

Connections and Communities: Reframing How We Talk About Opportunity Youth

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**FRAME
WORKS**

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Introduction

Everyone wants young people to thrive and be active and engaged members of their communities as they become adults. But deeply rooted, often-negative assumptions about young people can make this goal difficult to achieve. Mindsets about adolescence as a period of risk and vulnerability, when hormones “take over” and our peers lead us down dangerous paths, tend to dominate our thinking and permeate our culture. These mindsets are even more front of mind when people think about young people who are unemployed, out of school, or involved in foster care or the criminal legal systems. Post-2020 narratives about young people as a “lost generation,” crisis framing around youth mental health and social media, and often-misleading media coverage about crime make it clear that changing the narrative is as urgent as ever.

These narratives have also made it clear that changing labels is not enough. Leaving behind deficit-based terms like “at risk” and “disconnected” to talk about the young people as *Opportunity Youth* has been a step in a more positive direction. But truly changing the narrative means using an effective, shared framing strategy that builds people’s understanding about who Opportunity Youth are, what challenges they face, and what we can do to support them.

The ***Connections and Communities*** narrative described below does this by activating another way of thinking about young people: that *what surrounds us shapes us*. It helps audiences understand that context, not just individual willpower or the inherent riskiness of youth, is what determines Opportunity Youth’s ability to thrive as they become adults. Instead of focusing on the availability of opportunities, this narrative widens the lens to explain the role communities, relationships, and access to supportive programs, policies, and systems play in fostering the wellbeing of Opportunity Youth.

The ***Connections and Communities*** narrative draws on original research on framing Opportunity Youth funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, and FrameWorks’ previous work on reframing adolescence and adolescent development, transition age foster youth, and developmental relationships. The intersections between these strategies and new research point to how powerful this narrative can be in moving mindsets and increasing public commitment for change.

Cementing people’s collective commitment to making sure Opportunity Youth thrive also means everyone needs to frame in concert. Advocates, researchers, practitioners, and young people who are working to improve the lives of Opportunity Youth—whether they use the term Opportunity Youth or not—should use the recommendations below throughout their communications and in partnership with one another.

Framing refers to the choices we make in what we say and how we say it. Framing matters because it affects how people hear us, what they understand, and how they act. Using the same frames consistently helps move the conversation further and can stimulate action faster.

Evidence Base

The research for this reframing strategy was informed by six fellow Conrad N. Hilton grantees and young people they work with: [Brotherhood Crusade](#), [California Opportunity Youth Network](#), [Cafe Reconcile](#), the [Center for Law and Social Policy](#), [National Youth Employment Coalition](#), and [New Orleans Youth Alliance](#). During this research, FrameWorks staff met with organizational leaders, reviewed each organization's external-facing communications, and conducted listening sessions with each organization's staff and with young people they work with to develop the core concepts about Opportunity Youth that need to be communicated to members of the public.

Then, informed by a comprehensive review of FrameWorks' previous research on effectively framing adolescence and adolescent development, staff conducted original research focused on communicating about Opportunity Youth. In December 2023, staff led and analyzed nine peer discourse sessions with members of the public. Peer discourse sessions are similar to focus groups but are designed to elicit mindsets about topics, and then examine how mindsets shift (or do not shift) through interactive activities with frames. Staff then evaluate how frames are received in social context and determine which lead to positive shifts in thinking.

The sessions included 54 participants total, with six participants in each of the nine sessions. Three of the sessions comprised participants selected from regions across the country; three comprised participants from Louisiana; and three comprised participants from the Los Angeles metro area. Each session included a diverse group of participants, chosen for diversity in age, gender, income and education, and political affiliation. Participants of color were oversampled in each session to ensure diversity in race and ethnicity. Participants had to be at least 18 years old, and all sessions were conducted in English.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Use the *Plugged In* explanatory metaphor to build understanding of who Opportunity Youth are and how we can support their success and wellbeing.

The *Plugged In* metaphor helps communicators explain why young people included under the umbrella term Opportunity Youth need access to resources, networks, and opportunities to support their wellbeing and success, and how that access happens. *Plugged In* also offers a framing alternative to the term Opportunity Youth.

