

# The success sequence:

Research findings on pathways to adulthood and economic self-sufficiency

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# Sponsorship

- **Funded by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health and Family and Youth Services Bureau at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)**
  - The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) within the Administration for Children and Families managed the project.
- **OPRE Project Personnel**
  - Caryn Blitz (Project Officer) and Kathleen McCoy (Project Monitor)
- **Mathematica Staff**
  - Hande Inanc, Ariella Spitzer, and Briana Starks

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# Objectives of the panel

- 1. Understand key concepts of the success sequence model.**
- 2. Learn about factors associated with achieving success sequence milestones.**
- 3. Learn about research findings related to alternative pathways and barriers to achieving economic self-sufficiency.**
- 4. Hear practitioner reflections on research findings.**
- 5. Explore whether and how programming for youth can address identified factors for achieving success sequence milestones and economic self-sufficiency.**



# Agenda

- 1. What is the success sequence model?**
- 2. Presentation of findings from the research study**
- 3. Questions from participants**
- 4. Practitioner perspectives on the findings**
- 5. Small group discussion with participants**
- 6. Final remarks and session wrap-up**



What is the success sequence?

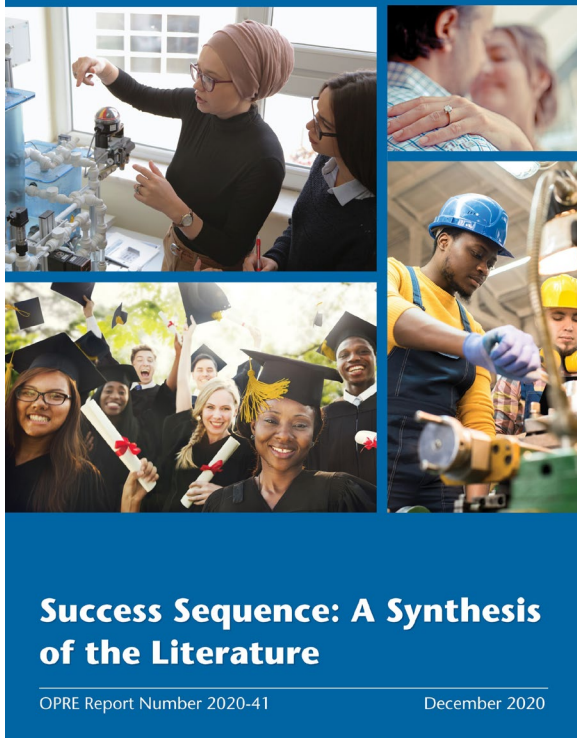
And what do we know about it?



# What is the success sequence?

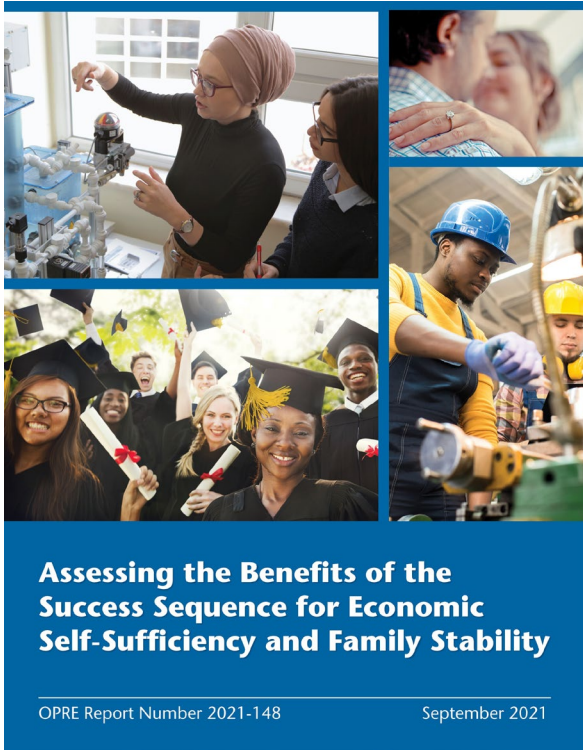
- **A theory discussed in the early 2000s to reduce poverty and improve economic opportunity for adolescents and young adults (Haskins and Sawhill, 2003; 2009).**
- **A sequence of life milestones believed to be associated with escaping poverty and joining the middle class.**
  - Completing high school
  - Full time employment
  - Waiting until marriage to have children
- **Success sequence has become an intentional focus of SRA programs in the context of empowering youth to avoid sexual risk, build healthy relationships, and achieve academic success.**
- **Early work on success sequence had many gaps in the evidence, and in particular if and how the order of the milestones matter and whether there is a relationship between the sequence and economic self-sufficiency.**

