

Beyond the Map:

**Rethinking Systems
Mapping and Stakeholder
Engagement in
Youth-Serving Work**

Marie-Soleil Hudon
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Land Acknowledgement

This project was conducted and written by a settler student living, studying, and working on the traditional territories of Treaty 7, which include the Blackfoot Confederacy, comprised of the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai First Nations; the Tsuut'ina First Nation; and the Stoney Nakoda Nations, including Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Goodstoney First Nations. Moh'kinsstis, the place now known as Calgary, is also home to the Métis Nation within Alberta, including Nose Hill Métis District 5 and Elbow Métis District 6.

Because this report focuses on systems mapping, it is important to acknowledge that mapping is not a neutral practice. Maps have been used as tools of colonial power to impose borders and separate Indigenous Peoples from their land, governance systems, and ways of knowing. Recognizing this history requires approaching systems mapping with humility and a critical awareness of whose perspectives are represented and whose are left out.

This project, therefore, approaches systems mapping through a critical, anti-racist, and decolonial lens by asking whose knowledge is treated as legitimate, who is included in decision-making, and what forms of support are made visible or left out. Without this approach, systems mapping can unintentionally reproduce harm by reinforcing colonial ways of knowing, excluding marginalized perspectives, and legitimizing existing power structures.

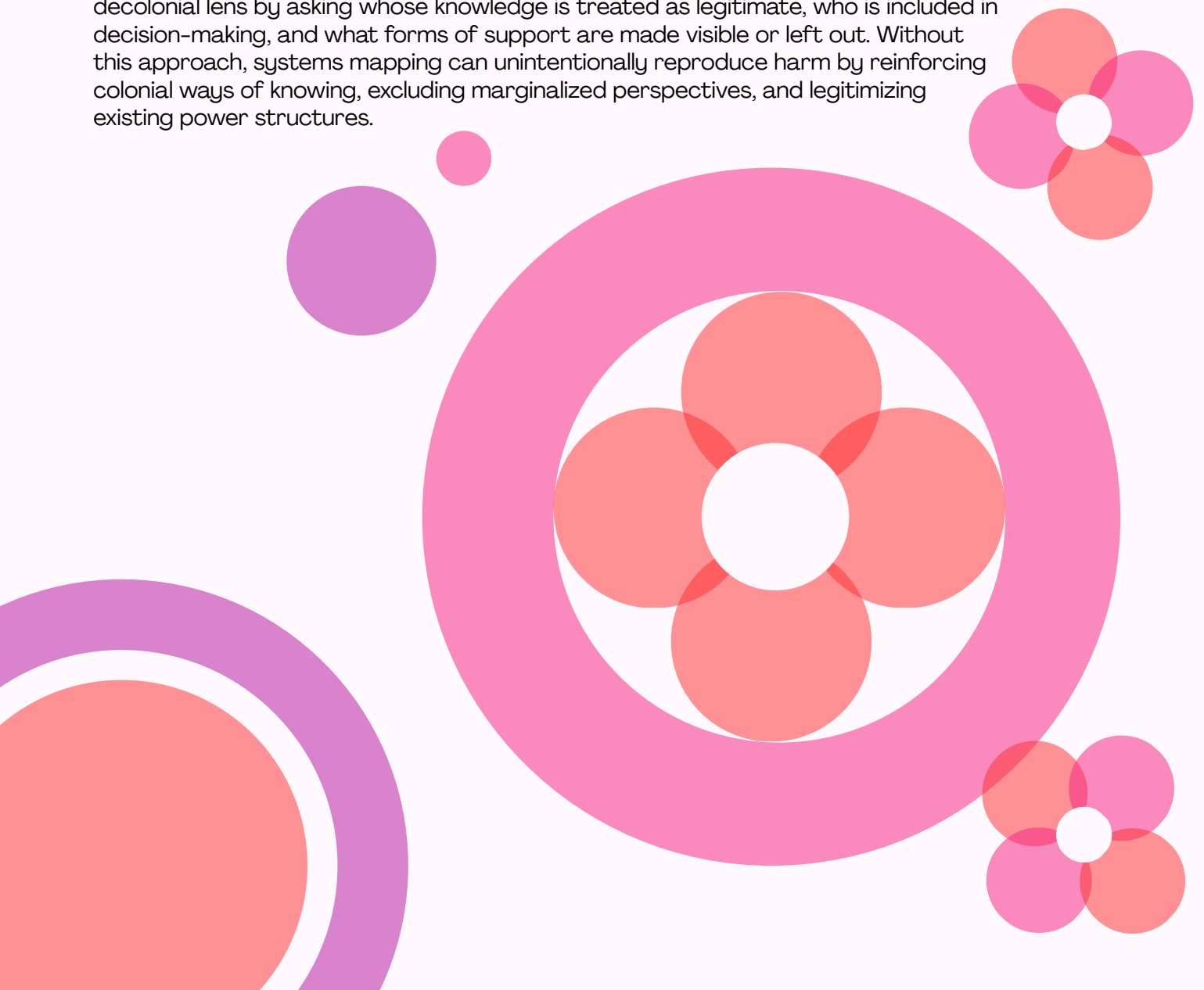


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Executive Summary

How might we leverage systems mapping and stakeholder engagement to strengthen understanding, alignment, and collective impact among youth-serving organizations?

This report explores this question by looking at why youth-serving systems become fragmented and how systems mapping can support more coordinated, youth-centred, and power-conscious change.

