

Los Angeles County Department of Youth Development *Research Framework*

***A YOUTH-CENTERED APPROACH TO
MEASURING WELL-BEING AND GUIDING
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION***

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01.

FRAMING

***SYSTEM-IMPACTED YOUNG
PEOPLE HELPED DEVELOP A
MEANINGFUL AND YOUTH-
CENTERED RESEARCH
INFRASTRUCTURE***

*"WHERE CAN I GO TO
GET REST AT NIGHT?
WHERE EVERYBODY
ISN'T FIGHTING FOR
A PLACE WHERE
RENT IS AFFORDABLE,
STACKING KID OVER
KID ON A BUNK BED?"*

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

*"LOVE
IN GENERAL, LIKE
PEOPLE, FRIENDS,
FAMILY, I FEEL LIKE
THAT'S A WAY THAT
HELPS PEOPLE WITH
THEIR WELL-BEING.
BEING CONNECTED
WITH EACH OTHER,
EXPRESSING IT."*

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

In Spring 2022, a Youth Engagement sub-committee formed from the Research and Data YJR workgroup. The sub-committee's central aim was to ensure that young people, especially system-impacted young people, were central in developing a meaningful and youth-centered research infrastructure for the Department of Youth Development (DYD). To begin this work, the Youth Engagement sub-committee embarked on a participatory process to identify measures of youth well-being, as defined by young people themselves.

THE PRIMARY GOALS FOR THE SUB-COMMITTEE WERE TO:

- 1. Center youth voices in developing strength-based measures of youth well-being in LA County.**
- 2. Construct a conceptual framework to guide DYD's approach to research and evaluation.**
- 3. Lay the foundation for a youth-centered and culturally responsive research strategy for DYD, especially as Alternative to Incarceration (ATI) and Decarceration of Girls efforts expand.**

As DYD deepens its Decarceration of Girls initiatives, including Safe Healing Centers and oversight over in-facility programming, evidence-informed, flexible, and strength-based tools are necessary to operationalize meaningful insights into the impact of alternatives to incarceration in Los Angeles County. This conceptual framework will be used to compile and create scales, measures, and questions for the Department to turn to in its evaluation of existing and emerging initiatives.

More information on how the department is using this framework can be found in Section 5.

***“WELL-BEING TASTES
LIKE TACOS AND
BURRITOS WITH
RED SAUCE... WELL-
BEING SOUNDS LIKE
BEAUTIFUL WAVES.”***

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

***“IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD,
WE NEED HEALTHY
FOOD, AFFORDABLE
FOOD, RELIABLE AND
BETTER CARS.”***

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

DYD INTENDS TO BUILD ON THIS WORK BY DOING THE FOLLOWING:

- 1. Develop a research hub from the framework for well-being that allows DYD to:**
 - b. Ask and answer interesting questions about youth well-being in LA County and in DYD programs.**
 - c. Make data-informed decisions around the development of strategic initiatives, programs, and policy.**
 - d. Evaluate its initiatives through a uniform evaluation plan that includes youth-driven well-being measures.**
- 5. Propose an infrastructure for direct and significant youth engagement in youth development research, including:**
 - f. Organize an implementation plan for a paid Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) fellowship.**
 - g. Develop onboarding research curriculum materials.**
 - h. Define terms of a written agreement for fellowship that includes final, actionable deliverables for Department to implement.**
- 3. Expand its Youth Development Learning Collaborative (YDLC) efforts with a structured approach to equipping staff, providers, County partners, and youth-serving stakeholders across Los Angeles County with effective and evidence-informed youth development resources.**

02.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

***THIS CONCEPTUAL MODEL
FOR YOUTH WELL-BEING
IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY
INTEGRATES VARIOUS
CONCEPTS THAT EXIST
ACROSS THE FIELD OF
YOUTH DEVELOPMENT***

***"THAT BROWN BOY
ON THE BLOCK WILLIN'
TO HELP BY SELLING
SOME DOPE N SOME
ROCK, THAT'S WHO I
AM AND THAT'S HOW
THE SYSTEM WAS MADE
OUT TO BE."***

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

***"BUT THIS SYSTEM
WASN'T DESIGNED
TO TAKE CARE OF A
PERSON LIKE ME."***

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

This framework provides a theoretical foundation for DYD to measure its operational and programmatic initiatives detailed in the Strategic Plan. This framework serves as a guiding structure for DYD's research, evaluation, and monitoring activities on all programmatic initiatives and internal accountability measures on our approach to supporting and engaging young people.

This conceptual model for youth well-being in Los Angeles County integrates various concepts that exist across the field of youth development. Please reference Appendix Section 2 for a review of the literature and models in the field of youth development. Many existing youth development frameworks acknowledge their shortcomings in including the voices of system impacted youth in the making of their models. Additionally, theoretical models emphasize the importance of vetting constructs to practically serve a given context, purpose, or population. This model was built alongside justice system impacted young people in Los Angeles County and is specifically tailored to (1) center their visions and definitions of their own sense of well-being, and (2) reflect the mission and vision of the Los Angeles County Department of Youth Development (DYD) in a practical context.

Building on key concepts from the Socio-Ecological Model and Critical Positive Youth Development (Appendix Section 2), our model also draws from Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD), which acknowledges the role of youth participation as they process the surrounding world as a critical addendum to traditional Positive Youth Development (PYD) frameworks. Ultimately, the model complements PYD & SJYD research by specifically highlighting youth well-being as multifaceted and essential to our programs, policies, and operational processes. The central competencies stem from the Youth Justice Reimagined (YJR) report, which itself was informed by the evolution from PYD to SJYD. Figure 1 highlights these theoretical frameworks and contextualizes them in the field of youth development research. Additional information on each of these can be found in the Appendix Section 2.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