# Literature review on success sequence



- **Early studies of the success sequence showed that families with employed, married, high school graduate parents have lower poverty rates and higher rates of middle-income status than families without these characteristics.**
- **These studies were limited because:**
  - Much of the existing research did not account for the timing of education or employment in relation to marriage or childbearing.
  - They did not differentiate between other pathways individuals may take as they transition to adulthood.

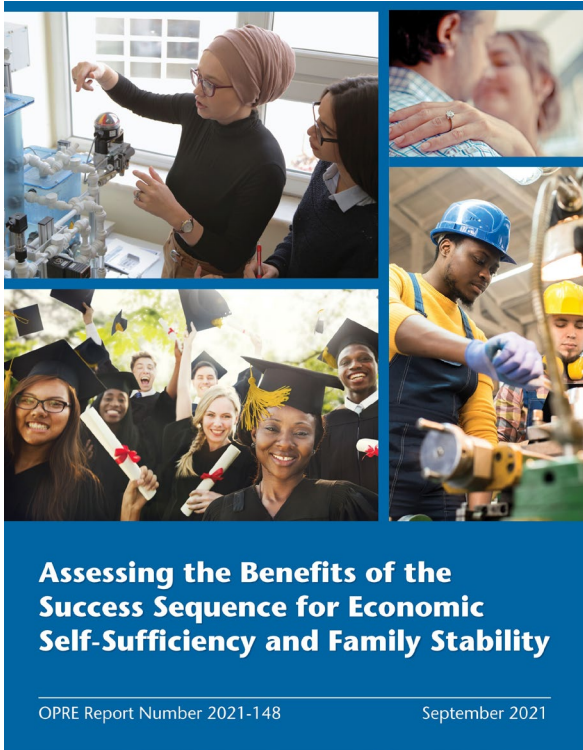
# New research on the success sequence



- To fill the gaps identified through the literature review and expand available evidence on the success sequence, HHS also contracted with Mathematica to conduct new research on the success sequence.
- **Goal:** To take into account the sequencing aspect of success sequence and assess whether and how milestone completion and sequencing are associated with economic self-sufficiency.
- **An external Technical Working Group advised on the methods used on the study:**
  - Katherine Bradley, John Iceland, Alexandra Killewald, Robert Lerman, Shelly Lundberg, Joseph Price, Isabell Sawhill, Jerry Regier, Wendy Wang, Brad Wilcox, and Jay Zagorsky.



# New research on success sequence (2)



- **Key takeaways from the empirical study:**
  - Many young adults (43%) followed a pathway consistent with the success sequence, including those who had completed all four milestones in the prescribed order and those “on track”.
    - Those who completed the four milestones in the prescribed order had a 61% chance of being economically self-sufficient.
  - However, findings collectively demonstrated the success sequence alone does not determine economic self-sufficiency.
    - Not all youth who followed the success sequence achieved economic self-sufficiency.
    - There were other pathways that were associated with economic self-sufficiency.
  - The strongest predictor of young adults’ economic outcomes was which individual milestones they completed, rather than the sequence of completion.
  - Taken together, these results suggested there was more to be learned regarding success sequence, since it alone does not necessarily lead to economic self-sufficiency.

# Unanswered questions

- **What influences whether young adults complete high school, get a full-time job, and get married before childbearing?**
- **What influences whether young adults follow the milestones in a different order?**
- **What influences whether young adults reach economic self-sufficiency?**



What influences milestone completion, success sequence, and economic self-sufficiency?