Key Findings

- Fragmentation is not a communication issue; funding models, institutional mandates, and power structures often make collaborating difficult.
- Systems mapping can show formal and informal factors shaping youth well-being, as well as the power relationships that influence decision-making.
- Systems mapping and stakeholder engagement are inseparable: each strengthens the other.
- Youth-serving ecosystems extend beyond programming to view informal gathering spaces as essential to youth's well-being.
- Mapping is not the final product: its value lies in enabling stakeholders to question existing structures, reshape power dynamics, and address the root causes of fragmentation.

Main recommendations

- Develop a living systems and asset map of Calgary's youth-serving ecosystem.
- Move from convening as information-sharing to shared decision-making.
- Build youth-centred accountability and feedback loops.
- Advocate for flexible, stable, and collaborative funding models.
- Embed anti-racist accountability and ongoing learning into systems-change work.

Guiding Insight

This report explores how participatory and power-conscious systems mapping can help youth-serving organizations better understand fragmentation, align around shared barriers, and act collectively to change the conditions that keep the system disconnected.

Introduction



Youth-serving organizations are often described as part of a broader ecosystem that includes caregivers, schools, community organizations, public systems, and other informal support. This suggests that collaboration and shared responsibility are crucial to supporting youth well-being.

Unfortunately, the reality experienced by many young people is often more fragmented. Organizations may be working toward similar goals, but they are frequently separated by different funding streams, reporting requirements, eligibility criteria, and referral processes. As a result, a city can appear to offer many programs and services yet be difficult for young people to access.

This disconnect helped shape the focus of this Catamount Fellowship project, developed in partnership with United Way, through the following *How Might We* question:

How might we leverage systems mapping and stakeholder engagement to strengthen understanding, alignment, and collective impact among youth-serving organizations?

This research process began with a desire to understand why there seemed to be a disconnect among organizations that are meant to support young people in the first place. The question was not whether youth-serving organizations care about youth well-being, since research clearly suggests that they do. Instead, I wanted to look more closely at the structural barriers that make alignment difficult, even when organizations share similar values and goals.

To better understand this tension, my literature review was guided by the following question:

What barriers within the system make alignment difficult, even when organizations share similar values and are working toward similar outcomes?

From there, the project explored how tools like systems mapping could be used to better visualize and understand the relationships, gaps, disconnections, and leverage points across the youth-serving sector. This approach can help organizations view service fragmentation as a symptom of deeper systemic inequities and examine the structural conditions that shape the nonprofit sector.

The findings suggest that the disconnect among youth-serving organizations is not accidental. It has been produced over time by more insidious structures, such as short-term funding, project-based accountability, and reporting systems that often value measurable outputs over relational and long-term impact. These conditions shape what organizations can prioritize, how they are able to collaborate, and how young people ultimately experience support in Calgary.

For this reason, the disconnect among youth-serving organizations should be understood as a wicked problem (Stony Brook University, n.d.): There is no single cause, no single owner, and no single solution. This report does not place blame on individual organizations, many of which are already working hard within difficult conditions. Instead, it examines the systems, and structures that make alignment difficult, even when organizations share similar values and care deeply about youth well-being.

With this in mind, the report argues that strengthening alignment requires more than creating a better inventory of programs and services. Systems mapping can help organizations look beneath the surface of fragmentation by revealing inequitable funding models, institutional norms, and power structures that shape the youth-serving sector as a whole. For backbone organizations such as United Way, this means going beyond convening to act as a bridge between youth, community organizations, funders, institutions, and decision-makers by helping surface tensions, question existing practices, and support more coordinated action across the sector.

Literature Review

Addressing fragmentation requires looking beyond individual organizations and examining the broader systems in which they operate. This literature review brings together research on nonprofit funding, neoliberal governance, stakeholder engagement, systems thinking, and collective impact to explore why alignment is difficult even when organizations share similar values and goals. It first examines how fragmentation is produced and sustained through structural conditions, before turning to systems mapping as a possible tool for making relationships, gaps, assumptions, and power dynamics more visible. Rather than treating systems mapping as a technical exercise, this review understands it as a participatory process that can support shared learning, stronger alignment, and collective action.

UNDERSTANDING FRAGMENTATION

Fragmentation is often described as a problem of poor communication, duplication, or lack of coordination between organizations. While these issues matter, they do not fully explain why youth-serving systems remain difficult to navigate. Fragmentation is also shaped by funding structures, institutional mandates, and power relationships that influence how organizations are able to work together. Understanding fragmentation, therefore, requires moving beyond the idea that organizations simply need to collaborate better and asking what conditions make collaboration difficult in the first place.

Neoliberalism and Funding Models

To understand the current disconnect among youth-serving organizations, it is important to

understand how nonprofit and community-based service systems have been shaped over time. Many nonprofit organizations began as mission-driven responses to social needs, community gaps, and inequities. However, as governments increasingly relied on nonprofit organizations to deliver public services, the role of nonprofits shifted (Osman et al., 2026). They became not only community actors, but also service delivery partners operating within government and funder-defined systems.

This shift created a complicated relationship. On one hand, nonprofits are trusted to deliver essential services because of their community knowledge and ability to respond to local needs. On the other hand, they are often not funded as long-term strategic partners (Osman et al., 2026). Instead, many are funded through short-term, project-based agreements that define what is seen as valuable, what can be done, and what must be reported back.

This tension reflects broader neoliberal norms in nonprofit funding and governance. In practical terms, organizations are encouraged to operate like businesses: compete for limited resources and prove their worth through standardized reporting and measurable outputs. Horler (2025) captures this pressure when she recalls sitting in meetings where decision-makers would state, “If we can’t give the numbers, we don’t get the money” (p. 9). However, there is a deeper contradiction in this funding relationship. While nonprofits are expected to perform like efficient service providers, Osman et al. (2026) note that federal funding language still frames them through the lens of “financial assistance,” (p. 29) positioning them as recipients of help rather than as partners with social capital and strategic knowledge. In other words, nonprofits

nare expected to be efficient and responsive, but are not always given the stability, trust, or flexibility needed to respond to complex community needs. This can make long-term collaboration, prevention, advocacy, and relationship-building harder to sustain.