Framing “Opportunity Youth”

Research with members of the public found that talking about Opportunity Youth without further framing can create misunderstanding and even backfire. Although the term Opportunity Youth on its own can lead to positive thinking about adolescents and adolescent development when first heard, when the term is followed by a description of who falls into this category, people think it is unsuitable or even purposely misleading.

Ordering helps prevent this backfire effect. Don’t lead your communications with the term Opportunity Youth. Whether or not you use the term, be sure to describe which young people fall into this category, and what needs to happen to ensure they thrive using the *Plugged In* explanatory metaphor.

Examples:

With Opportunity Youth:

Young people need to be plugged into resources, supportive relationships, and opportunities that support their wellbeing. But some young people lack these connections. Opportunity Youth are young people aged 16 to 24 who are not currently employed or enrolled in school, and those who have experience with child welfare, foster care, and criminal legal systems. These young people need our support to power their growth and success.

Without Opportunity Youth:

Connections to financial resources, supportive relationships, and opportunities to thrive are crucial as we become adults. But some young people aged 16 to 24 who are not currently employed or enrolled in school, and who have experience with the child welfare, foster care, or criminal legal systems often aren’t plugged into these supports. These young people need our support to power their growth and success.

Why this works:

Because the term Opportunity Youth is unfamiliar to most people and may even create backlash, framing it with an explanatory metaphor builds understanding from the outset. *Plugged In* helps communicators talk about supporting young people under the Opportunity Youth umbrella aspirationally, by explaining what needs to happen and what policies and programs need to be in place to ensure they do well as they become adults. Moreover, this metaphor allows communicators to describe in detail a grid of supports that focus not just on the material needs of Opportunity Youth, but also on their developmental and emotional needs.

The *Plugged In* metaphor also makes expanding opportunities for young people a matter of collective action and responsibility, rather than “preventing crime.” In this way, the metaphor also redirects thinking away from unhelpful assumptions about young people of color and the communities they live in.

Tips:

- Consider using the *Plugged In* metaphor to talk about who Opportunity Youth are without using the term itself.
- Don't simply replace Opportunity Youth with “Disconnected Youth”: Make your language active by focusing on what they need to be connected to and how to make that happen.
- Talk about access, not availability. Make it clear that the responsibility for Opportunity Youth becoming plugged in is ours, not theirs. Otherwise people will focus on young people's individual traits and shortcomings.
- Remember to include social and emotional supports so that people don't just focus on education and employment. Link these supports to policy and programmatic decisions.
- Beware of literalism! Make sure you talk about specific solutions and supports so people don't get too sidetracked by access to technology.

Although the recommendations mostly focus on individual frames, the overall framing strategy entails using all of these frames in concert with one another across your communications.

Recommendation #2: Link Opportunity Youth to their communities early on and throughout.

Talk about *Community Connections* and *Community Stability* to highlight why supporting Opportunity Youth matters to all of us. Draw on people's positive association with the word "community" to kickstart discussions about the collective responsibility and collective benefits of supporting Opportunity Youth.

Examples:

When we support Opportunity Youth, we are also supporting our communities. Our communities are stronger when we make sure that everyone, including Opportunity Youth, is connected to one another.

Programs that connect Opportunity Youth to the resources and supports they need to thrive and create stable, happy lives ultimately benefit all of us as they create more engaged, connected community members.

Why this works:

FrameWorks' research on framing adolescence and adolescent development shows that Americans believe in the power of community when it comes to supporting young people. The research on reframing Opportunity Youth reaffirmed this finding.

The *Community Connections* and *Community Stability* values build support for collective action and policies that facilitate relationship building and maintenance by establishing that supporting Opportunity Youth is a way to create stronger, more connected communities. These values cue optimistic, future-oriented thinking about what young people can accomplish in their communities. It also reinforces people's positive perceptions of communities, moving people away from deficit-based assumptions about communities with high poverty rates and communities of color.

Tips:

- Make it clear that the benefits of supporting Opportunity Youth go both ways.
- Expand people's idea of what community is by talking explicitly about who needs to be involved, what programs need to be established and supported, and what policies need to be enacted. The term "community" may often refer to a neighborhood or an organization, but it may also be expanded to encompass a city or a state.
- Give specific examples of the ways Opportunity Youth can engage with their communities, and explain how to make that engagement happen.

