

A photograph of four diverse young people (two men and two women) smiling and cheering with their mouths open. They are outdoors in a sunny, urban setting with trees and buildings in the background. One woman in the foreground is wearing a yellow floral shirt and glasses, and another woman next to her is also smiling broadly. In the background, a man with glasses and a woman are also cheering, with one arm raised.

A Thriving and Holistic *SEXUAL HEALTH* Ecosystem

Key Learnings from Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

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HOW WE DEFINE SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH (SRH)

Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) is defined as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being related to the reproductive system, including sexuality, reproductive functions, and processes. It encompasses not just the absence of disease, but also the ability to have a satisfying and safe sex life, the capability to reproduce, and the freedom to decide if, when, and how often to do so. (World Health Organization, 2025, Sexual and Reproductive Health Research: <https://bit.ly/3HHU1hl>)



A Thriving and Holistic *SEXUAL HEALTH* Ecosystem:

Key Learnings from Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

Young adult co-researchers did a deep dive into 10 young people's perspectives and lived experiences using photography, focus groups and other sources to explore access, barriers and future visions surrounding their sexual and reproductive health (SRH). This brief highlights some of what was learned and extends an invitation to collectively work toward what's next.

Women's Fund of Omaha would like to extend our sincerest appreciation to **Abbie Deng, Cleo Zagurski, Kween Alabi** and **Megan Hall**, who led this project as co-researchers with the support of **Alejandra Iniguez Gomez** and **Kate Kough**.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

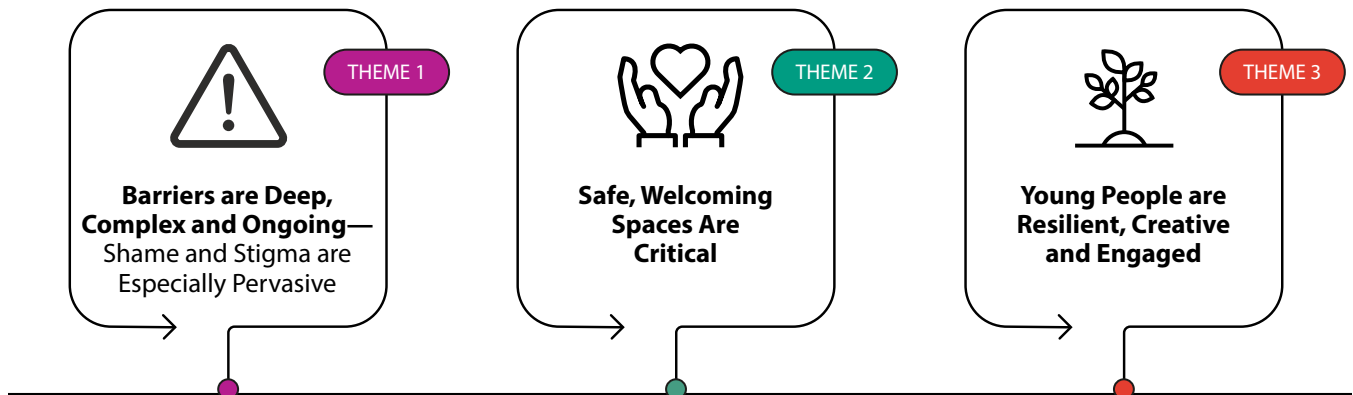
EMERGING THEMES	4
WHAT'S NEXT?	6
MORE ABOUT OUR RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	10
RESOURCES.....	11

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How to Cite This Report: **Women's Fund of Omaha, YPAR 2024-25 Key Learnings Brief, 2025**

EMERGING THEMES

The insights featured here reflect key themes that surfaced through the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) process. Young adult co-researchers engaged deeply with the experiences of 10 young people by using photography, focus groups, and other tools to explore their access to, barriers within, and hopes for the future of sexual and reproductive health (SRH).



THEME 1: Barriers are Deep, Complex and Ongoing—Shame and Stigma are Especially Pervasive

- **Shame and stigma continue to shape young peoples' experiences across family, peers, politics, schools and media.** While some participants reported affirming environments, most described early exposure to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) topics as fear-based or judgmental.

"I definitely feel like some of my shame came from growing up around people who thought sex was gross or dirty, like you'd be ruined if you did it." –YPAR participant

- **Young people experience judgment and lack of cultural competence from healthcare providers, and service gaps in Omaha's more conservative zones.** This especially impacts LGBTQIA2S+ youth and youth of color.