Additionally, Gautier (2025) found that systems change approaches are often perceived by funders as risky because they are long-term and difficult to measure. This is particularly relevant to nonprofit organizations because much of their work seeks to address the root causes of the challenges their communities face, whether or not they explicitly describe their work as systems change. However, this risk is not only shaped by neoliberal expectations around return on investment; it is also shaped by White-dominant and colonial assumptions about which forms of knowledge count as legitimate and what kinds of change are considered fundable.

COVID-19 Briefly Revolutionized Funding

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed something important about funding and service delivery: flexibility is possible. During the emergency response, governments and funders temporarily loosened many of the administrative and reporting requirements that had long constrained nonprofit organizations (Ayer, 2020). Osman et al. (2026) note that organizations benefited from “flexible practices during the pandemic” that allowed them to respond more effectively to rapidly evolving community needs (p. 47). Similarly, Ayer (2020) found that flexible founding enabled organizations to innovate and adapt in ways that traditional project-based funding often prevented. However, these flexible practices did not become the dominant funding model after the emergency phase of the pandemic. As funding models returned to pre-pandemic norms, so too did many of the barriers that limited collaboration, innovation, and systems change.

Importantly, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that governments are capable of funding nonprofits differently. When circumstances demanded it, organizations were trusted with greater flexibility, reporting requirements were reduced, and community needs took precedence over administrative

processes. The pandemic, therefore, challenged the assumption that funding requires highly prescriptive oversight.

White Supremacy and Colonialism

Vong (2023) argues “institutional pressures” rooted in White Supremacy permeate the nonprofit sector, from high-level funding access to everyday expectations within organizations (p. 11). When reviewing how the sector values “credentials over lived experience and organizing work through hierarchical standards of legitimacy”, she notes that the sector often reproduces inequitable patterns (Nickels & Leach, 2021, as cited in Vong, 2023, p. 9). In this sense, White Supremacy is embedded in the ways organizations are funded, evaluated, and expected to prove their impact.

These institutional norms are reinforced by who holds decision-making power within the funding landscape. As Ahn (2007) observes, many foundation board members who establish funding priorities and approve grants “do not reflect the constituencies that would most benefit from progressive social and political changes” (p. 20). When those determining what is worthy of investment are institutionally and socially removed from the communities most affected by systemic inequities, funding decisions may continue to privilege familiar approaches and lower-risk interventions over community-led and transformative change.

Osman et al. (2026) illustrate how these power dynamics can manifest in practice. One of their participants explained that “governments and white systems” often expect BIPOC people to solely exist solely within a narrative of harm and trauma (p. 47), creating funding environments that unintentionally privilege deficit-based narratives over culturally grounded work centered on joy, belonging, and self-determination. The authors further argue that these compliance-heavy funding models can take on colonial dimensions by assuming deficiency and risk. They describe how one Indigenous organization experienced restrictive funding language and allowable expense rules as colonial because they limited the organization’s “ability to create trauma-informed,” reciprocal, and community-

grounded spaces (p. 48). These examples demonstrate that funding decisions are not neutral administrative processes; they shape whose knowledge and experiences are recognized as legitimate.

These findings suggest that nonprofits may be placed at a disadvantage within funding environments that position them as recipients of assistance, treat systemic work as risky, and require organizations to prove their value through standards rooted in neoliberalism, capitalism, and White Supremacy. As Vong (2023) explains, funding is not simply a resource; it is fundamental to organizational survival. Because access to funding is shaped by these institutional norms, nonprofits may feel pressured to demonstrate success in ways that align with white-dominant and capitalist expectations, even when their work is relational, creative, or community-led.

The current system was therefore not created by one poor policy decision or the actions of any single organization. Understanding this history is essential because it reframes fragmentation as more than a coordination problem: it is also a consequence of the broader power structures rooted in neoliberalism, capitalism, colonialism, and White Supremacy that continue to shape Canadian institutions.

How Funding Models Impact Youth

The relevance of these funding structures becomes clear in youth-serving work, where young people's needs rarely fit into short-term, program-specific outcomes. Youth wellbeing is shaped by interconnected factors, yet funding systems often separate them into categories that are easier to measure and evaluate.

This creates a tension, as youth-serving organizations are asked to respond to complex realities through funding models that prioritize short-term deliverables and narrow program outcomes. Osman et al. (2026) argue that government reporting frameworks often fail to capture the “complex, relational, and long-term outcomes” of community-based work (p. 34). For youth-serving organizations, this is a central issue. Many organizations understand that meaningful support depends on trust, prevention, advocacy, flexibility,

cultural connection, and long-term relationships. However, these forms of work are not always easy to measure. A young person feeling safe enough to return to a program, building trust with a staff member, reconnecting with school, accessing informal support, or developing a stronger sense of belonging may not fit neatly into a traditional output metric, even though these outcomes can be foundational to longer-term change.

These funding models also shape how services are organized. Project-based funding often requires organizations to operate under different reporting requirements, eligibility criteria, and funding timelines, while short-term funding can disrupt collaborative relationships as programs end and staff are laid off. The consequences of this disconnect are reflected in Nixon's (2026) findings, which suggest that young people are most vulnerable to fragmentation during “transition points” (p. 104). As young people move between programs, age out of services, or navigate referrals, they may encounter inconsistent eligibility criteria, delays in intake processes, and repeated requests to tell their stories. This fragmentation can undermine trauma-informed care by requiring youth to repeatedly revisit traumatic experiences and rebuild trust at each point of contact instead of receiving continuous support.