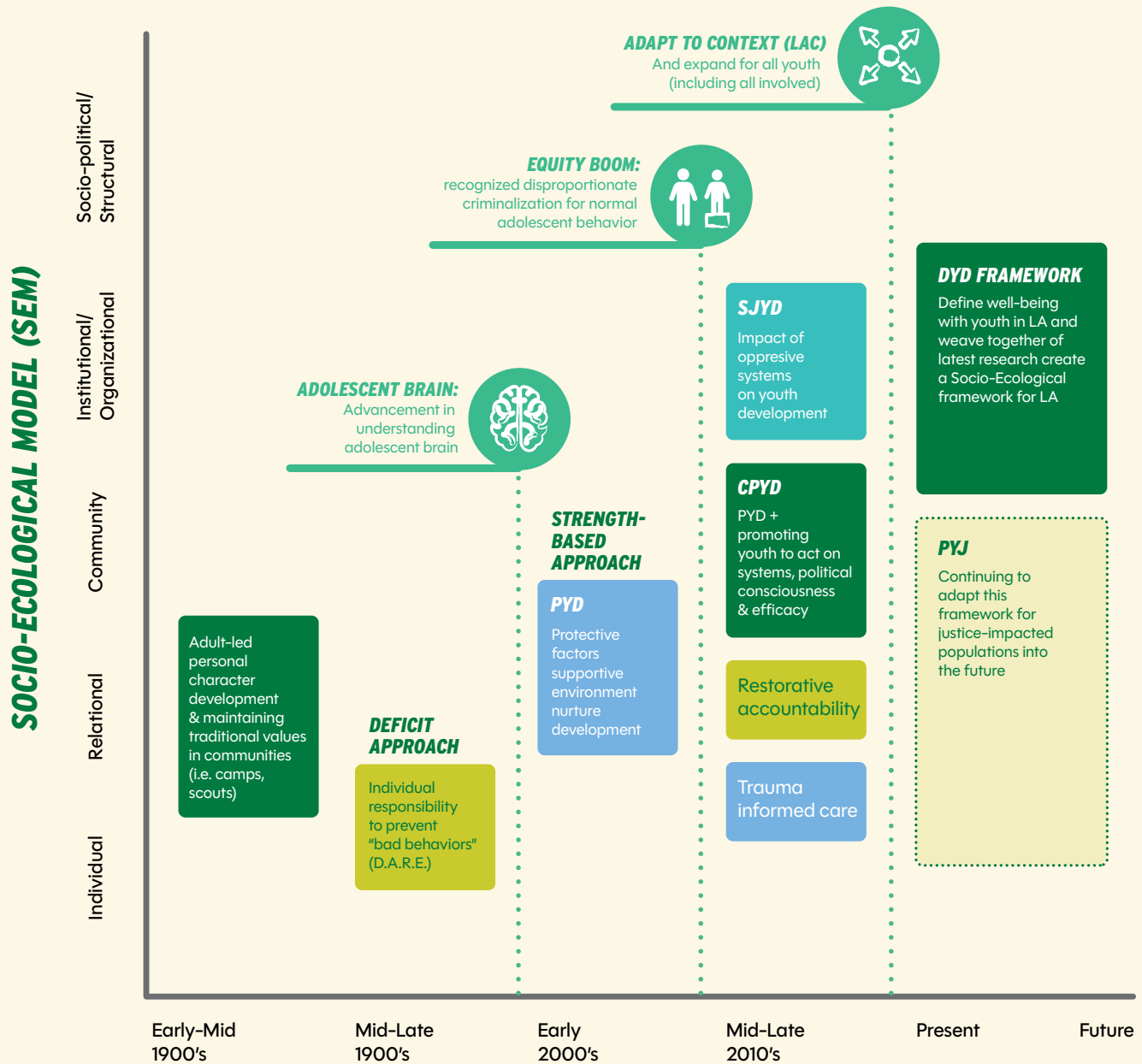


FIGURE 1. OVERVIEW OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH HISTORY

**"FAMILY ASSISTANCE
WOULD PROBABLY BE
A BIG HELP BECAUSE
THAT'S PROBABLY
WHAT DERAILS A LOT
OF KIDS, YOU KNOW...
AND THAT'S WHAT
CAUSES THEM TO
DO CERTAIN... THEY
SHOULDN'T DO. SO
HELPING OUT FAMILIES
WOULD PROBABLY BE
GOOD, TOO."**

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

**"BUILD MORE GROUNDS
[...] WHERE [YOUNG
PEOPLE] CAN GO
AND DO WHAT THEY
WANT TO DO. NOT SET
SOMETHING FOR THEM
THAT THEY DON'T
WANT TO DO."**

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

Additionally, this model also stems from programs in Los Angeles County. One Los Angeles County-specific PYD framework that integrates components of the SEM serves as a program implementation tool for the Ready To Rise Program. They acknowledge the impact of environmental factors when contextualizing their program's own services. This model seeks to build an approach to connecting the environmental influences directly with youth well-being. The Principles and Domains are meant to blueprint an environment that facilitates healthy youth development in alignment with a socio-ecological approach. Principles are meant to guide how the Department of Youth Development approaches work with young people, and Domains encourage action in that they represent what the Department should promote to achieve youth well-being. More information on the Ready to Rise model can be found in Appendix Section 2.

THE PRINCIPLES AND DOMAINS OF YOUTH WELL-BEING IDENTIFIED THROUGH THIS PROCESS WERE:

HONORING YOUTH AGENCY

Centering Human Rights¹

Healing Not Harm

Relational Not Transactional

Recognizing Community

Culturally Sustaining

Critical System Analysis

DOMAINS OF YOUTH WELL-BEING

**Authentic & Fulfilling
Engagement**

Nourishment of Whole Self

Thriving Communities

*Subdomains are detailed
in Section 5*

CULTIVATING AN ECOSYSTEM FOR YOUTH WELL-BEING AND POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN LA COUNTY

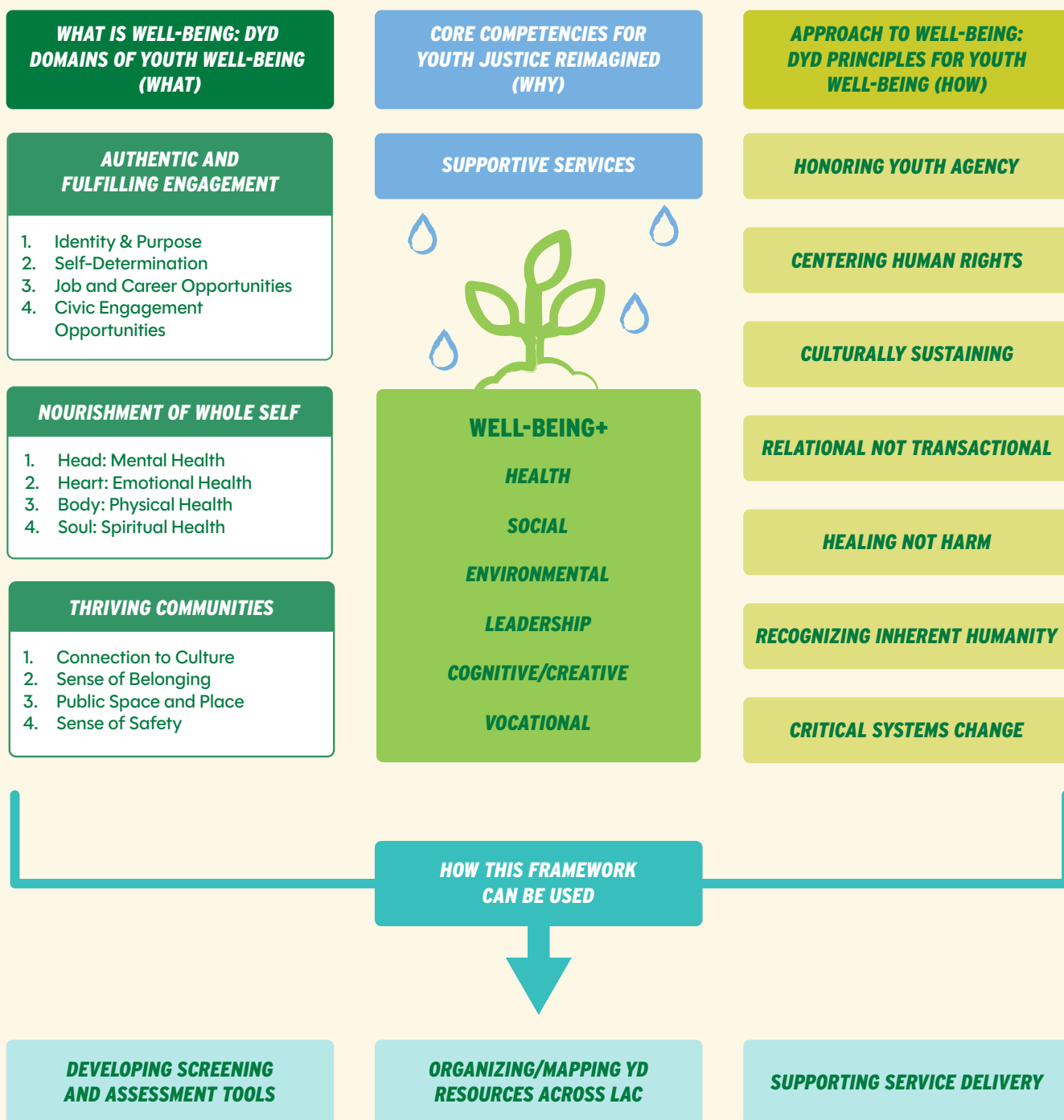
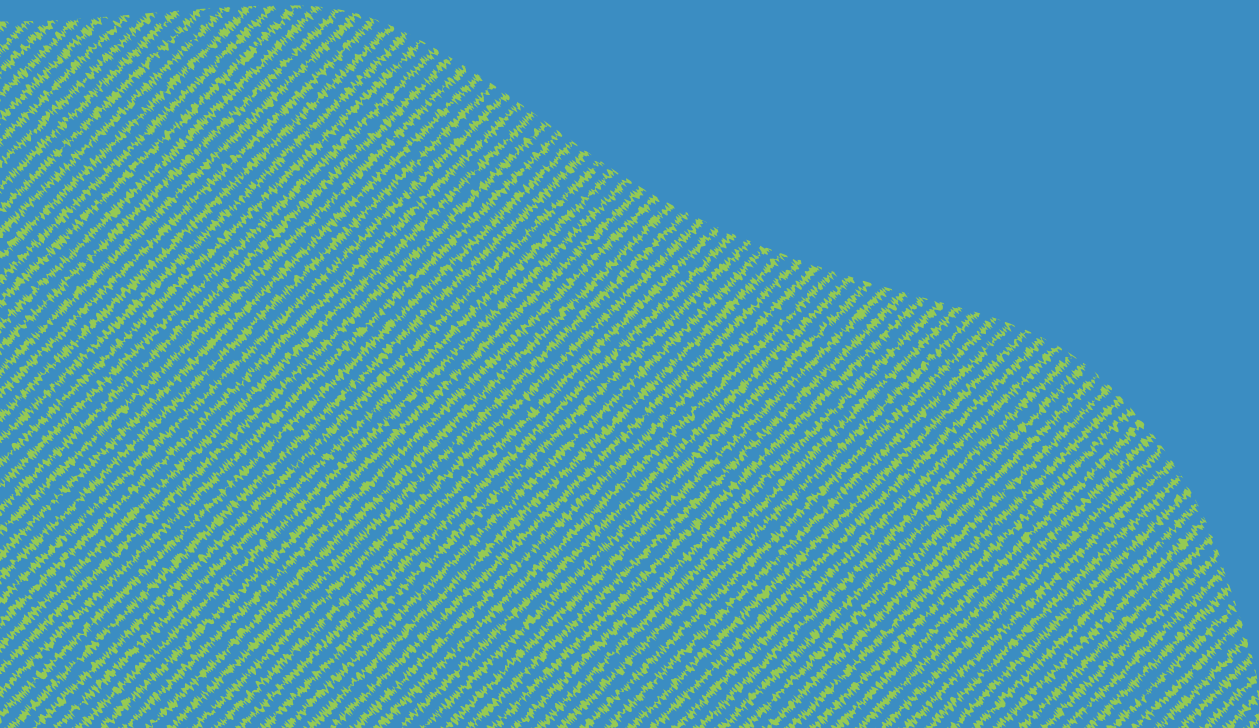