Recommendation #3: Prevent othering by linking Opportunity Youth's needs to what *all* young people need.

Use language like “all young people” and “every young adult” to connect the needs of Opportunity Youth to the needs of all adolescents. Always combine this language with the other frames to make it clear that although Opportunity Youth have similar needs to other young people, they face unique challenges and need stronger access to resources and supports than they currently have (see Recommendation #4 for guidance on this).

Examples:

As we become adults, *we all need* to be plugged into supports like financial resources and supportive relationships to succeed. So do Opportunity Youth.

All young people need to be connected to financial resources, supportive relationships, and opportunities to do well. Opportunity Youth need these same supports to thrive and succeed. Here's how we make sure they are plugged in ...

Why it works:

Language that connects what Opportunity Youth need to what every young person needs helps to move thinking away from unhelpful assumptions about Opportunity Youth as fundamentally different from other young people or permanently damaged because of their experiences. Using terms like “all young people,” “every young adult,” and “we all need” prevents “othering” and creates a sense of collective responsibility for supporting Opportunity Youth.

Tips:

- Ordering is key. Start by establishing what young people need to thrive and then talk concretely about how we make sure Opportunity Youth access these resources and supports.

Using the principle of *Targeted Universalism*

Targeted universalism is an approach to social change by setting universal, collective goals and then using targeted processes to achieve them. While we may all agree that all young people need financial resources, supportive relationships, and opportunities to do well, we also recognize that some groups of young people need targeted supports to ensure they thrive. Targeted universalism creates a sense of collective responsibility for reaching that goal while creating an opening for explaining what particular challenges Opportunity Youth face, and how targeted policies and programs address them.

Recommendation #4: Use the *Steep Climb* metaphor to talk about the challenges Opportunity Youth face and the additional resources and supports they need to thrive.

Draw on this metaphor to talk about racial inequities and the ways in which programs and policies can address them.

Examples:

The journey to adulthood can be challenging for all young people, but Opportunity Youth face an even steeper climb.

Opportunity Youth often face a particularly rocky path to adulthood. We need programs that equip them with the resources they need to navigate that path, and make sure they have supportive, encouraging guides to help them find their footing.

Why this works:

Steep Climb draws on the conventional “life is a journey” metaphor to move people’s thinking away from unhelpful mindsets about individual drive and willpower (or lack thereof). It cues positive thinking about Opportunity Youth by portraying them as actively engaged in a challenge. The metaphor also increases a sense of efficacy and hopeful expectations for Opportunity Youth by inviting people to think about the different kinds of supports Opportunity Youth need on their journey, and what types of programs and policies can ensure they receive them.

The *Steep Climb* metaphor also helps communicators explain racial and economic inequities as obstacles to their path to a thriving adulthood. Steep Climb helps us explain how and why Opportunity Youth experience different outcomes and can be used to frame data on racial disparities. It also helps communicators explain that equity involves ensuring that all individuals and groups get what they need to thrive and participate fully in society.

Pairing *Steep Climb* with universalizing framing helps people see the similarities between Opportunity Youth and other young people, while also leaving room for discussion about the systemic obstacles Opportunity Youth face as they work toward their goals. This framing opens the door to discussions about equity.

Tips:

- Use *Steep Climb* and universal framing to explain how equity and inequity work, while making sure to clearly define these terms whenever you use them.
- Avoid talking about the journey as lonely or framing the climb as an individual achievement. Always include other people as supporting the journey.
- Use words like *compass, supplies, supports, ropes, and guides* as well as phrases like *difficult terrain, equipment for the journey, navigating new landscapes, finding their footing* to build out the metaphor.

Recommendation #5: Make it about healthy adolescent development.

Use the language of discovery and exploration to build people's understanding that Opportunity Youth are experiencing a unique period of growth and possibility. Talk about how the programs your organization runs and the policies you promote support healthy development. This framing also builds understanding of the role that civic engagement can play in helping adolescents develop a sense of agency and positive sense of identity that will benefit their communities.

Examples:

Like all young people, Opportunity Youth are discovering interests, passions, and sense of purpose. We can support their healthy development by ...

The period between ages 16 and 24 is a time of remarkable growth and opportunity. We discover who we are and who we want to be in the world, and we explore the interests and goals that shape our adult lives. Opportunity Youth, though, need extra support to make the most of this unique period of discovery and exploration. We need to make sure that they have the resources and supports they need to navigate new experiences and explore their passions and goals so they become thriving adults.