Ultimately, the literature suggests that alignment cannot depend on the efforts of individual organizations alone. It requires funding and governance structures that treat collaboration as essential and recognize relational outcomes as legitimate. Without these structural changes, fragmentation is likely to persist.

SYSTEMS MAPPING FOR CHANGE

If fragmentation is not simply caused by poor communication, then the goal cannot be to create a better list of services or a more organized referral directory. Instead, systems mapping can help make visible the relationships, gaps, assumptions, and power structures that shape how young people and organizations move through the system.

For this reason, systems mapping is most useful when it is used to look beneath surface-

level symptoms and ask how the system is actually behaving. Freebairn et al. (2022) argue that each community engagement site should be explored and understood as its “own complex system” (p. 10). This is important because a map that works for one community may not capture the relationships, histories, strengths, and barriers of another. It also means that mapping must pay attention to power dynamics: who makes decisions, who controls the resources, whose knowledge is treated as legitimate, and who is left out of formal conversations. CommunityMap.ca’s (n.d.) open source textbook on community mapping argues that institutional relationship mapping is “inherently political” because it reveals whose interests are served and where power is concentrated (section 5.3). Without this lens, a systems map can make the sector look neutral, even when some organizations, policies, and ways of knowing hold more influence than others.

Who Needs to Be Involved and How

Systems mapping is only useful if stakeholder engagement is understood as part of the systems mapping process itself. A map created without the people most affected by the system is likely to reproduce the same assumptions, barriers, and exclusions it is meant to challenge.

The Alberta Family Wellness Initiative (2023) provides a helpful example of how mapping can become more participatory. In the Lethbridge case study, community stakeholders contributed to a living community map by identifying existing and desired referral pathways and considering which organizations reduce adversity or add positive support. This approach is relevant because it shows that participatory mapping can help stakeholders build a shared understanding of the service landscape.

Freebairn et al. (2022) argue that genuine stakeholder engagement gives people a “place at the table” and allows them to contribute to decision-making (p. 2). Applied to youth-serving systems, this suggests that young people should be included early in the process, especially in identifying what matters, what counts as success, and what barriers feel most urgent. This is especially important for

youth who have historically been excluded from decision-making, including youth experiencing poverty; youth living with disabilities; youth living in rural areas; youth who are racialized, Indigenous, newcomer, and/or 2SLGBTQ+; and youth who have disengaged from formal services. Without these perspectives, a systems map may miss the barriers, gaps, informal supports, and moments of mistrust that shape how young people actually experience the system.

Other stakeholders also need to be involved because each group holds different knowledge about how the system works and what can be leveraged:

- Frontline staff can identify where referrals break down, where young people are most likely to disengage.
- Organizational leaders, including representatives from Indigenous-led, Black-led, newcomer-led, and culturally specific organizations, can help shift internal practices. They can help create a more power-conscious analysis by identifying the assets, relationships, cultural knowledge, and gathering spaces that are often less visible to those outside the community.
- Funders and government actors shape the policy conditions that influence how organizations work together. Without their involvement, systems mapping risks identifying problems without including the people who have the power to change some of the conditions that produce them.

In this sense, the value of systems mapping is not only the final map itself, but the conversations it creates. Systems mapping can support stakeholder engagement by giving people a shared visual space to question assumptions, identify patterns, and see how their work connects to the broader system. At the same time, stakeholder engagement strengthens systems mapping by making the map more accurate, more complex, and less dependent on the perspective of one person or organization.

Moving Beyond Mapping: From Insight to Action

Systems mapping can help stakeholders see the system more clearly, but seeing the system does not automatically change it. Many maps end up as diagrams or reports that do not shift decision-making, funding, or accountability. Osman et al. (2026) warns against this kind of extractive engagement, noting that participatory processes can become “repetitive, extractive” when communities are asked to share their stories without seeing meaningful results (p. 47). For this reason, systems mapping should not be treated as the final product, nor should stakeholders expect to resolve fragmentation through a single engagement session or map. Instead, as new patterns emerge, they must continue revisiting what the map shows, asking whether actions are improving young people’s experiences, and adjusting when the system continues to reproduce the same harms and barriers.

Moving beyond requires understanding not only what the map highlights, but who has the power and capacity to act on those insights. For instance, Horler (2025) argues that systems thinking can improve strategic clarity, but organizations often have limited capacity to act on those insights because of funding relationships and reporting requirements (p. 289). Similarly, Grewatsch (2026) found systems change work often gets pressured to “shrink the problem” to what is fundable or provable” (p. 3).

Reducing wicked problems to simple coordination issues can lead to superficial or short-term responses, such as creating another referral tool or service directory. While these tools can be useful and may alleviate some of the challenges young people face, they do not address the deeper conditions that create fragmentation in the first place. Instead, they risk leaving intact the funding structures, reporting requirements, and “top-down decision-making” processes that constrain nonprofit’s ability to respond to community needs and undermine collective impact (Osman et al., 2026, p. 47). To avoid this, Desai et al. (2025) recommend evaluating success from a youth-centered lens, where accountability is not only to funders but also

to the young people organizations work with.

Taking youth-centred accountability seriously means building the conditions that make alignment easier across the youth-serving sector. Part of this work involves treating collaboration as something that must be actively built and maintained. Koschmann and Coope (2025) describe collaboration as a “negotiated order” rather than something controlled only through hierarchy or economics (p. 2), suggesting that collaboration. In practical terms, this may include clearer referral pathways, shared intake processes, coordinated follow-up, common language, regular cross-sector tables, data-sharing agreements, and formal agreements about who is responsible at key transition points. Desai et al. (2025) also emphasize the importance of treating time as a system issue by paying attention to wait times, referral delays, enrollment timelines, and the points where young people are most likely to disengage.