FIGURE 2. LA COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR YOUTH WELL-BEING

03.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

***DYD APPROACH TO
YOUTH WELL-BEING***



7 GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF YOUTH WELL-BEING

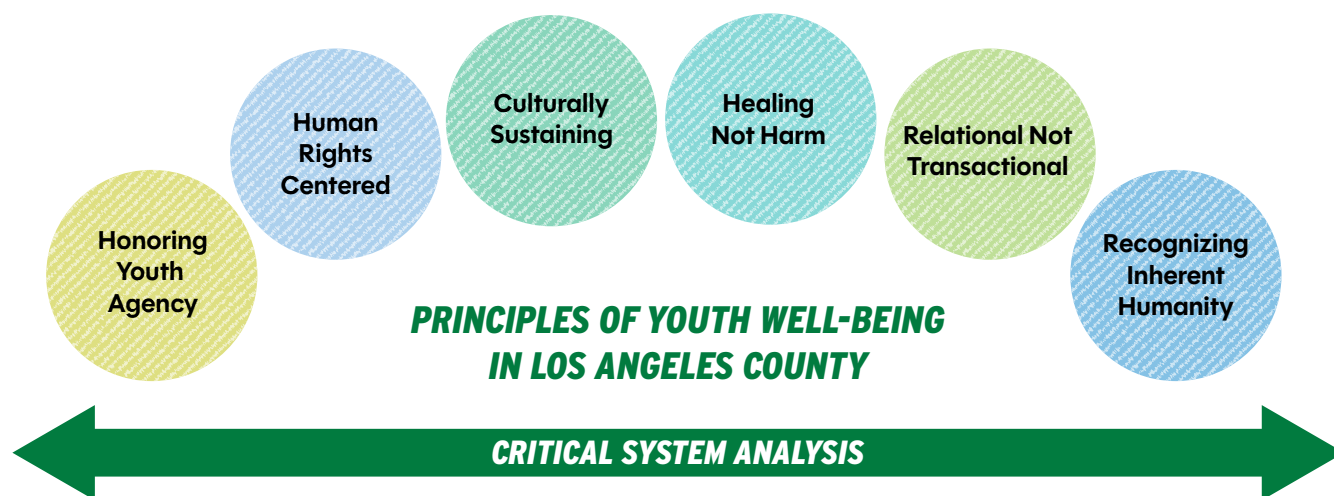


FIGURE 3: PRINCIPLES OF YOUTH WELL-BEING IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY

*"LIVE LIFE TO THE FULLEST
EXTENT. I FEEL LIKE THAT'S A
GOOD PART OF WELL-BEING
BECAUSE WHEN YOU SETTLE
FOR LESS, WE GET INTO OUR
COMFORT ZONES."*

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

*"WELL-BEING IN LA LOOKS LIKE
NOT HAVING TO WORRY WHEN
YOU'RE GOING TO EAT AGAIN
AFTER SCHOOL. FIGURING OUT
WHERE'S MY SAFE PLACE."*

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

*"I WOKE UP IN A WORLD
THAT HAD ROOM FOR ME. MY
ANCESTORS DIDN'T HAVE TO
FIGHT AND DIE TO SAY THEY
WERE FREE."*

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

1. HONORING YOUTH AGENCY

Respect for how young people want to spend their time and a commitment to facilitating opportunities that allow young people the freedom to explore what matters to them. Recognizes that young people can think for themselves and make their own decisions and deserve the opportunity to do both.

2. CENTERING HUMAN RIGHTS

Positions bare necessities, including housing, food, transportation, and financial security, for young people and their families countywide as foundational rights. Recognizes the importance of basic human needs impacting well-being.

3. CULTURALLY SUSTAINING

An approach that affirms and sustains the rich and diverse cultural practices of communities of color and ensures they have agency in determining how these ways of knowing and being are shared and honored across generations. Requires resisting the tendency to measure youth of color against norms prescribed by white supremacy.

"IT'S CRAZY 'TO PROTECT AND TO SERVE' WRITTEN ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE CAR. I HAD MY HANDS IN THE AIR AND YOU STILL RAISED GUNS TO ME. WE WORK HARD AND COME FROM BROKEN HOMES. JUST FOR THEM TO TAKE OUR TAXES TO BREAK MORE HOMES."

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

"LIKE, THEY LOOK AT THE WORST... LIKE, THEY DON'T TAKE THE TIME TO GET TO KNOW YOU AND GET TO SEE YOUR GOOD SIDE. THEY ONLY SEE YOUR BAD SIDE. SO THEY JUDGE YOU BASED OFF OF WHAT YOUR BAD SIDE IS."

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

"THEY SAY CHANGE STARTS WITH YOUNG KIDS BUT I DON'T THINK IT'S TRUE. IT IS WHAT IT IS. IT CHANGES WITH THE GOVERNMENT CAUSE THEY MAKE THE RULES. WE NEED TO STAND TOGETHER AND SHOW EM HOW TO RULE."