# Approach

**Goal 1: To identify factors that influence the sequence of milestones youth complete as they transition to adulthood, their milestone completion pathway, and whether they achieve economic self-sufficiency.**

- Used longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 on 7,146 individuals who were 13-17 in 1997.
- Grouped individual characteristics into six categories which are experienced sequentially during adolescence.
- Results show how much of the variation in outcomes are explained by each category.







**Goal 2: To explore how youth describe what influences milestone, their order, and economic self-sufficiency.**

- Conducted asynchronous written interviews with 225 adults aged 30 to 35 who were selected purposefully to capture diversity of pathways and backgrounds.
- Coded the interview data to identify milestones, pathways, and economic self-sufficiency status.
- Grouped responses (as a barrier, a facilitator or neutral) around each milestone and economic self-sufficiency status.
- Results show common facilitators and barriers that participants report about milestone completion or non-completion, and economic self-sufficiency.



# Definitions: Factors explored in the study

## Factors included in the quantitative analysis

1	 Demographics	<i>Year of birth (age), gender, race/ethnicity</i>
2	 Parent and family characteristics	<i>For example, parental education, parent race, household financial characteristics</i>
3	 Environmental characteristics	<i>For example, urban/rural area, environmental risk indices, peer characteristics</i>
4	 Childhood characteristics and experiences	<i>For example, school characteristics, childhood experiences, family routines</i>
5	 Cognitive ability measured at adolescence	<i>ASVAB score, SAT score, ACT score</i>
6	 Adolescent characteristics, behaviors, and relationships	<i>For example, drug and alcohol use, criminal behavior, sexual behavior</i>

## Common themes identified in the in-depth interviews

- **Personal.** Personal finances, values, abilities, personal health, and personal education
- **Partner/spouse.** Partner/spouse finances, partner/spouse emotional support, partner/spouse values, partner/spouse health, and partner/spouse job
- **Family.** Financial support from family, emotional support from family, family health, family values, and child care and caregiving
- **Friends.** Financial support from friends, emotional support from friends, and friends' values
- **Economic conditions.** Inflation, job market, housing market, and government policies
- **Religion.** Religious obligations and faith

# Definitions: Milestones and economic outcome

## Milestones (measured at age 30 or at the time of interview)



- *High school completion.* Completing high school with a diploma. GED receipt is not considered.



- *Full-time employment.* Ever working at least 35 hours per week for at least 40 weeks of a year.



- *Marriage.* Ever being married, regardless of divorce.



- *Childbearing.* Ever having a (biological) child.

## Economic self-sufficiency (measured at ages 32-38 or at the time of interview)

- *Middle-class status:* Having household income above 300% of the federal poverty level.