Ultimately, moving beyond mapping means more than using a map to improve coordination. It requires stakeholders, especially those with institutional power, to act on what the map reveals. This may involve taking risks, questioning funding practices, challenging top-down decision-making, and using power where it exists to disrupt the conditions that keep fragmentation in place. Without this, systems mapping risks becoming another way of documenting the problem rather than supporting meaningful change.

Community Engagement

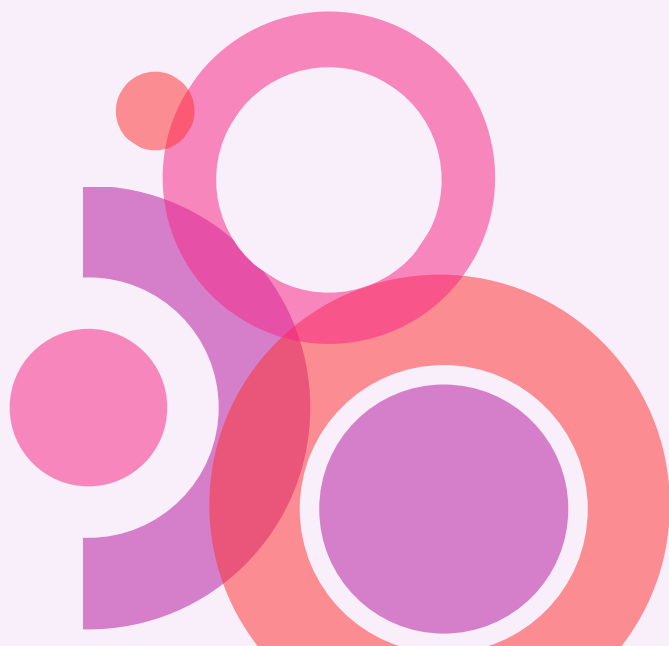
The community engagement activity, held as part of the fellowship, helped ground this project in a more everyday understanding of youth well-being. Although the engagement was not used as formal primary research, it helped me return to my first systems map (**Figure 1**). At the time, I placed youth at the centre and mapped many of the barriers, supports, services, and possible impacts surrounding them. While this helped me begin thinking about youth well-being as connected to multiple parts of a system, it also revealed the limits of my own perspective.

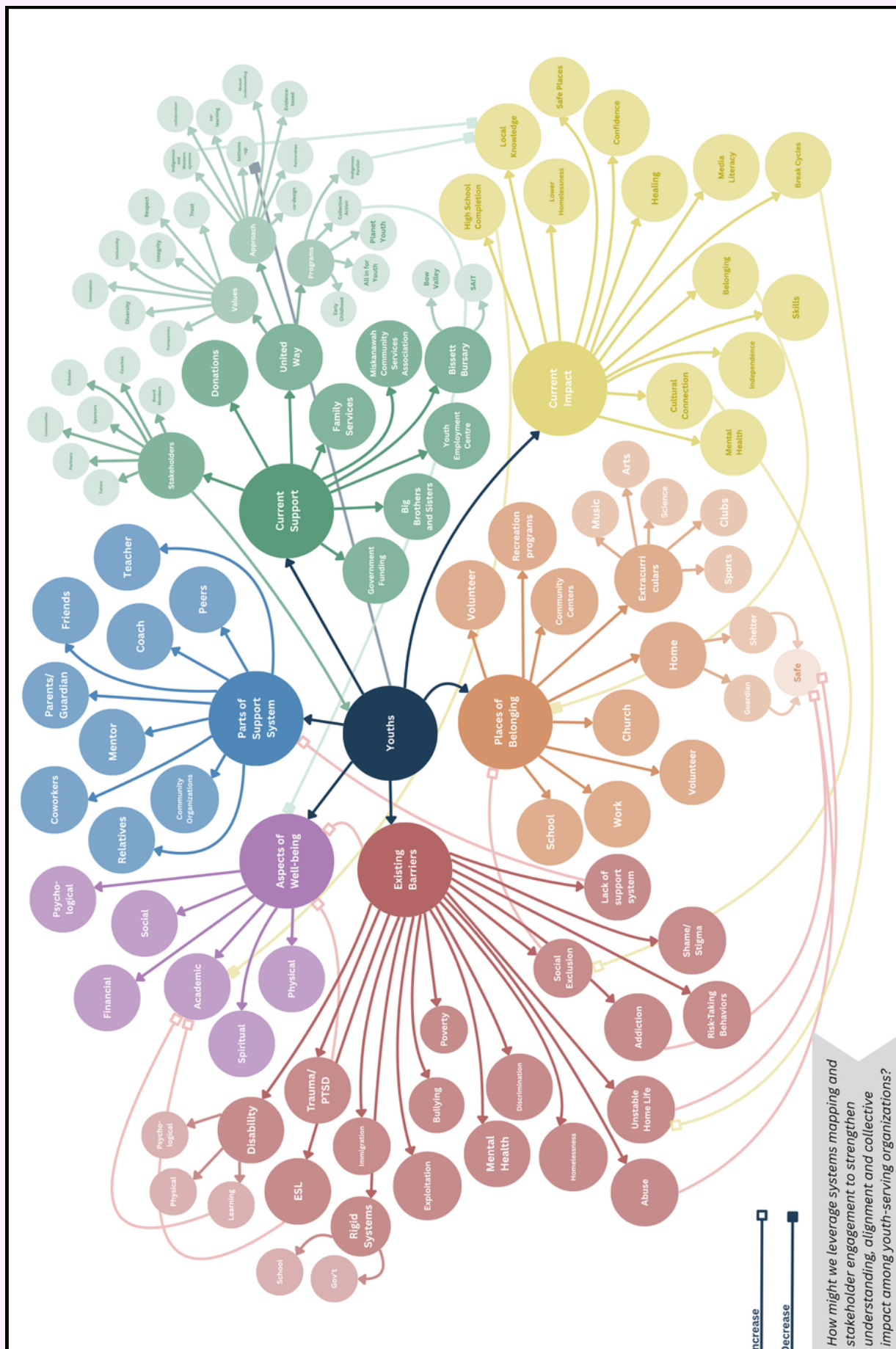
Looking back, the map was still largely shaped by a service-centred understanding of youth support. Most of what I included focused on formal barriers, existing services, and institutional support. I did not meaningfully include land, informal gathering places, or everyday environments that help young people feel connected, safe, and grounded. Reflecting on this gap is crucial, as it reveals how easily systems mapping can reproduce colonial and institutional ways of thinking, even when the intention is to centre youth. If a map only includes agencies, services, and formal supports, it can unintentionally treat well-being as something delivered by institutions rather than something also shaped through land, community, and belonging. In this sense, this experience pushed me to question not only the content of the map but the assumptions that shaped what I recognized as part of the system in the first place.