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

"IF YOU INFLUENCE [YOUTH] IN THE RIGHT WAY, THEN THEY WON'T BE INFLUENCED BY EVERYTHING AROUND THEM."

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

4. HEALING NOT HARM

Punitive and carceral approaches to behavior are counterproductive to child development and traumatizing. Communities of color face disproportionate exposure to these harmful approaches. Together, these have created and sustained oppressive cycles. As a department, grappling with these truths and centering principles of healing in place of systems of harm is at the forefront of our objectives.

5. RELATIONAL NOT TRANSACTIONAL

An approach that centers relationships as foundational to the building of a system of care. A 'relational' approach emphasizes long term connections that exist above and beyond superficial interactions. Working relationally is rooted in a reciprocal commitment to each other's well-being, recognizes our interdependency, and cannot be forced. Instead, trust and kinship need to be cultivated over time.

6. RECOGNIZING INHERENT HUMANITY

This principle guides us to think beyond good/bad people binaries. It emphasizes the understanding that mistakes are inevitable and fundamental to learning & human development, and challenges the disproportionate criminalization of Black & Brown youth, youth with disabilities, and low-income youth.

7. CRITICAL SYSTEMS ANALYSIS

There are structural and systemic barriers that asymmetrically impact young people and identifying those barriers is critical to DYD's approach to youth development. This lens gives way for the department to better assess the youth justice landscape and engage across multiple sectors to comprehensively support young people in Los Angeles and promote equity. In addition, a system analysis approach provides DYD space to examine institutional power and the ways that the department may (in)directly contribute to systemic barriers and propose solutions to course-correct its direction.

04.

DOMAINS OF YOUTH WELL-BEING

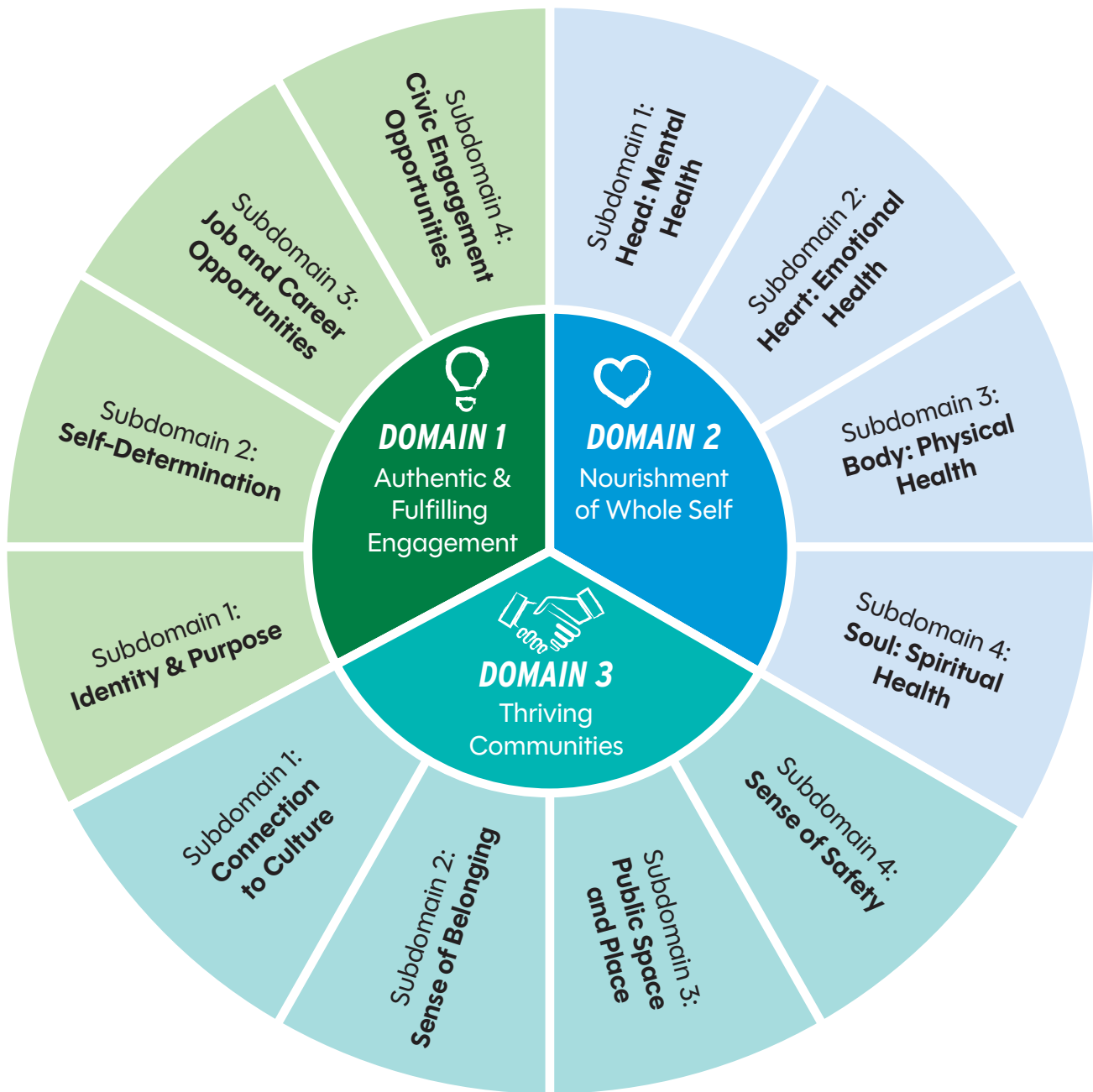
FOCUS AREAS FOR DYD INITIATIVES



DOMAINS OF YOUTH WELL-BEING

This framework for understanding domains of youth well-being was co-developed by the Department of Youth Development and system-impacted youth to identify measures that reflect young people's own lived experiences.

INITIATIVES



DOMAIN 1: AUTHENTIC & FULFILLING ENGAGEMENT

"I'D RATHER THERE BE MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR US TO GET OUT THERE TO START DOING OUR GOOD. HELP FOR THE YOUTH WHO DIDN'T HAVE ONE. SOMEWHERE IN SOUTH CENTRAL WE ALL GOING TO HAVE TO DO SOME THINGS BUT YOU GET HOW YOU LIVE AND ASK FOR BETTER DAYS"

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

"I'M RECOVERING FROM A POINT IN MY LIFE WHERE I DIDN'T CARE IF I LIVED OR DIED. FOR A SHORT AMOUNT OF TIME I WOULD SAY I LIVED A PURPOSELESS LIFE"

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

"PUTTING TIME AND EFFORT INTO SOMETHING PRODUCTIVE"

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

What it means: Young people in LA County have access to opportunities to discover what drives and inspires them and to consciously develop how they want to engage with their communities.

SUBDOMAIN	DESCRIPTION
IDENTITY & PURPOSE	Young people are encouraged and guided to explore and reflect on their personal interests, intellectual curiosities, values, and goals.
SELF-DETERMINATION	Young people feel respected and are empowered by their communities to exercise agency. Includes nurturing guidance to support youth when mistakes or missteps occur as they navigate what autonomy and agency means in their young adult lives.
JOB AND CAREER OPPORTUNITIES	Young people can access paying jobs to support them financially, as well as exposure to internships, mentoring, and professional opportunities that allow them to explore potential careers and skills they want to develop.
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES	Youth perspectives are valued by, invited into, and honored in civic processes. Young people have a place to turn to learn about and practice civic engagement.