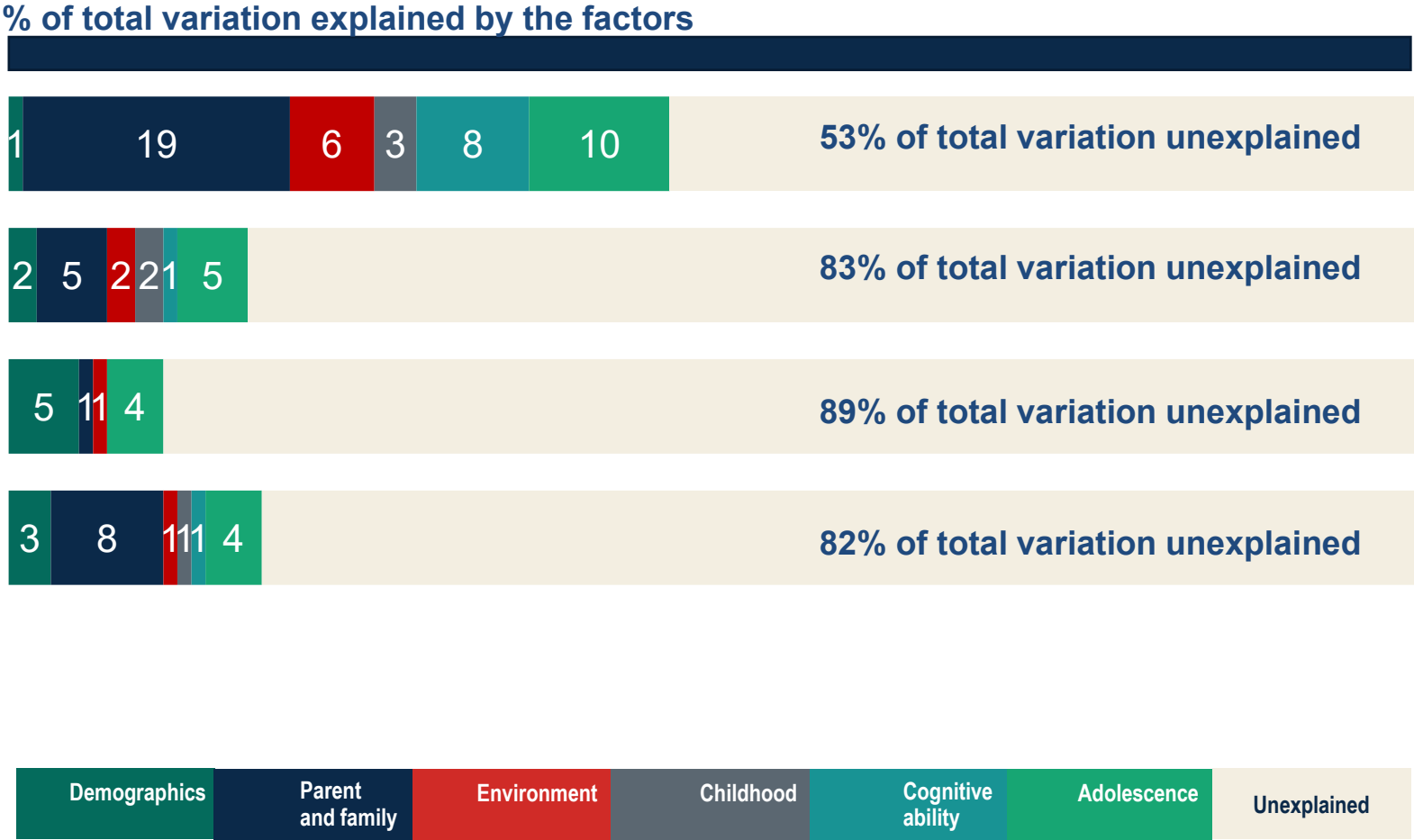


# Summary of findings

- **Who and who does not complete each milestone, follows the order of the success sequence, and achieves economic self-sufficiency is very complex and was not fully explained by the factors in our data**
  - This means that there is still a lot to learn about what shapes youth pathways to adulthood
- **Parents and family play an important role in influencing milestone completion, following the order of the success sequence, and economic self-sufficiency.**
  - For example, completing high school is supported by a safe home environment, while employment and economic self-sufficiency are influenced by parent and family networks and financial support.
- **Participants discussed the importance of values and support systems in shaping their pathways to adulthood**
  - Parents, families, and adolescent experiences likely play major roles in shaping values and beliefs.



# Factors associated with completing individual milestones: Findings from the quantitative data





# What explains high school completion?



47% of total variation explained

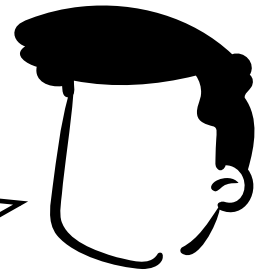


- Most participants completed high school. Among those who did not, many described a challenging home environment.
- Substance use and difficulty in school (cognitive ability) also disrupted the completion of high school.



“Honestly I stayed home [from school] because my mom was in an abusive relationship and felt like I needed to stay home to be able to call for help/protect her.”

“A range of barriers. Home life, peer pressure into taking substances I had no business doing. Being raised by a single father who struggled to make ends meet while suffering from epilepsy since he was a child. Worrying, stress, toxic home environment while visiting our mom.”



# What explains employment?



17% of total variation explained



- Personal values, which were likely shaped by parents, family, and adolescent experiences, were the driving factors in completing the employment milestone.
- Those who never worked full-time cited barriers such as ill-health and child-care demands.