This reflection helped shift my later mapping process. Rather than only asking what services exist or where individual barriers appear, I became more interested in what the map was not showing and why. My later systems map (**Figure 2**) focused more directly on power relations and leverage points, burnout, and the pressure to prove program

impact in ways that may unintentionally reinforce fragmentation. This moved the analysis from identifying parts of the system to questioning why certain barriers continue to be reproduced and who benefits when the system remains organized this way.

Because both maps function as thinking tools, they should be read as narrow examples rather than models to replicate or act upon. I created them from my own positionality, and there are many experiences I cannot fully represent. I am a White, cisgender woman who has never been justice-involved or had to navigate emergency youth services. Because of this, the maps likely miss important insights about fear, stigma, surveillance, racism, trauma, accessibility, and institutional harm. A stronger mapping process would need to include youth with lived experience, frontline workers, culturally specific organizations, and funders. Rather than treating my maps as complete, I invite readers to challenge them, complicate them, and build a more collective understanding of where change might be possible.





FigFigure 1. Early mapping of youth's ecosystem to better understand where young people may face barriers, experience support, access places of belonging, and encounter organizations or services within the broader youth-serving system. (Hudon, 2026)

Systems Map on Fragmentation of Youth-Serving Resources in Calgary

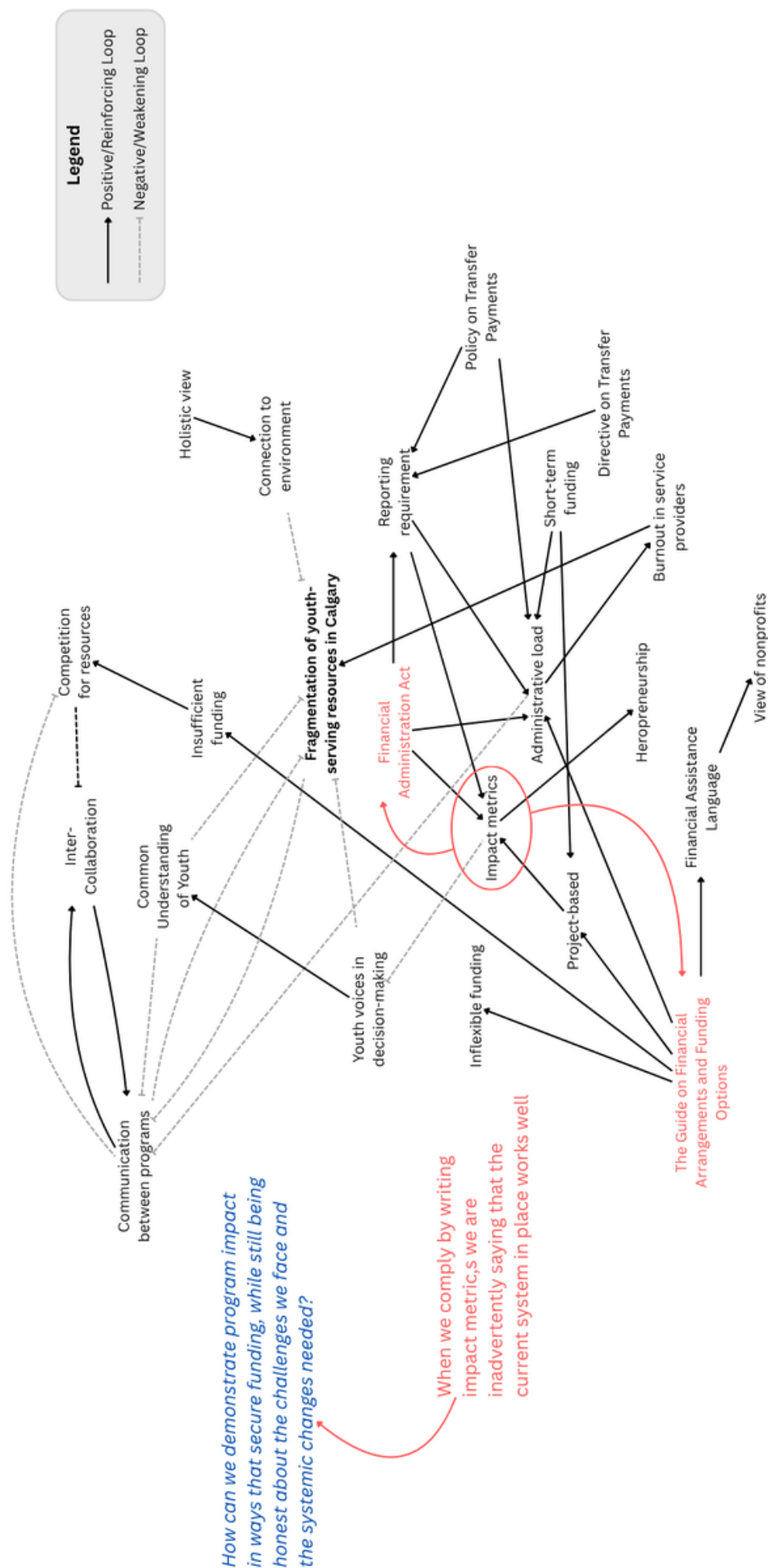


Figure 2. Systems map examining how funding structures, impact metrics, reporting requirements, administrative load, competition for resources, and burnout contribute to the continued fragmentation of youth-serving resources in Calgary. (Hudon, 2026)

The Role of United Way

Throughout the Catamount Fellowship, this project explored the following wicked problem:

How might we leverage systems mapping and stakeholder engagement to strengthen understanding, alignment, and collective impact among youth-serving organizations?

Answering this question requires identifying organizations that are well-positioned to convene diverse stakeholders and act on the insights generated through systems mapping.

United Way is particularly well-positioned to respond to this challenge since its work extends across community organizations, funders, public institutions, and corporations to bring about systems-level change.

SWOT Analysis

The SWOT analysis below (**Figure 3**) considers what United Way's position makes possible, where its limitations remain, and what risks need to be addressed if systems mapping is going to support meaningful alignment.

The SWOT analysis highlights United Way's greatest strength lies in its ability to bring people together across the ecosystem. Its credible funding networks and convening power also allow it to see patterns that individual organizations may only experience in isolation. On the other hand, its greatest challenge is ensuring that this power is used to shift system conditions rather than reproduce top-down, colonial, and white-dominant practices.

SWOT Analysis

Figure 3. SWOT analysis of United Way of Calgary and Area's role as a systems leader within Calgary's youth-serving ecosystem. (Hudon, 2026)

Strengths