DOMAIN 2: NOURISHMENT OF WHOLE SELF

"I FEEL LIKE IF YOU CONNECT YOURSELF WITH THE OUTER WORLD AROUND YOU, CREATION, WITH NATURE AND STUFF, I FEEL LIKE THAT'S SOMETHING NOURISHING FOR THE HUMAN SOUL AND MIND"

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

"SOMEWHERE IN THE UNIVERSE WE ARE ALL TOGETHER BECAUSE EVERYONE DECIDED NOT TO FIGHT"

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

"IT'S CHANGING YOUR MENTALITY AND ALSO YOUR WAY HOW YOU PROCESS... AND EVERYTHING, YOU KNOW. BECAUSE AFTER A WHILE BEING THERE YOU BECOME INSTITUTIONALIZED AND EVEN WHEN SOME PEOPLE COME OUT THEY'RE ALREADY STILL IN THAT MENTALITY. SO, I FEEL LIKE A CHANGE IN THAT WOULD HELP"

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

What it means: Activities that contribute to the well-being of the whole body, including mental, emotional, physical and spiritual health.

SUBDOMAIN	DESCRIPTION
HEAD: MENTAL HEALTH	Young people are equipped to develop and maintain a healthy sense of self and social relationships, and to make sense of their lives. Young people can relate to the world around them and traverse distressing thoughts, feelings, ideas, or actions and have opportunities to challenge their thinking, develop and cultivate their world view, and inquire upon the world.
HEART: EMOTIONAL HEALTH	Young people understand their emotions and can feel and process them safely. Young people can build a healthy connection to their emotional selves and have the tools and support to navigate life's challenges and disproportionately distributed injustices.
BODY: PHYSICAL HEALTH	Young people know what their bodies need to feel physically well and learn about other factors that impact physical health such as physical activity, nutrition, hygiene, sleep, and lifestyle choices.
SOUL: SPIRITUAL HEALTH	Young people explore relationships with their spiritual or natural worlds that contribute to their sense of purpose and meaning in life, including morals and values they may develop.



DOMAIN 3: THRIVING COMMUNITIES

"WELL-BEING LOOKS LIKE OLD WOMEN SITTING ON A BENCH LOOKING AT YOUNG KIDS PLAYING IN THE SOIL. GENERATIONS PAST ONE DAY TO CONTINUE OUR STORIES"

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

"BETTER SAFETY, NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH, CLEANER AND NO GENTRIFICATION AT ALL... LESS VIOLENCE"

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

"YOU GOTTA PROVIDE THEM A SERVICE WHERE THEY CAN KINDA BE WHAT THEY WANT. NOT FORCING THEM"

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

What it means: Thriving communities where people within can trust one another, feel safe, and foster an evolving, cohesive, and collective culture. Community lines can be drawn and measured in various, overlapping ways.

SUBDOMAIN	DESCRIPTION
CONNECTION TO CULTURE	Young people have access to offerings that intentionally nurture, expand, and sustain the cultural practices, knowledge, and histories of communities of color that are often erased or overlooked in institutions and spaces characterized by white supremacy.
SENSE OF BELONGING	Young people have a sense of being a part of a supportive and reciprocal community.
PUBLIC SPACE AND PLACE	Young people have access to publicly accessible, safe, and community determined spaces, including parks, community centers, and recreation centers. Places exist where young people can just be.
SENSE OF SAFETY	Young people, their families, and members of a community feel safe and cared for in their surroundings.

05.

TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

***DYD HAS ALREADY
BEGUN ADAPTING THIS
FRAMEWORK TO SUPPORT
EMERGING INITIATIVES***

This framework has already begun to guide program design and evaluation for DYD and our partners. DYD will continue to explore opportunities to translate this research into practice and support cross-sector alignment in the evaluation of youth development programs and policies.

The four initiatives described in this section represent the framework in motion. Each example provides lessons learned to guide future use of this framework to strengthen a shared language for how Los Angeles County understands, supports, and measures the well-being of young people in Los Angeles County.

5.1 UPDATED MODEL FOR PREVENTION & YOUTH DEVELOPMENT NETWORKS

In 2024, DYD launched a pilot that included 5 regional Youth Development Networks (YDNs), community-centered resources designed to provide free, comprehensive, and culturally responsive youth development programming and services to youth ages 12–26. After the first year of implementation for this pilot, DYD used this framework to inform an analysis of opportunities to improve and expand the YDN model.

By translating the research framework to concrete service categories, DYD was able to solve a core challenge facing the pilot: a lack of clarity and consistency on program goals and core services. By applying the framework, DYD developed an updated YDN model that included a two-tiered structure. Tier 1 prevention programming reflects Authentic & Fulfilling Participation, offering community-wide opportunities for identity, purpose, and skill-building. Tier 2 individualized care coordination reflects Nourishment of Whole Self, addressing the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual needs of young people needing more intensive case management support. YDN Collective Tables operationalize Environments for Thriving by building the relationships and referral pathways that can sustain an ecosystem of support for young people countywide. The Heart of Youth Justice Reimagined (HYJR) is a youth-led space hosted monthly in each region that allows young people to explore across the domains, from developing leadership skills to connecting with peers in a space just for them.

All three domains are built into the two-tiered structure, informing the design of Tier 1 program offerings and grounding the strengths, needs, and outcomes assessments used in Tier 2 case management. DYD will use this foundation to develop an applied Youth Development Framework, translating these domains into concrete guidance for service delivery and network capacity building.

Applying this research framework to a countywide model has surfaced key lessons. It offers a shared reference point for building consistency across SPAs with varying levels of existing opportunities for youth, and clarifies that youth leadership cannot be an assumed byproduct of program participation, informing the model's dedicated investment in HYJR. It also underscores that thriving communities look different across Los Angeles County's diverse regions, shaping DYD's regionally responsive rollout of YDN Collective Tables rather than a uniform network structure.

As the YDN model expands to more communities, this framework will anchor tiered service delivery, network coordination, capacity building, and youth leadership in a consistent and evidence-informed understanding of youth well-being.

5.2 DECARCERATION EFFORTS & IN-FACILITY PLANNING

Another emerging application of this framework is to shape direct services for young people in juvenile facilities, reentry support, and alternatives to incarceration. On April 7, 2026, the Board of Supervisors (Board) adopted a motion by Supervisors Lindsey P. Horvath and Janice Hahn that tasked DYD with developing a plan to oversee programming in all LA County juvenile facilities, a significant and meaningful opportunity to demonstrate what youth development can look like inside and beyond the walls of these systems.

This framework was adapted to translate the three Domains of Well-being into five concrete programming areas with the well-being of incarcerated youth at the center: Cognitive & Creative, Workforce & Leadership, Health & Well-being, Social, and Connection to Nature. These categories align with California Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC) Title 15 programming requirements while also reflecting the core assets and practice domains of Positive Youth Justice (PYJ), an approach that applies strengths-based, developmentally informed practices to young people involved in the justice system² (Appendix Section 2).

Through the application of this framework to programming for incarcerated youth, DYD has identified several lessons learned that can guide

future practice and partnerships. In particular, the framework has highlighted important gaps in existing services and helped ensure that evidence-informed domains of well-being that are often left out of services for incarcerated youth, such as opportunities for engagement and environmental well-being, are no longer ignored.

Translating the Environment for Thriving domain to programming in facility settings presented unique constraints. While DYD's broader plan intends to improve facility climate and safety, direct programming cannot fully replicate Public Space and Place or Connection to Culture, both of which depend on community access and mixed cultural gathering that a unit-based structure doesn't allow. In response, DYD reoriented this domain around Connection to Nature: structured activities for young people to step outside their units with providers and staff to engage with nature, offering opportunities for grounding and agency within secure settings.

The exercise of applying this framework to the task of assessing gaps and designing an updated model for programming in youth justice facilities has both helped DYD refine practice-grounded service categories aligned with the research that will allow the Department and our partners to overcome historical blind spots and barriers.

FIGURE 4.