"When I just see only White people, sometimes I'm like, 'Oh, they're not gonna know everything that I need.' ... Because even between White people and Black people, things can be different, so just the diversity of [an organization is really important]." –YPAR participant

- **Youth emphasized that school-based sex education is often incomplete, outdated and fails to represent the complexity of their real lives.** For example, there is little to no instruction on topics like gender identity, consent, pleasure or emotional readiness for a variety of topics such as intimacy.
- **While misleading SRH information from the media is not new, youth identified new challenges they experience when accessing social media to fill in gaps with sex education.**

"I think [social media] can be very radicalizing. So, it's really just like you're at the will of the algorithm. You could either learn something that's really, really anti-autonomy, or you could learn something that's super pro-autonomy, and it's just like, you don't really have a choice. It's just kind of given to you like that." –YPAR participant

"For a long time, I saw people saying birth control equals bad because it means you're having sex and therefore, it's bad. [This was from] maybe older media, like 20 years ago. But nowadays I see people like on TikTok, spreading misinformation the other way, being like, 'oh, birth control is bad because it's not natural,' or like 'you're harming your body,' which is really not true." –YPAR participant

THEME 2: Safe, Welcoming Spaces Are Critical

- Space is about more than a physical environment or a clinical setting, and they can't be one-size fits all. **Youth want environments where they are encouraged to explore SRH topics as one part interconnected with their whole selves**—their emotional well-being, cultural identity, community belonging, and access to other basic needs like transportation, food and housing.
- **How a space makes a young person feel is as important as the services and education offered.** There are existing organizations who embody this approach and serve as examples of affirming, youth-friendly environments.

"It just felt calm. I don't know, it didn't feel like a clinic - in a good way." –YPAR participant

"[Organization] felt like a place you could just ask and not be scared of being wrong." –YPAR participant

- **Finding basic information online is helpful, and youth desire physical spaces to connect with other young people and trusted adults who can mentor, guide or learn alongside them.**
- **Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of timing, tone and context, calling for adults and institutions to engage with them openly and without judgment.** Meeting youth "where they are" means more than just providing information in places they already gather.

THEME 3: Young People are Resilient, Creative and Engaged

- **Despite gaps in systems, young people actively seek out information and resources, even if that learning is fragmented and unequal.**

"I had to learn on my own, and I got lucky that I had people around me who weren't afraid to talk about stuff." –YPAR participant

- Though they acknowledged they are not ideal, **youth recognized alternative sources** like friends, social media, online searches and trusted adults were often more honest, relevant or affirming than what schools provided.
- **Youth navigate social media as both a source of information and misinformation that can be both empowering and harmful.**



"I would say something positive [about social media] is that I would have learned so much on TikTok." –YPAR participant

"For real, but it's like, you just learned something from a TikTok or a reel or whatever? And it's like, why am I learning that there?" –YPAR participant responding to comment above

- Through community service activities like packaging menstrual products, **young people not only gain knowledge about SRH but can also build community and form a network of support.**



...the project gave me a better way to think and look outside the box of sex education, and to find my own voice in a world of stigma and hatred toward these topics.



–YPAR participant

WHAT'S NEXT?

This latest YPAR project both illuminates new ideas and supports what we already know. Most importantly, it serves as an opening. Rather than definitive solutions, it provides grounding and an opportunity for power to be shifted to young people so they can lead and build the SRH ecosystem they desire and deserve.

STARTING POINTS FOR ACTION

Strengthen a continuum of options for authentic engagement.

- Offer **sustained, flexible and evolving opportunities to connect with SRH services and education**, all rooted in emotional safety, cultural relevance and shared power, so that young people not only deepen their own learning but can also help transform systems around them.
- Provide **opportunities for young people to participate and lead in SRH** spaces according to their passions and interests.
- Use **Hart's Ladder of Youth Engagement as a framework to understand and evaluate** the level at which young people are engaged in a given activity or strategy and build capacity accordingly. For example, it can help groups distinguish between tokenism versus shared power.

Deepen investment in drop-in and third spaces.

