



# OUR VOICES NUESTRAS VOCES

Life, Relationships,  
Sex and Reproductive Health

CARING *for*  
COLORADO  
FOUNDATION  
A Health Grantmaker

  
The Colorado  
Health Foundation™





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# INTRODUCTION: Why This Work Now

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Caring for Colorado Foundation and The Colorado Health Foundation share a deep-rooted belief that all women have the right to make decisions about their bodies and futures. This includes the right to determine whether and when to become pregnant, whether and when to use contraception, and whether and when to continue a pregnancy.

This right, however, is not equitably exercised by all women in Colorado. Despite considerable gains in access to contraception and family planning services, inequities persist among certain populations. Many women, particularly women of color, experience systemic oppression and institutionalized racism that make it nearly impossible to exercise their reproductive rights.

While teen pregnancy rates among all women in Colorado have dramatically declined since 2008, data shows that birth rates for Latinas ages 15-19 remain high. Latina birth rates are nearly twice that of white, non-Latina youth.<sup>1</sup>

Latinas make up a significant part of Colorado's population and their voices, needs and desires have been left unheard within efforts to address reproductive health care needs across the state. As Colorado continues to lead advances in reproductive health care and justice work, we must move beyond "one size fits all" programming for all populations. It is critical to ensure relevant, culturally responsive solutions that meet the needs of Latinas.

While focused on reproductive health care, this project is fundamentally about equity and justice. For Latinas, high pregnancy and birth rates are not the problems. They are symptoms of failures to meet the needs of Latinx youth, both women and men. As you'll see in this report, inequities extend beyond access to reproductive health care and directly impact the agency young people feel in navigating their pathways to adulthood.

Within the report, you will notice a shift on how reproductive health is framed. This shift, centered on reproductive justice, is consistent with changes at the national level. It recognizes the historic and current social injustices, as well as inequities, in populations of color that create barriers to reproductive health. These injustices necessitate the need for culturally responsive information and services that are available and accessible.

It is against this backdrop that our project team set out to listen and learn. We did so by taking an innovative approach – radically Latinx-centric and deeply engaging the community. This journey has been revelatory and humbling. We are delighted to share the findings from the first of two phases of this project.



**Chris Wiant**  
President and Chief Executive Officer  
Caring for Colorado Foundation



**Karen McNeil-Miller**  
President and Chief Executive Officer  
The Colorado Health Foundation

<sup>1</sup> Source: Tri-County Health Department 2018 Teen Pregnancy Prevention Study



For most of us who are white or read as white by the world, our default is automatically to our whiteness. Unless we are actively countering with analysis [of our design research] that centers on Latinas or Latinx young adults, our default will lead us to more generalized solutions that, again, don't meet the needs of this population. This project is focused on Latinas ages 18-24 years old.

- Melanie Bravo, Pueblo Design Fellow

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Keeping in mind that culturally aware learnings lead to culturally relevant outcomes and acknowledging that diversity exists within the Latino community, are important factors to consider. Unfortunately, there is not a one-size-fits-all when it comes to cultural relevance in any culture, especially ours.

- Maria Zubia, Adams Design Fellow



# METHODOLOGY + APPROACH

## Human-Centered Design (HCD)

We are using a methodology called Human-Centered Design. HCD is a problem-solving process that involves communities in the development of ideas intended to benefit them. In this case, rather than assume we know Latinx youth (particularly Latinas) – who they are, what they care about, what challenges they face and what solutions they need – we engage them as thought partners.

This process is designed to inspire new and innovative solutions that meet Latinx youth where they are, resonate with them more deeply and develop a culturally responsive, dignified, even delightful resolution to a challenge.

We focused our inquiry on the following question:

How might we understand the reproductive health needs and desires of Latinx young women (18-24 years old) in Adams and Pueblo Counties, and design with them relevant, culturally responsive ways to support them in meeting those needs?

## HCD +

This project goes beyond Human-Centered Design as it is typically practiced in a couple of ways. Both have to do with the composition of skills and perspectives on our team.

**1. Community leaders are integral members.** The project team includes seven women who serve and are connected to the Latinx communities in the city of Pueblo and Adams County. We refer to them as Design Fellows and each is a thought partner in the project, connecting us to her community, helping synthesize the findings, and keeping the team grounded in the nuances of each place. Together, the Design Fellows bring passion, expertise, and a breadth of experience as educators, practitioners, advocates, community organizers and nonprofit leaders.

**2. Our research team is trained in cultural anthropology and behavioral science.** In addition to being skilled researchers, the women who conducted the majority of the interviews bring experience understanding cultural nuances as well as the psychology that informs why human beings behave the way they do. Both skill sets provide valuable context for the findings provided here and, as importantly, to the opportunities the team frames later in the project.