DYD'S YOUTH DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK: DOMAINS OF SUPPORT & WELL-BEING FOR DEVELOPMENTALLY & CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CARE



*"WELL-BEING TASTES LIKE TACOS
AND BURRITOS WITH RED SAUCE...
WELL-BEING SOUNDS LIKE
BEAUTIFUL WAVES."*

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

*"I FEEL LIKE A CHANGE IN THE
JUSTICE SYSTEM WOULD HELP
US AND OUR WELL-BEING
BECAUSE INSTEAD OF TRYING
TO PUNISH US, SOMETIMES
IT'S EVEN FOR STUFF LIKE
MISDEMEANORS – STUFF THAT
REALLY ISN'T THAT BAD – I FEEL
LIKE PUNISHING IS JUST A WAY
THAT'S BAD FOR US, YOU KNOW."*

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

*"WELL-BEING FEELS LIKE BEING
SEEN WITH HUMANITY FRONT
AND CENTER."*

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

5.3 TAY TABLE: PROMOTING YOUTH WELL-BEING ACROSS COUNTY DEPARTMENTS

The Transition Age Youth (TAY) Table is a collaborative County space that brings together departments serving young people ages 16–26 to bridge service gaps and improve access to coordinated care. DYD co-convenes the TAY Table alongside County partners, and it serves as a meaningful venue to align Countywide efforts to support young people navigating critical transitions.

DYD introduced this well-being framework into the TAY Table space, inviting County partners to reimagine how they approach and measure well-being for young people and centering a strengths-based understanding that reflects what matters most to young people. The Domains and Principles of this framework offer County departments a shared vocabulary for thinking about young people's lives in fuller terms.

There is growing momentum to integrate these domains into how departments plan, deliver, and evaluate services for young people. As the TAY Table's work continues to deepen, DYD aims to continue to collaborate with County partners in developing strategies to center young people's well-being.

5.4 YOUTH WELL-BEING SURVEY: ADAPTING THE BOLD VISION YOUTH THRIVING SURVEY

To measure the impact of this framework in practice, DYD is working to adopt the Bold Vision Youth Thriving Survey³, a tool developed by Catalyst California, the Social Justice Learning Institute, and Imoyase Community Support Services in collaboration with young people across Los Angeles. The Bold Vision initiative has been a valued partner in this process, and their survey's foundation in young people's own understanding of what it means to thrive makes it a natural fit for DYD's approach.

DYD is adapting the survey to create a well-being measurement tool that aligns with this framework's Domains and Subdomains. This will allow the Department to move beyond anecdotal evidence and begin systematically capturing how young people experience their own well-being across DYD's programs and initiatives. The survey will center young people's self-defined sense of thriving, keeping measurement as youth-driven as the framework aims to reflect.

The framework is shaping the way DYD shows up for young people, and it will continue to do so as the Department deepens its commitment to putting young people's well-being at the center of everything it builds.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX SECTION 1: METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

In an effort to understand the ideals and practices that DYD's research should embody, we adopted a qualitative, arts-centered approach. This method was chosen to facilitate a non-traditional academic understanding of youth, particularly those from marginalized communities in Los Angeles. The arts-centered approach offers a powerful storytelling platform, allowing youth to express the experiences they face in their communities. Our primary objective in the youth engagement sessions was to develop an understanding of what well-being means to young people in LA County, which would kickstart the creation of DYD's research framework.

PARTICIPANTS

Our study engaged predominantly Black and Latino youth ages 14–25. The participants' backgrounds were diverse, with some having experienced incarceration, gang affiliations, or trauma. Some were parents or expecting children. We collaborated with community-based organizations centered on community healing, transformation, and empowerment including Homeboy Art Academy and Street Poets to support in recruiting the participants in our engagement sessions. Across the four sessions held in October and December 2022 and May and August 2023, we engaged a total of 44 youth participants.

SETTING

The youth sessions were conducted in familiar environments for the youth, specifically where they usually participate in programs with their affiliated organizations. To ensure comfort and safety, and to compensate youth for their labor and invaluable insights, we provided food, materials, stipends, and transportation.

DATA COLLECTION

Using an arts-centered approach, we invited the participants to create mixed media collages using magazines images that resonate with their definition of well-being. The youth participants were also encouraged to express themselves through poetry, rap, and drawings. The artwork produced by the young people led to deeper discussions about well-being and the kinds of resources and investments they would like to see in their communities. Some selected works by youth can be found in Appendix Section 3.

FACILITATION

Facilitators played a crucial role in creating a safe space, educating the youth on the importance of this process and the DYD in general, and practiced deep listening. The facilitators varied by session, and included representatives from DYD, Burns Institute, Arts for Healing and Justice Network, and University of Alabama, among others. Guiding questions and prompts were used to steer discussions and activities.

DOCUMENTATION

Sessions were audio-recorded using iPhones and later transcribed for analysis. Artworks, poetry, and raps were documented through photographs and submissions.

DATA ANALYSIS

Transcriptions were generated using software complemented by human interpretation to ensure cultural vernacular and youth slang was accurately captured. A thematic analysis was conducted, with data (quotes) coded and synthesized into principles and domains.

The team categorized codes that spoke to an overarching approach the department should take to promote youth well-being as Principles. Codes that represented specific activities or functions that the department can provide to young people to achieve their well-being were categorized as Domains or Subdomains.

While multiple iterations of reviews led to the renaming and reidentification of Principles and Domains, the team anticipates future changes to occur throughout the next stage engaging more youth, community, and other stakeholder input.

The Principles and Domains of youth well-being identified through this process were:

Principles of Youth Well-being

- *Honoring Youth Agency*
- *Centering Human Rights*
- *Healing Not Harm*
- *Relational Not Transactional*
- *Recognizing Community*
- *Culturally Sustaining*
- *Critical System Analysis*

Domains of Youth Well-being

- *Nourishment of Whole Self*
- *Authentic & Fulfilling Participation*
- *Thriving Communities*

Subdomains are detailed in Section 5

YOUTH SESSIONS FOLLOW-UP

Two follow-up sessions were conducted with the community-based organizations Street Poets and Homeboy Art Academy in 2023. In one such session, principles and domains were presented to the youth, who then indicated resonance using stickers. This exercise highlighted the nuance within topics such as “jobs” and helped categorize key subdomains.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Participants’ information was anonymized to ensure confidentiality. Facilitators shared personal experiences, like incarceration, to build rapport and relate to the youth. They were also trained to handle sensitive topics and ensure participants’ emotional well-being.

LIMITATIONS

While the arts-centered approach was powerful, challenges like low audio volume during recordings and software limitations in understanding cultural vernacular were encountered. In addition, some participants were less engaged in the process.

NOTE ON ARTS-CENTERED APPROACH

Observations revealed themes of police harassment, betrayal, gentrification, and other potentially traumatic experiences, especially in poems and lyrics written by Black male participants. This process underscores the value of an arts-centered approach in capturing the nuanced perspectives of youth on well-being. By centering their voices and experiences, we gain invaluable insights into the domains and principles of well-being that matter most to them.

REVIEW OF YOUTH APPENDIX SECTION 2: REVIEW OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT LITERATURE

Youth development scholarship evolved throughout the 20th century with disciplined adulthood as the primary motivation.⁴ By the late 20th century, much of the field of youth development was centered around a deficit-based approach, and youth behavior was an inevitable problem that needed fixing⁵. This paradigm began to shift when emerging research began to shed light on the developing brain and the unique markers of adolescence. Evolutionary psychologists have theorized that the impulsivity of the adolescent brain during development could be connected to a number of pivotal human social transitions across human history⁶. Risk-taking activates the reward circuitry of the nucleus accumbens and research has shown that adolescents are not only more sensitive to reward than adults, but this is how they navigate learning⁷. Teenagers take risks, make mistakes, and act up—these are healthy and normal correlates with development. Instead of focusing on controlling “mini adults,” there was an acknowledged need to understand how to best support and nurture youth in this precarious stage. In response, Positive Youth Development (PYD) arose as a novel strengths-based model of youth development, meaning it looked at what positive elements in a young person’s life contribute to healthy development (called protective factors) instead of focusing efforts on behavioral avoidance/abstinence (Figure 5)⁸.