- **Co-create spaces, both physical and virtual**, where youth can hang out with peers and mentors, learn on their terms and be seen as whole people.
- Bring **resources to places where youth already gather**—concerts, college campuses, coffee shops, social media platforms (ex: TikTok) and accessible, educational apps (ex: eukiapp.org).
- **Don't forget the vibes**: spaces should be technically accessible, but also welcoming and reflective of the diverse ways young people define care, safety and connection.

Position young people to use media, peer education and art (zines, stickers, etc.) to challenge and reduce shame and stigma, recognizing it as a gradual and ongoing process.

Keep convening young people to generate additional ideas and identify the resources they need to try out their ideas in practice.



Reproductive health and education in Omaha is something that needs to be more inclusive and talked about so people can get resources...creating more ways to access it will benefit Omaha to get rid of stigma/stereotypes.

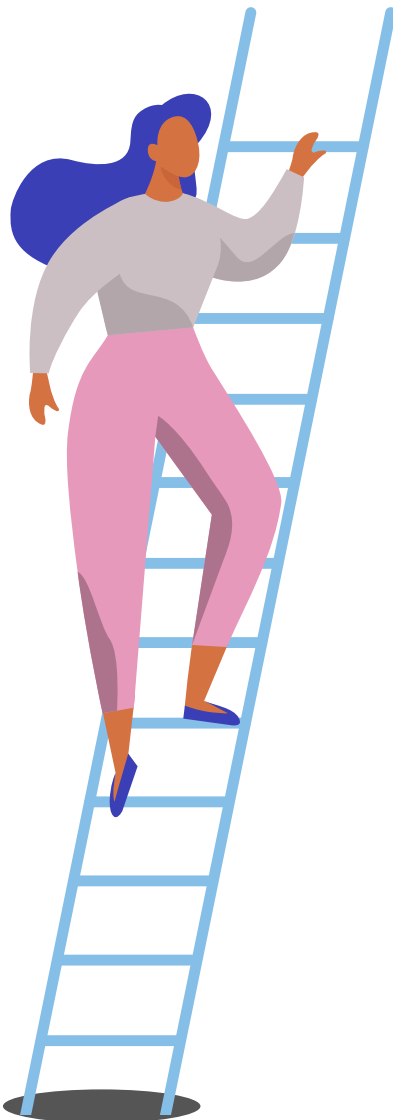
—YPAR participant



CENTERING WHAT MATTERS

- **The future is about more than resources.** It's about continuing to advance shifts in culture, power and trust. When given authentic leadership roles, young people generate powerful insights and can drive systemic change, not just service improvement.
- This project used photography to remind us that **sexual and reproductive health is not just about what young people do with their bodies**, but also about how they move through the world, how they're perceived and how they are cared for.
- **The future of sexual health cannot simply be built for youth.** It must be built with them.

HART'S LADDER OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT



YOUTH-LED

Within an organization, young people comprise the majority of the board of directors, staff members and volunteer base of the organization. Initiatives are also youth-led when young people are the ones making decisions not only about content and activities but also how resources are used and allocated. Their decisions and actions speak to the audience they are trying to reach and engage.

STRONG INTERGENERATIONAL PARTNERSHIP

Youth are empowered to hold top positions and initiate important decisions, including those concerning budget, hiring and vision, with appropriate and reciprocal senior member support.

SHARED DECISION-MAKING

Youth and older adults jointly initiate and shape fundamental decisions with tangible impact in practice and youth perspectives are not only valued by being taken seriously and applied faithfully when and where possible but also compensated when possible/appropriate.

OLDER ADULT-LED PROJECTS

Older adults initiate partnerships, but afford youth some input in decision-making.

SUPERFICIAL INCLUSIVITY

Youth get assigned to tasks by decision-makers, but are at least informed or peripherally consulted. Most youth-facing services and non-leadership volunteer programs aim only for this level of engagement.

TOKENISM

Youth are symbolically included in the decision making process, but in a powerless, under-informed and unaccountable way.

DECORATION

Youth's images, presence and names are used to bolster a cause without any real involvement or consultation.

MANIPULATION

Youth don't have an understanding of the issues or choices they are appearing to speak out about, but are made to act as if they do.

Source: Youth Friendly



"FOLKS CAN EDUCATE THEMSELVES BY USING THEIR COMMUNITY RESOURCES."



