goals of the Opportunity Agenda is to prepare students for the transition to college and/or career after high school. We track progress toward this goal using the College Readiness benchmarks established by the State Department of Education (Figure 13). As has been the case for far too long, the vast majority of Detroit students—less than 10%—do not meet this threshold.

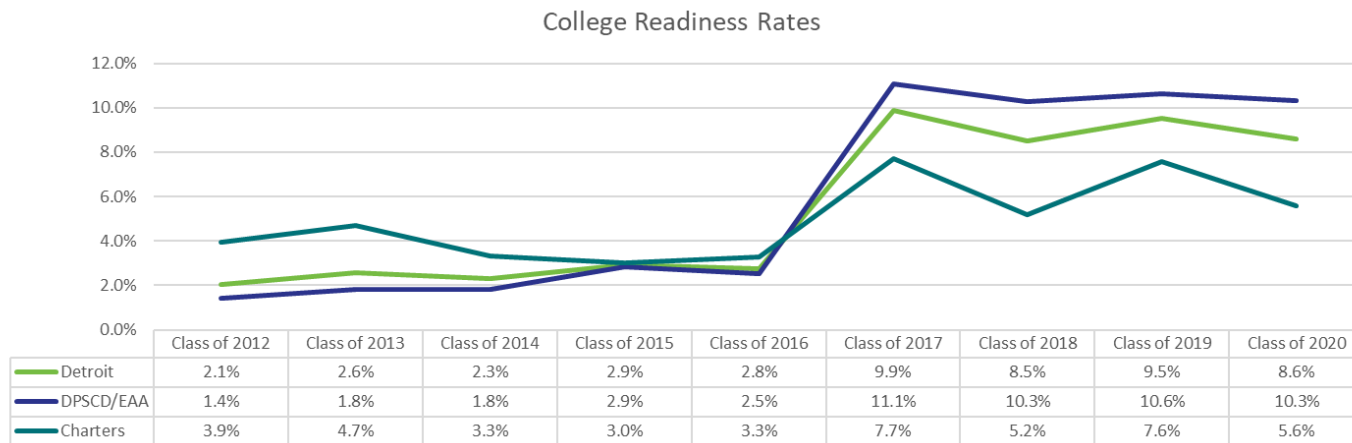


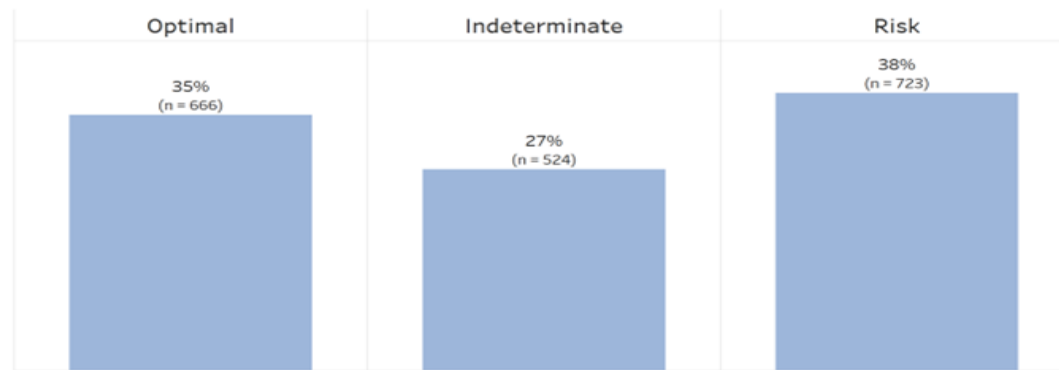
Figure 13. College Readiness (Source Michigan Department of Education/CEPI, last updated September 2020)

⁵ Since there were not equal numbers of students across grade bands, it is more useful to think about the proportion in each band than to assess the absolute number.

Despite alarmingly low rates of academic college readiness (defined as surpassing a 1060 on the SAT), students in this sample were optimistic about their readiness for college. Over three-quarters (84%, n=1190) of the students reported “Optimal” or “Intermediate” levels of perceived college readiness (Figure 14). **Perception of College Readiness** was measured by asking students to rate how often:

- Adults talk to me about going to college
- Adults help me plan for career or college
- Adults let me know they expect me to have a plan for after high school
- What I am learning now is preparing me for my future
- I can picture myself as a student in college
- I feel confident that I will be prepared for what’s next when I graduate from high school.