PYD originally focused on 5 C’s: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring⁹, and later expanded to include a 6th C: contribution¹⁰. While PYD has since grown as the predominant theoretical framework underpinning youth development in the 21st century, youth development practitioners continue to expand beyond these original components to better serve young people in practice. Practitioners have sought to evolve and adapt the PYD template to embrace the growing paradigm of structural and environmental impacts on individual outcomes¹¹. Additionally, justice involved youth have been largely excluded from the popular understanding of PYD and are often still met with deficit, discipline-based approaches, driving the need to advance inclusive, strength-based, and context-informed perspectives on youth development.¹²

The current moment centers around building young people’s assets and strengths while acknowledging the complexities of young people’s environments. One adaptation that centers community in young people’s development is generally named Community Youth Development. Initial proposals of this approach called to merge concepts of community development with youth development, with the understanding that promoting young people’s civic engagement in their communities can contribute to key protective factors¹³. Building off the role of community in youth development, the Community Action Framework for Youth Development, broadly speaking, situates community as the incubator for young people’s positive developmental outcomes¹⁴. The authors propose that with specific supports and opportunities for youth in communities, and communities’ capacity to change conditions to sustain these resources and positive environments, youth development outcomes can improve and lead to long-term improvement in adult outcomes.

Other frameworks have moved toward building upon PYD’s socioecological underpinnings by emphasizing the impact of sociopolitical factors on young people’s development. Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD), initially proposed to work with youth of color, considers systems of oppression and their impact on youth as well as young people’s ways of responding to these layers of oppression¹⁵. New takes on SJYD posit the approach as action- and equity-oriented, in that practitioners aim to reduce or eliminate disparities in systems such as health, education, justice, and employment that thwart young people’s development¹⁶.

Another iteration of PYD that emphasizes the role of social systems on young people’s growth is Critical Positive Youth Development (CPYD) (Figure 6). CPYD is an approach that integrates Paulo Freire’s concept of critical consciousness, other concepts from scholars who have built on critical consciousness work, and Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality^{17,18}. The authors of CPYD propose critical consciousness as the 7th C of the Five Cs model in positive youth development and a reframe to the 6th C to become contribution through critical action. They

"IF SOMEBODY COMMITS A ROBBERY, A LOT OF TIMES THEY DON'T ASK WHY? YOU KNOW, LIKE, 'WERE YOU HUNGRY? DID YOU NEED TO IMMEDIATELY PROVIDE FOR YOUR FAMILY IN THE MOMENT? WHAT WAS GOING ON?' WHY IS NOT ASKED THAT MUCH. IT'S USUALLY LIKE, 'YOU SHOULD'VE KNOWN BETTER, YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE DID THAT.' IT'S ALWAYS ABOUT THE PUNISHMENT."

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

"WANNA WAKE UP IN A WORLD WHERE I DON'T HAVE TO FIGHT FOR MY LIFE."

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

"SOMETIMES, WELL-BEING FOR ME WAS LIKE GETTING THE OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE A MISTAKE AND NOT HAVE IT RUIN MY LIFE"

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

hypothesize that the development of the Five Cs fosters critical reflection and political efficacy which, in turn, leads to contribution through critical action. All three proposed critical theory concepts—critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action—beget critical consciousness, and the dynamics of each, including the original Five Cs constructs, can either reinforce or aid in the development of each other. The authors argue that not only does CPYD promote a critical lens to viewing young people's contexts and their relationships with their environments, but also leans on intersectionality to help practitioners and youth learn about their positionality through power, privilege, and oppression.

While CPYD and SJYD attend to race and systemic oppression broadly, other adaptations of PYD have emerged to address specific populations excluded from its early scope, including justice-involved youth. Positive Youth Justice (PYJ) reflects DYD's own deepening decarceration efforts and offers another opportunity for continued adaptation. Research is clear that punitive, deficit-focused approaches in juvenile facilities are ineffective and actively harmful to young people's development¹⁹. The PYJ model emphasizes that young people in detention and reentry contexts have the same developmental needs for safety, belonging, meaningful relationships, and opportunities to grow as their peers, and that meeting those needs is a proven pathway to better youth and public safety outcomes²⁰. Programming grounded in these principles has been associated with reduced recidivism, improved mental health, and stronger connections to education and employment upon release²¹.

There are other approaches that are not strictly in the field of positive youth development but either serve as influential in the youth development field and/or stress the importance of external variables, such as relationships and environments, that are integral to young people's healthy development. For example, Bronfenbrenner's widely utilized socio-ecological model (SEM) introduced to the field of human development the role of a person's relationships with their ecologies, or systems, in influencing their development (Figure 7).²² Arguably, many offshoots of PYD focus on the role of specific systems that Bronfenbrenner initially proposed, such as the macrosystem which is attributed to elements of society and culture. One Los Angeles County-specific PYD framework that integrates components of the SEM serves as a program implementation tool for the Ready To Rise Program (Figure 8)²³. Their acknowledgment of environmental factors, an amalgamation of the SEM's macro-, exo-, and meso-systems, highlights the importance of external forces on young people's development, in conjunction with the program's own services. Another framework, Webs of Support, which can transverse many ecologies that the SEM identifies, explains how relationships and the resources produced from relationships impact adolescent development.²⁴ It centers the dynamic relationship between a person and their context and recognizes that relationships are critical to identity development and provide social connections that are vital to all humans. The

"BUT IF I'M TELLING THE TRUTH FROM WESTMONT TO INGLEWOOD FROM LONG BEACH TO WEST SIDE TO COMPTON, WE HOLD MORE TALENT IN OUR LIPS THAN HILLTOP PEOPLE ALL TOGETHER."

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

"IN MY JOURNEY, I'VE FACED THE CHALLENGE OF CHOOSING BETWEEN JOBS THAT OFFER ME A CHANCE TO EXPLORE POTENTIAL CAREER PATHS AND THOSE THAT MEET MY IMMEDIATE FINANCIAL NEEDS, EVEN IF THEY'RE LESS THAN IDEAL. THIS BALANCING ACT HAS TAUGHT ME TO VALUE OPPORTUNITIES THAT ALIGN WITH MY INTERESTS AND VALUES, EVEN AS I NAVIGATE THE REALITIES OF EARNING A LIVABLE WAGE."

- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

"WORKING ON MY WELL-BEING AS I ROLL THIS LEAF. BUT LATELY FIGHTING DEPRESSION AND NIGHTMARES. EVER GOT PULLED OVER AND THE POLICE TOLD YOU, 'WAIT RIGHT THERE?'"