"I was working as a tutor for an afterschool program and loved working with students. I knew I wanted to do more than teach so I decided to pursue a career as a school psychologist. It was important to me to do both."

"I obtained a back injury which has proven to be a stumbling block when looking to obtain a place of employment."



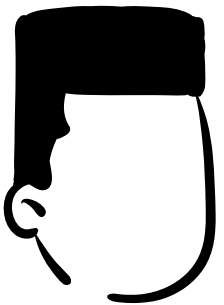
# What explains marriage?



11% of total variation explained



- Personal values (including those of the partner) were the primary reason for getting (or not getting) married.
- Perceived financial benefits or disadvantages of marriage, also influenced whether individuals married.
- Gender and race/ethnicity were strong predictors of marriage.



"We had matching values, morals, similar ideas on goals & ambitions as well as what we wanted in a family of our own."

"I don't value the concept of marriage. It feels like a lot of pomp and circumstance. I don't need a piece of paper or a witness to prove my love. Let's just be."



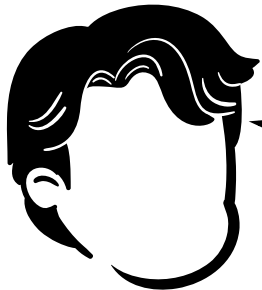
# What explains childbearing?



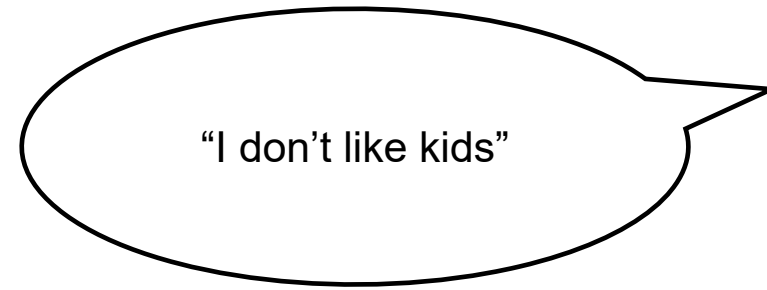
18% of total variation explained



- In addition to parent and family characteristics, values and desires around childbearing, and attaching importance to financial stability before childbearing, influenced whether individuals had a child.
- Participants who had child they did not plan for reported they were often emotionally and financially unprepared.



"I was working, my ex was working. During that time I really wanted children. I felt ready because our combined income was more than enough for a small family of 3."

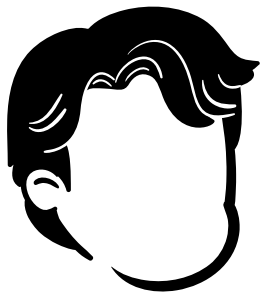


"I don't like kids"



# What explains following a success sequence pathway?

- **43 percent of the NLYS97 sample followed a success sequence pathway.**
  - 24% of this variance is explained by factors observed by age 18.
- **Parent and family characteristics are the most important factors in following the success sequence in the prescribed order.**
- **Among those interview respondents who adhered to the success sequence, many described that the order was consistent with their values and the importance of family support .**
- **For those who did not adhere to the prescribed order, many described how they deviated from plans due lack of parental support.**