Why this works:

The term “Opportunity Youth” itself can cue positive mindsets about adolescence as a unique period of discovery and development. Using the language of discovery to talk about healthy adolescent development expands thinking about the types of experiences Opportunity Youth should have, including the positive potential of technology.

Using discovery language to talk about how adolescents benefit from opportunities to try things out, take risks, make mistakes, and learn from this process moves people away from thinking about adolescence as a “dangerous time” when “the hormones take over” and toward thinking about adolescence as a time when we are developing our identities, interests, and ambitions and, therefore, are primed for civic engagement.

When discussion of healthy development is paired with the targeted universalism, communicators can avoid cuing “damage done” thinking and help people understand the role policy can play in increasing access to opportunities that young people need to reach their full potential.

The healthy development frame helps communicators build a positive case for supporting Opportunity Youth, rather than focusing on what happens when Opportunity Youth do not receive the support they need.

Tips:

- Make sure to talk about various forms of development, such as identity formation and learning new skills. Otherwise people may become overly focused on mental health supports.
- Use the [Core Story of Adolescence](#) as a well-framed guide for talking about how healthy adolescent development happens and to connect ongoing, supportive relationships to various aspects of development.
- When people connect adolescence as a period of opportunity to technology, it can lead to productive thinking about social media and other newer forms of technology as a place for positive exploration and achievement. Use discovery language to talk about how technology can help Opportunity Youth reach their goals.
- Be positive and aspirational. When you do need to talk about less positive situations, begin by discussing how the right supports and resources can lead to positive development.
- Include youth voices whenever possible.

Recommendation #6: Talk about how strong, supportive relationships help Opportunity Youth flourish using the *Roots of Success* metaphor.

The *Roots of Success* metaphor clarifies the link between supportive, developmental relationships and Opportunity Youth's growth and success. It also gives you the language to talk about the role environments play in creating and sustaining these relationships.

Examples:

Every young person's wellbeing is rooted in strong, supportive relationships. But Opportunity Youth lack these connections at a critical time in their lives. We need to create programs and environments that prioritize strong relationships if we want Opportunity Youth to thrive.

Developmental relationships with mentors, employers, and other supportive adults are roots that nurture Opportunity Youth's success. These relationships are a source of stability as young people explore their world and discover their place within it. By nurturing self-expression, critical reflection, and social skills, developmental relationships continually open up new possibilities for success and new opportunities to make a difference.

Why this works:

The *Roots of Success* metaphor helps communicators talk about the importance of relationships with supportive adults while avoiding framing around disconnection and isolation. Instead, this metaphor helps communicators advance an affirmative vision. It prompts people to consider what can happen when Opportunity Youth have stronger ties to the people around them and the places they live, and helps people see that these relationships are not just important, but also realistic and feasible. Moreover, this metaphor opens up conversations about the conditions and environments—that is, programs and policies—that make these relationships possible. These conversations move thinking away from the assumption that establishing these relationships is a matter of individual virtue and toward a recognition that this is a collective responsibility.

Tips:

- Remind people that supportive, developmental relationships can sprout in many places.
- Broaden people's understanding of the types of relationship that can be considered "developmental" by naming adults beyond parents and teachers who can form growth-sustaining relationships with young people.
- Combine the *Community* values with the *Roots* metaphor to highlight the ways in which community conditions nurture developmental relationships (the roots) to ensure Opportunity Youth's success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Cite examples of systems-level practices and policies that institutions can take to facilitate (rather than impede) relationship building. Environmental factors like water, soil, or air can be compared to the external factors that facilitate or hinder developmental relationships.
- Employ mentors as effective messengers.

Conclusion

At its core, the *Connections and Communities* narrative is about *context*. It pushes back against toxic mindsets and narratives about Opportunity Youth by building audiences' understanding of what surrounds Opportunity Youth, what shapes them, and how we can collectively support them. However, this narrative can and should be communicated using your organization's authentic voice and communications style. The examples here are intended as models but are not prescriptive. Always use this strategy in ways that make sense for your communications and the audiences that you want to reach.



About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis[®], offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks[®], toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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