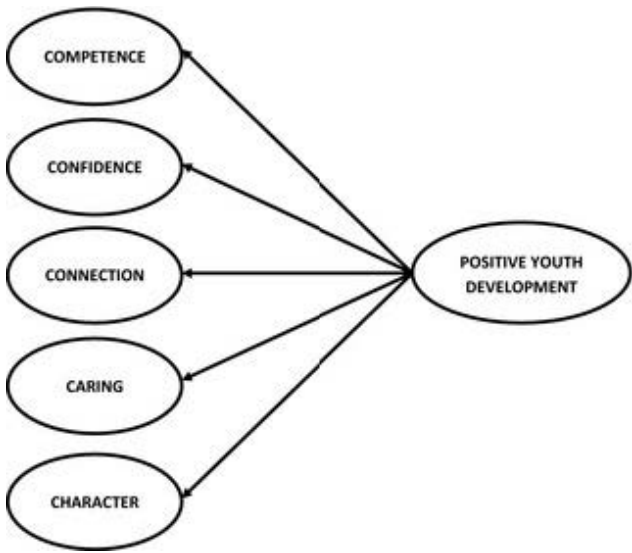
- LISTENING SESSION PARTICIPANT

authors share that having a web of support does not necessarily produce positive developmental outcomes as youth can have ties to people that can be maladaptive to their development, but having this lens can aid in viewing "how different positive and negative agents in a web work together or against one another and how they affect developmental outcomes."

Applying any positive youth development frameworks should be approached cautiously as adaptations to the frameworks are likely needed to best suit the practitioner's setting. Seemingly, many programs utilizing a PYD framework assume it is a "one-size-fits-all" tool and have a limited understanding of the logic behind the tool, and therefore struggle with implementing the framework and seeing results²⁵. Practitioners should apply the framework with their priority population in mind while also focusing on the fundamentals that many youth development frameworks share. Commonalities include emphasizing the role of 1) supportive relationships, 2) ecologies, and 3) developmental outcomes.²⁶

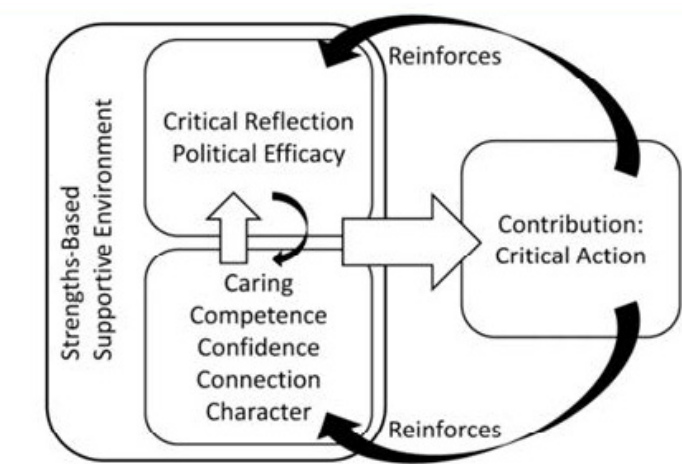
DYD has a unique opportunity to scaffold a scaled ecology of youth development in Los Angeles County and propel the field forward in its applied research. Our research framework for well-being was co-created with justice impacted youth in Los Angeles County and is ultimately an adaptation of the socio-ecological model, critical positive youth development, and social justice youth development. The research framework is grounded in honoring where current youth development research has landed, practically expanding on it to include justice involved youth and their visions for their own well-being by incorporating the principles of positive youth justice, and embodying youth empowerment in all aspects of our work as researchers. While this is partly done through how DYD approaches measuring its programming, we have also strategically aimed to capitalize on our sphere of influence as a government agency by operationalizing how LA County commits to youth well-being in all areas of work.

FIGURE 5: CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT



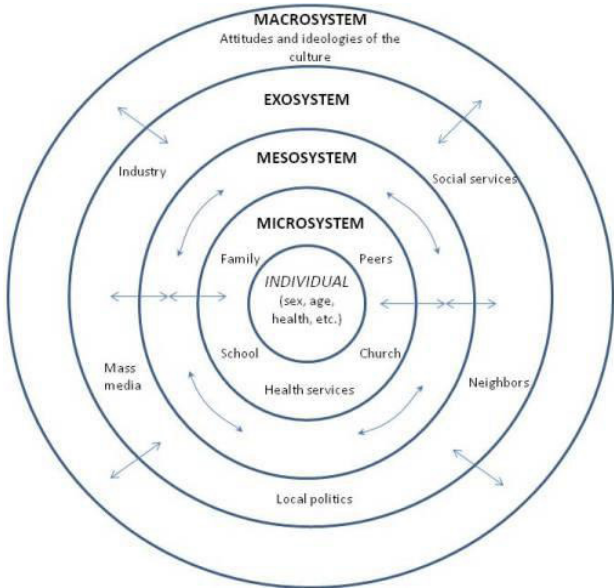
Burkhard, B. M., Robinson, K. M., Murray, E. D., & Lerner, R. M. (2019). Positive youth development: Theory and perspective. The encyclopedia of child and adolescent development, 1-12

FIGURE 6: CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR CRITICAL POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT



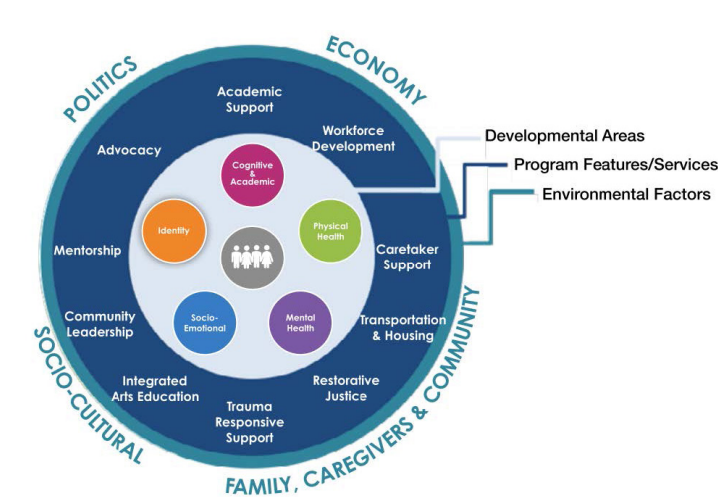
Gonzalez, M., Kokozos, M., Byrd, C. M., & McKee, K. E. (2020). Critical positive youth development: A framework for centering critical consciousness. Journal of Youth Development, 15(6), 24-43.

FIGURE 7: SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL MODEL



Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. American psychologist, 32 (7), 513.

FIGURE 8: READY TO RISE PROGRAM'S POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK



Ready to Rise (2022). 2022 Cumulative Report.

APPENDIX SECTION 3: YOUTH ARTWORK AND WRITING FROM LISTENING SESSIONS

- well-being in LA looks like,
not having to worry when you're
going to eat again after school.
Figuring out where is my safe place,
wondering who I can put my faith in,
When my home isn't stable in the day,
Where can I go to get rest at night.
Where everyone isn't fighting for
a place where rent is affordable.
Sticking kid over kid on a bunk bed.
A opportunity to participate
with the children who have it all.
The parents that weren't ready or
prepared, given a better opportunity
to provide. For the youth.

BIEN ESTAR

*El bien estar para mí es cuidarme
No importa donde este, la música
me motiva por eso es lo que más
hago para sentirme bien después
de hacer ejercicio. La escuela
Me ayuda mucho, y sus programas
me mantienen más seguro.

*En mi familia hay muchas fallas, como
cualquier otra, pero para estar mejor,
se que necesitamos más comunicación
y más empatía, escucharnos uno al
otro y dar opiniones para estar
de acuerdo con todos.

*En mi vecindario veo que faltan
más lugares donde no le pagan por
como te ves, por ejemplo: Un centro
de comunidad, arte y educación.

*En la ciudad, veo que solo falta
gente que ayude más gente a
los lugares con oportunidades de
trabajo, estudio y cosas para
usar el tiempo, y llamarlo
tiempo productivo



Endnotes

- 1 Human rights language was particularly poignant during the research process with young people. Human rights frameworks assert “rights” includes support for basic needs and points to existing doctrines that outline the obligation to support those rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child even names that “governments must make sure that children survive and develop in the best possible way.” Additional notable conventions that round out a human rights approach are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners. The U.S. has not ratified any of these treaties.
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