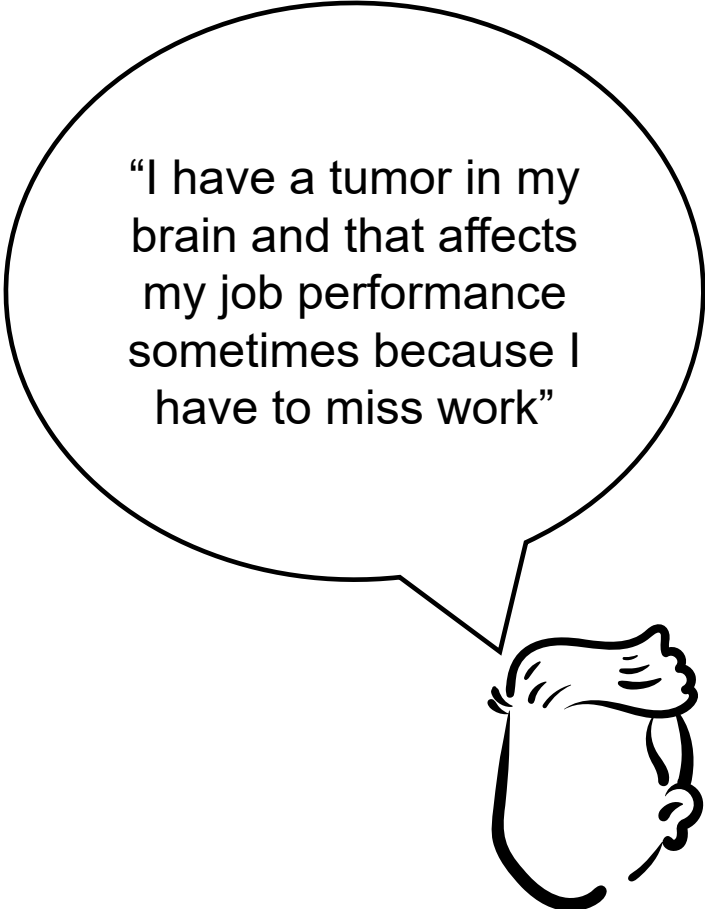
“We knew we wanted to be together and start a family. It was important to us and our families to take the ‘traditional’ route..”

“I wanted to go to a trade school... I just needed my mom to fill out the paperwork for the financial part. She just said NO! So remember 10 years from now if my life is screwed up you could of helped me succeed in life. So after that heartbreaking experience I kinda didn't have it in me to try again (to find employment) plus I started having children.”



# Participants who **did follow** the success sequence, yet **did not reach economic self-sufficiency**

- **31 percent of the sample who followed a success sequence pathway did not achieve middle class status**
  - Only 15% of this variation is explained by factors observed in youth, with the largest being parents and family
- **Respondents faced barriers such as physical health, mental health, and lack of affordable childcare**
- **Some respondents were working but had low income due to starting a new business or low wages, often attributed to the economy or insufficient education**

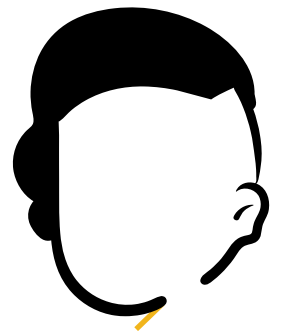


“I have a tumor in my brain and that affects my job performance sometimes because I have to miss work”

# Participants who **did not follow** the success sequence, **yet reached economic self-sufficiency**

- **39 percent of the sample who did not follow a success sequence pathway still achieved middle class status**
  - 17% of this variation is explained by factors observe in youth, with the largest being parents and family
- **Respondents credited networking, working their way up, and random luck**
- **About half of these respondents pursued some form of continuing education**

“My first position with the state was in a Medicaid provider call center. After my year probation, I took a lateral into an entry level finance position. From that point, I was able to work my way up the ladder.”



# Conclusion

- **Our research on the success sequence demonstrates that while it works for some, success sequence alone cannot determine one's economic success.**
- **Results of the mixed-method study highlight the complexity of the circumstances and decisions surrounding the pathways youth take, and conditions that lead to economic self-sufficiency.**
- **Our findings highlight the key role that parents and family play in shaping the pathways that youth take to adulthood and their economic outcomes.**
  - However, they also show how numerous other life factors, such as health problems, can influence youth and young adults as they travel these pathways.





# Questions



# Practitioner perspectives on the findings



# Questions for practitioners

- **What did you think of the findings?**
- **What is surprising to you, and what is not surprising?**
- **What do these findings mean for your program, and how would you interact with youth about the results?**
- **What do you think is not captured in these findings and how could it be captured in future research?**



# Small group discussion with participants



# Questions for discussion

- **What did you think of the findings?**
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- **What do these findings mean for your program, and how would you interact with youth about the results?**
- **What do you think is not captured in these findings and how could it be captured in future research?**



# Final remarks and session wrap-up



# For more information

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