"MY BED, WHERE MOST THINGS BECOME UNCOVERED."



yay

"ACCESS IS OURS!"



photovoice

THESE ARE ACTUAL YPAR
PHOTOVOICE PHOTOS
AND CAPTIONS FROM
THIS PROJECT.



yes

"ASSIGNED FEMALE AT
BIRTH (AFAB) BODIES ARE
NOT INHERENTLY SEXUAL"

"THE POWER OF CHANGING
SEXUAL EDUCATION LIES WITHIN
THE HANDS OF YOUR COMMUNITY!"



☆ YPAR ☆

MORE ABOUT OUR RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

WHAT IS YPAR?

YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (YPAR) is a research approach used in the social sciences that centers the importance of engaging young people as co-researchers in studying the issues that affect them to advance change, rather than involving them solely as research “subjects.”

WHAT IS PHOTOVOICE?

PHOTOVOICE is a participatory photography method that seeks to empower people to share their experiences through storytelling. See BetterEvaluation for more details: [BetterEvaluation.org/Methods-Approaches/Methods/Photovoice](https://www.betterevaluation.org/Methods-Approaches/Methods/Photovoice)

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Findings reflect the perspectives of young people who designed and led this research. Women’s Fund has used Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approaches as part of its Adolescent Health Project work as early as 2017. YPAR is a research approach used in the social sciences that centers the importance of engaging young people as co-researchers in studying the issues that affect them to advance change, rather than involving them solely as research “subjects.” As an overall research approach, YPAR can use a wide variety of more specific methodologies such as quantitative survey research, qualitative interviews, mixed-methods case studies, and more. Rather than specify the use of a particular method, a key hallmark of a YPAR approach is working with young people to decide which methodology best suits the goals of the research.

Co-researchers for this current project used **Hart’s Ladder of Youth Engagement** (*see page 7*) as a theory to ground the research and structuring of the team to ensure alignment with the YPAR approach. This latest project recruited a co-research team in 2024 to design and begin implementing the research. **Five young adult co-researchers opted to engage in photovoice research with data collection and analysis occurring from late 2024 through early 2025.** Photovoice is a participatory photography method that seeks to empower people to share their experiences through storytelling, and co-researchers identified photos as a “literally holistic” way of gathering data. As a form of qualitative research, photovoice provides direct access to participants’ viewpoints in comparison to, for example, pre-empting responses with closed-ended survey questions. For this reason, this method is especially well suited to explore topics of interest that center the voices of young people. Co-researchers recruited an additional 10 young people to participate in the photovoice research and accompanying focus groups. Youth participants were provided with cameras and predetermined descriptions of SRH-related themes, ideas and experiences to consider when taking photographs. Once photographs were taken, participants returned cameras to co-researchers and participated in focus groups about their photos with other participants and co-researchers.

This brief summarizes some key learnings from this process. The group of **10 participants** who engaged in photovoice included agender people (10%), men (10%), women (70%) and people who selected multiple gender identities (10%). Sexual orientations represented include abrosexual (10%), bisexual (30%), heterosexual (20%), queer (10%), questioning (10%) and those who selected multiple sexual orientations (20%). Participants identified as Black/African American/African (10%), Hispanic (10%), Multiracial (20%) and White (60%), with races and ethnicities represented within the Multiracial category including Asian/Pacific Islander, Black/African American/African, Indigenous/Native American/American Indian and White. Sixty percent of participants were 16-18 years old, whereas the other 40% were 19-23 years old.

While a diverse array of identities and experiences were part of the research, it is important to note that photovoice research is not designed to be generalizable to an entire population of people.

RESOURCES

HEY ADULTS, LET'S TALK!

Access Granted has composed and collected resources that may be useful for young people and their educators, including their parents/caregivers, on navigating dating, sex and safety.

Remember, parents/caregivers, you are the primary sexuality educators for the children you care for and—believe it or not—they want to hear this information from you. Research shows that 57 percent of Nebraska teens have sex before graduating from high school. Nationally, 18 is the average age young people have sex for the first time.

Talking to young people about sex can be challenging, and being the young person navigating it, even more so, but we've got you! The key is being prepared for open, honest and ongoing conversations. Talk early, talk often.

Find everything you need at GetAccessGranted.com/Resources/.

For information about an Askable Adults Matter workshop for youth supporting professionals, please visit OmahaWomensFund.org/wp-content/uploads/AAM-Initiative-Document-2022.pdf or email Lisa Schulze at LSchulze@OmahaWomensFund.org.





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