

# WHAT DEFINES YOUTH?

## SUMMARY OF RESEARCH & RECOMMENDATIONS

This summary reflects the findings of comprehensive mixed methods research conducted by Imoyase Community Support Services for the Los Angeles County Department of Youth Development to develop an evidence-informed definition of youth for Los Angeles County.



Los Angeles County's definition of youth should include young people **up to age 26** and resources for youth should reflect intentional flexibility and coordination to respond to the developmental impact of specific circumstances.

**Youth:** Age 12 - 26

**Transition Age Youth:** Age 16 - 26

### WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Definitions of youth currently vary widely across systems and programs in Los Angeles County, which presents challenges to effective and equitable policy, funding, and service-delivery decisions.

Although scientific evidence and lived expertise are generally aligned on the core age range to define youth, cross-sector research highlights the importance of acknowledging the impact of **system-involvement, trauma, and socio-cultural context** on the transition from youth to adulthood.

Justice system involvement, child welfare system involvement, homelessness, and parenting status, for example, may all extend the age up to which a young person needs coordinated, developmentally appropriate services that intentionally bridge the gap to adult systems.

A **consistent but flexible definition** of youth for Los Angeles County can improve outcomes for young people by strengthening their connection to developmentally-appropriate services. Flexibility that is responsive to the impact of systems, trauma, and context will allow policymakers and service providers to create a more inclusive continuum of care that effectively empowers youth during their transition to adulthood.

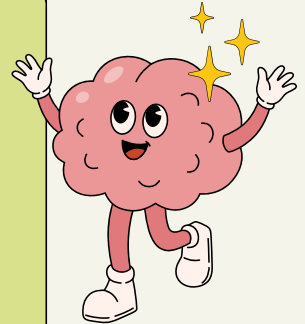
*"If I were to emphasize anything, it would be the importance of expanding that upper boundary of youth, particularly when we're talking about young people who've been incarcerated for all the reasons I explained around arrested development and what it means when you're experiencing re-entry and you're being treated like a 23-year-old by society, but really you're at a 17-year-old-level and just learning how to navigate life."*

- Key Informant, Community-Based Organization (CBO)

# KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR LOS ANGELES COUNTY'S DEFINITION OF YOUTH

## 1 The most common chronological age range for “youth” should be from 12 to 26 years of age.

Nationally and internationally, the most common definition of youth includes a core age range of 12 to 26. This reflects scientific research on adolescent development, which shows unique experience of decision-making, impulse control, and emotional regulation that characterize youth begin at around age 12 and persist until age 25 or 26. Part of this age range includes a population of Transition Age Youth, ages 16 to 26 with unique developmental needs as they grow closer to adulthood.



### Spotlight: Impact of the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on young people's development and connection.

Disruption and disconnection from educational, social, and professional opportunities have led to extended disconnection and delays in essential life milestones in the transition to adulthood, especially for youth who were aged 12–26 in 2020.

## 2 Programs and policies should build in flexibility around chronological age requirements that is trauma responsive and culturally relevant.

Chronological age alone does not a sufficient definition for youth. Neurological, emotional, and physical development, along with exposure to trauma and cultural socialization, all have significant impacts on how long an individual needs services and approaches tailored to youth.

## 3 Research and practice are misaligned, especially for justice involved youth, so cross-sector collaboration should be a priority.

There is a disconnect between youth development research and policy, especially for justice-involved youth. While research supports defining youth up to age 25 or 26, many juvenile justice and service programs cut off support at 18 or 21, leaving young people without critical resources. This gap in services prevents smooth transitions into adulthood, particularly for youth exiting the justice system.



**The solution? Stronger cross-sector collaboration—bringing together education, mental health, social services, and the justice system—to ensure seamless, developmentally appropriate connection and re-connection to prevent young people from falling through the cracks.**