- Strong credibility and convening power across Calgary's youth-serving sector
- Existing systems-change language.
- Support initiatives that address root causes
- Support multi-sector coordination across agencies
- Recognizing broader support systems beyond service delivery.
- See patterns across the youth-serving ecosystem

Opportunities

- Engaging youth early in decision-making processes
- Developing a live systems map
- Focus on youth-centered accountability measures, such as timely and continuous support.
- Advocate for flexible and multi-year funding
- Leverage its own institutional power to challenge colonial and white-dominant norms in organizational processes

Weaknesses

- Distrust and poor perception from individuals who have experienced harm from formal systems
- Funding environment that prioritizes donor expectations over system-level change.
- Lack of control over stakeholders
- Extractive and harmful engagement processes
- The exclusion of racialized and grassroots organizations in decision-making processes

Threats

- Symbolic systems-change language that
- Short-term, restrictive, and project-based funding
- Individual program survival rather than collaboration
- Weakened trust from competing for resources
- Consultation fatigue from extractive engagement
- Focus on funder-approved metrics over youth's lived experiences

United Way and Systems Mapping

The SWOT analysis captures how United Way's role matters to this project's wicked problem. If systems mapping and stakeholder engagement are meant to strengthen understanding, alignment, and collective impact, they need to be connected to decisions about funding, coordination, and accountability.

United Way of Calgary and Area is already positioned to do this work because it operates across Calgary's youth-serving sector as a convener, funder, institutional partner, and systems-change intermediary. In its 2025 Annual Report, United Way (2025) frames systems change as work that moves beyond urgent program responses to address root causes, shift policies, structures, and relationships, and build a stronger and more equitable future. Its existing initiatives already reflect this role: Action Table Calgary brings together "over 50 agencies to coordinate" multi-sector responses for people facing high-risk situations (p. 49), Enough for All uses "research, advocacy, lived experience, and collective action" to address the root causes of poverty (p. 50), and the Natural Supports Leadership Table expands the meaning of support beyond formal services by focusing on "family, friends, neighbours, and community members" (p. 49). Together, these initiatives suggest that the opportunity is for United Way to further deepen their systems-change work by connecting its existing infrastructure more directly to fragmentation in the youth-serving ecosystem.

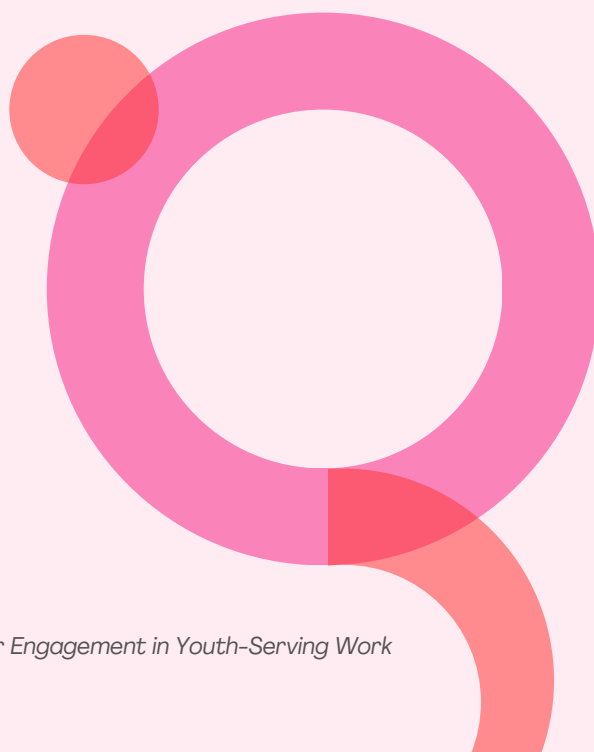
A concrete way to do this would be through a living youth-serving systems map supported by ongoing stakeholder engagement. This map could include organizations, wait times, eligibility criteria, natural supports, green spaces, transportation barriers, funding flows, and youth-reported experiences of accessibility, safety, belonging, and continuity of support. Additionally, it should also make visible who controls resources, who is included in decision-making, and which forms of knowledge are treated as legitimate. Stakeholder engagement should then create opportunities for those most affected by fragmentation to challenge the map,