### Pueblo Design Fellows



**Yesenia Beasochea**  
Community Organizer



**Melanie Bravo**  
Packard Foundation  
Fund for Pueblo/  
Caring for Colorado



**Kristi Roque**  
Executive Director,  
Pueblo Rape Crisis Services



**Theresa M. Trujillo**  
Community Organizer

### Adams Design Fellows



**Mirna Ramirez-Castro**  
Senior Program  
Coordinator,  
Vuela for Health



**Merrick Weaver**  
CEO, Binderful

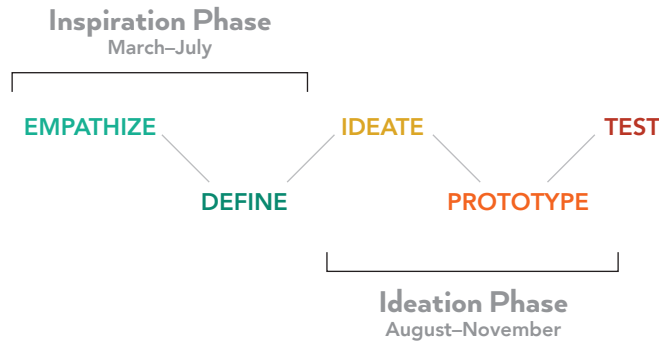


**Maria Zubia**  
Director of Community  
Outreach, Kids First  
Health Care



### A Two-Phased Approach

While there are many steps along the way, our journey comprises two simple phases: **Inspiration** and **Ideation**.



During the **Inspiration Phase**, we conducted qualitative interviews in the city of Pueblo (seat of Pueblo County) and in Adams County (Thornton, Commerce City, Federal Heights) to gain an understanding of, and deepen the team’s empathy for, Latinx youth 18-24 years old, and uncover possible opportunity areas to support them in navigating challenges.

The **Ideation Phase** will launch in the fall of 2019 and is an iterative, prototyping process of developing rough solution ideas, sharing them with the community, and inviting them to help us make them better. The goal of the Ideation Phase is to ensure the solution ideas meet the communities’ needs.

### Who We Spoke With

We interviewed a total of 104 people during Phase One. Our primary focus was Latinx women 18-24 years old; however, to understand their lives more fully, we also spoke with Latinx young men in the same age range, as well as parents, caregivers and influencers of young adults.

Note: All pregnancies we are aware of are counted in the “Parent”

columns below. As far as we know, we did not interview anyone who had an abortion, miscarried, or placed a child for adoption.

	PUEBLO		ADAMS	
	PARENT	NON-PARENT	PARENT	NON-PARENT
Young Latinas	7	18	3	21
Young Latinos	1	18	1	7
Adult Influencers	8		10	

- The majority of youth we met were between 18-22 years old. Several were as young as 16 years old and a few were 24 years old.
- With a few exceptions, all identified as Latina/o, Hispanic, Chicana/o, or Mexican.
- All but one young person preferred to speak English. Five parents or caregivers preferred to speak Spanish. We conducted all other interviews in English.
- We met people in homes or public spaces of their choosing (parks, cafés, local libraries).

Our total number of interviews includes interviews with the following experts on reproductive health, reproductive justice and Latinx engagement. The range represents people working at local, state and national levels.

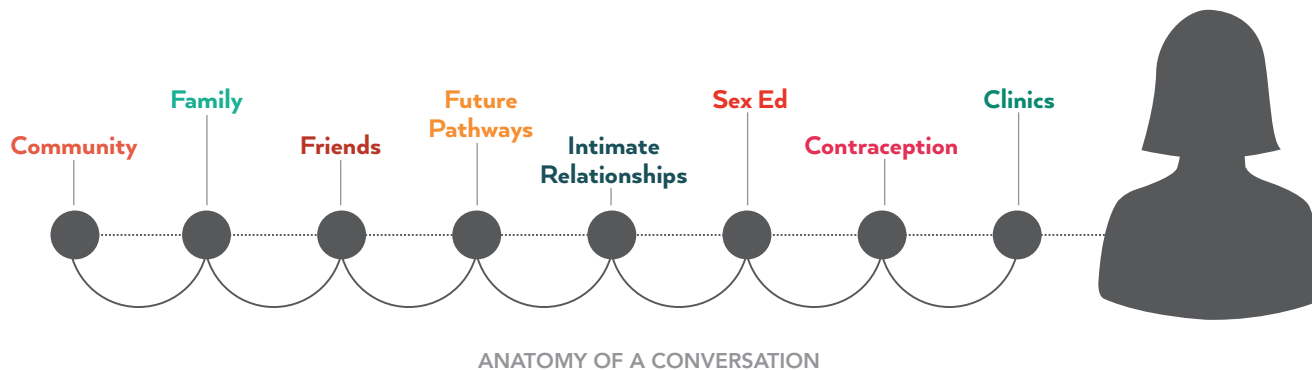
- ♦ Francisca Angulo-Olaiz, VP Community Engagement, Mile High United Way
- ♦ Kate Coleman-Minahan, Assistant Professor, College of Nursing, University of Colorado
- ♦ Charis Denison, Teen Advocate and Author
- ♦ John Douglas, Director, Tri-County Health Department
- ♦ Tenesha Duncan, Reproductive Health Alliance
- ♦ Karla Gonzales-Garcia, Policy Director, COLOR (Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights)
- ♦ Destiny Lopez, Cofounder, All Above All
- ♦ Gina Millan, Community Organizer, Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights
- ♦ Sonya Ulibarri, Executive Director, Girls, Inc. Metro Denver
- ♦ Zak Van Ooyen RN, BSN, Pueblo Department of Public Health and Environment