Perceptions of College Readiness – Overall



44

Figure 14. Youth Perception of College Readiness

Unpacking the items in the Perception of College Readiness scale underscores the fact that this concept is not simply about how students “feel” about college because the measure captured the adult behaviors and supports that we believe are crucial to college preparedness. But clearly, it is not enough. We should be concerned that so many students in middle and high school “feel” ready for college considering the data, going back for almost a decade, that suggests that only a small fraction of high school graduates are academically college ready. This may speak to the need to

continue and perhaps even expand the social and emotional supports offered to youth through out-of-school time programming, while we double-down on the provision of in-school supports that will prepare students for the rigors of college. The students in this sample are participating in activities that put them in contact with loving, caring adults and they are expanding their pool of experiences by engaging in summer employment. We should celebrate the fact that Detroit youth feel ready for the world as we work in schools and communities to ensure that is actually the case.

Final Thoughts: Implications for Our Work

The data from this pilot study are largely encouraging. We found that young people in Detroit are optimistic about the possibility of the next year being better for them, even though the survey was administered during the pandemic, and during a moment with the entire country was embroiled in heated demonstrations about racial justice. Finding that young people are optimistic is good—we want all youth to feel that way. But when we begin to dig into how they are thinking and feeling about **hope**—by exploring “agency” and “pathways”—the findings get a bit less encouraging. While most of the youth reported having a high sense of “agency” (the belief that they have some control over their future) and “pathways” (the belief that they know what to do to achieve their goals), only about a quarter of young people reported high levels of **both**.

While our study did not attempt to identify what **causes** high levels of hope, we did look for important correlations. We found that the presence of caring adults is strongly correlated with hope in this group of students. The presence of adults who are attentive to their needs, know them well, and who young people see as resources was very strongly related to youth hopefulness. Specifically, our data show that young people with access to high numbers of adults they see as resources was strongly correlated with them reporting that they feel they have control over their lives. We were encouraged to find that young people in Cody Rouge report high levels of access to caring adults and suspect this is at least partly responsible for the higher-than-average levels of youth hopefulness reported by young people from that neighborhood.

The findings related to youth perceptions of their college readiness are particularly noteworthy. Well over half of the youth reported feeling ready for college, and those with high numbers of caring adults in their lives were more than three times more likely to report “optimal” levels of perceived college readiness than their peers with fewer connections. But there is a bit of troubling news here too: first, our data on youth perception of their college readiness is in contrast to their actual academic readiness. Second, the number of caring adults reported by youth declined over the middle to high school years, suggesting that youth access to this key resource diminishes precisely when they need it most. We should be concerned that so many high school students “feel” ready for college when the standardized test scores and GPAs reported by schools indicate that they are not. We should also be concerned that the older youth do not appear to have the connections and supports that would shepherd them through this critical time in their lives.

Taken together, these findings are a clarion call to the adults in Detroit to help youth activate their optimism. Young people’s sense of hope and perception of college readiness is so strongly correlated with caring adults—those who are attentive to them, know them well, and can offer help

when needed—that we ought to consider this an essential asset that all young people must have to be successful. We should work to expand access to programs and experiences that bring young people into contact with caring adults, and work to build the capacity of those adults to serve as resources for them. This is important throughout the life span but is of critical importance for older youth who are rapidly approaching their own transition to adulthood.

Selected References

1. Dixon, D. D., Worrell, F. C., & Mello, Z. (2017). Profiles of hope: How clusters of hope relate to school variables. *Learning and Individual Differences, 59*, 55–64. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2017.08.011>
2. Dixon, D. D. (2017). Hope Across Achievement: Examining Psychometric Properties of the Children’s Hope Scale Across the Range of Achievement. *SAGE Open, 7*(3), 2158244017717304. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017717304>
3. Dixon, D. D., Keltner, D., Worrell, F. C., & Mello, Z. (2018). The magic of hope: Hope mediates the relationship between socioeconomic status and academic achievement. *The Journal of Educational Research, 111*(4), 507–515. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.2017.1302915>
4. Dixon, D. D., & Stevens, D. (2018). A Potential Avenue for Academic Success: Hope Predicts an Achievement-Oriented Psychosocial Profile in African American Adolescents. *Journal of Black Psychology, 44*(6), 532–561. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798418805644>
5. Snyder, C. R., Hoza, B., Pelham, W. E., Rapoff, M., Ware, L., Danovsky, M., Highberger, L., et al. (1997). The development and validation of the Children’s Hope Scale. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology, 22*(3), 399–421. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jpepsy/22.3.399>
6. Snyder, C. R. (2002). TARGET ARTICLE: Hope Theory: Rainbows in the Mind. *Psychological Inquiry, 13*(4), 249–275. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1304_01