complicate it, and shape the decisions that follow from it. This would help strengthen shared understanding by showing both the formal and informal conditions that shape youth well-being, while also revealing the power relationships that influence how the system operates.

Stakeholder engagement would then become the process of interpreting the map together and deciding what needs to be leveraged first. Youth, frontline workers, grassroots and culturally specific organizations, funders, and institutional partners should have opportunities to shape the insights and decisions following the mapping process.

This is where United Way's influence matters. Osman et al. (2026) note that financial dependence can limit nonprofits' ability to engage in policy advocacy or critical dialogue, meaning individual organizations avoid challenging funders or naming structural barriers directly. Because United Way has broader relationships across funders, institutions, and community partners, it may be better positioned to advocate for funding models that support stability, flexibility, collaboration, and systems change.

Ultimately, United Way's relevance lies in its ability to connect systems mapping to action. This means moving beyond convening as information-sharing and using its position to support shared decision-making, fund coordination work, challenge restrictive funding norms, and ensure that youth have real influence over what changes after the mapping process.



Recommendations

The following recommendations build on the finding that systems mapping is useful only if it leads to coordinated action, shared accountability, and changes to the conditions that keep organizations fragmented.

While these recommendations are directed primarily toward United Way in its role as a backbone and systems leader within Calgary's youth-serving ecosystem, many will require collaboration across youth-serving organizations, funders, government actors, and young people themselves.

1. Develop a living map of Calgary's youth-serving ecosystem

United Way should support the development of a living systems map that is updated over time rather than treated as a one-time project or static artifact. This map should include youth-serving organizations, community assets, referral pathways, funding flows, decision-making structures, and youth-identified priorities. It should also make less visible forms of power more visible, including who controls resources, where trust or mistrust exists, and which voices are missing from decision-making processes.

2. Move from convening to shared governance

United Way's convening power is one of its strongest assets, but convening alone is not enough. It should support cross-sector discussions with a clear purpose beyond information-sharing. These spaces could focus on specific system barriers, such as referral delays, transition points, repeated intake processes, or transportation barriers. The goal should be for stakeholders to actively coordinate action and responsibilities.

3. Build youth-centred accountability and feedback loops

United Way should ensure that youth are involved from the beginning of mapping, planning and decision-making processes. Youth with different lived experiences and age ranges should help define the problem, identify what matters, and shape what success looks like. Since youth needs change over time, a systems approach also requires

ongoing reflection, adaptation, and accountability. This could be achieved through system-map updates, shared reflection sessions, youth feedback reviews, and annual ecosystem check-ins.

4. Advocate for infrastructure that supports collaboration

Short-term, restrictive, project-based funding can make it difficult for youth-serving organizations to plan long term, build trust, and participate in systems-change work. United Way can help name these patterns across the sector and advocate for more multi-year funding that supports prevention, relationship-building, shared infrastructure, and community-led responses. This could also include investing in shared intake processes, referral pathways, communication protocols, transition supports, common language, and shared data or learning tools where appropriate.

5. Embed anti-racist accountability into systems-change work

United Way should apply an anti-racist lens to its own role as a funder, convener, and institutional partner. This means recognizing that it is not neutral within the youth-serving ecosystem; its funding decisions, partnership criteria, reporting expectations, and convening practices all shape whose knowledge is valued and what kinds of work are treated as legitimate. United Way should also examine how white-dominant norms around professionalism, metrics, hierarchy, and legitimacy may be reproduced in its own systems-change work.

Conclusion

This project began by asking: *How might we leverage systems mapping and stakeholder engagement to strengthen understanding, alignment, and collective impact among youth-serving organizations?*

The findings suggest that strengthening alignment is not simply a matter of improving communication or creating new referral tools. Fragmentation is shaped by deeper funding structures, institutional mandates, power relationships, and dominant ways of understanding what counts as legitimate knowledge and support.

Viewed in this way, systems mapping becomes more than a way of documenting organizations or visualizing relationships. When grounded in meaningful stakeholder engagement, it can help make visible the conditions that produce fragmentation, surface perspectives that are often overlooked, and create opportunities for shared learning and collective action. At the same time, stakeholder engagement strengthens systems mapping by ensuring that the map reflects multiple lived experiences, ways of knowing, and community assets rather than the perspective of a single organization or individual.

However, this report does not claim to solve the wicked problem it set out to explore. Any system map will remain incomplete as communities, relationships, policies, and youth needs continue to change. Instead, this project argues that systems mapping should be understood as an ongoing, participatory practice of questioning assumptions, challenging power, and learning together.

The value of a systems map, therefore, lies not in the map itself, but in what stakeholders choose to do with what it reveals. Ultimately, strengthening understanding, alignment, and collective impact will require organizations with the influence and resources to move beyond maintaining the current system and instead work collectively to reshape the conditions that continue to produce fragmentation.



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