We entered this project knowing there is no “one size fits all” approach and that it is critical to honor differences and cultural nuances across Latinx communities. In order to do so, we recruited a range of individuals: youth who recently immigrated with their families, those born here to parents who immigrated, those born to mixed-race parents, as well as young adults from families who have lived in Colorado for generations.

All recruiting was done through the relationships design fellows have with youth and adults in their communities. In the end, we spoke with more individuals from multi-generational Latinx families in Pueblo and more individuals who are recent immigrants in Adams County.

### Interview Approach

We started each conversation broadly by asking participants to talk about their lives at school, in their communities and with their family and friends. We explored their life goals, values, aspirations, challenges and supports, as well as listened for what matters to them. Only then did we explore the topics of sexuality, intimate relationships and contraception. In other words, each conversation mirrored the project’s commitment to place these topics in the larger context of a young person’s life.



## A Word About Language

Throughout this report, we agreed on the following:

**Names:** To respect individual privacy, we have not shared names of any interviewees.

**Youth:** Unless otherwise indicated, ‘youth’ refers to the Latinx young people with whom we spoke.

**Caregivers and Influencers:** These terms refer to parents and adult family members, as well as other adults supporting youth, such as coaches, counselors, promotoras (community health workers), and teachers.

**Pueblo and Adams:** These terms refer to the city of Pueblo and the communities of Commerce City, Thornton, and Federal Heights in Adams County where we met youth.

**Latinx:** While this is not a term that was used by young people to describe themselves, we use this inclusive term to refer to the communities we engaged and all we met who identify as Latina/o/Hispanic/Mexican/Chicano/a.

### The Team

This project was designed by and led in partnership with The Curious Company, a San Francisco-based research and design studio that partners with pro-social organizations tackling issues affecting women and girls.

The team from Caring for Colorado includes:

- ◆ Colleen Church, Vice President of Programs
- ◆ Gillian Grant, Associate Program Officer, Colorado Collaborative for Reproductive Health Equity
- ◆ Liz Romer, Project Director, Colorado Collaborative for Reproductive Health Equity

From The Colorado Health Foundation:

- ◆ Melanie Herrera Bortz, Program Officer

And, from The Curious Company:

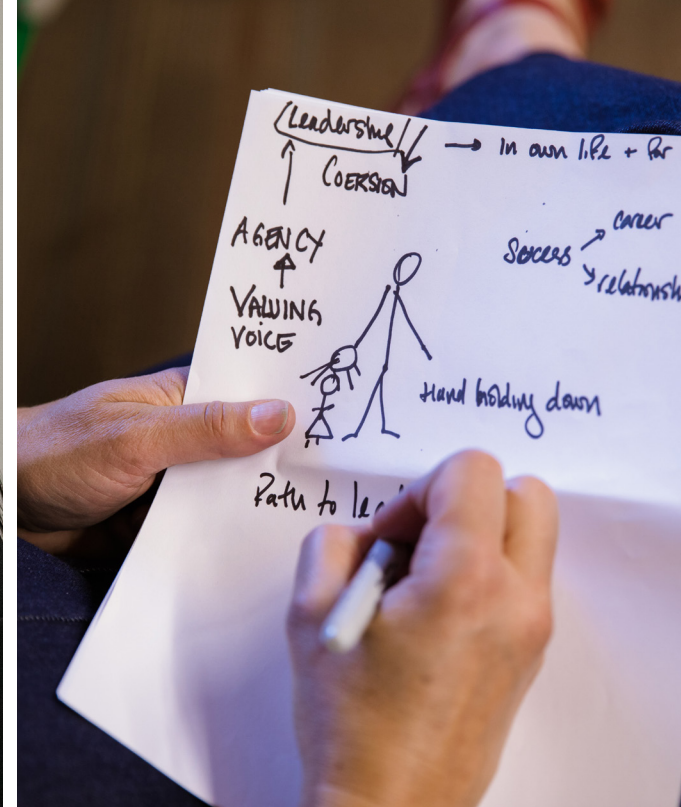
- ◆ Stacy Barnes, Design Co-Lead
- ◆ Ka Yun Cheng, Recruiter
- ◆ Sarah Deigert, Project Coordinator
- ◆ Alexandra Fiorillo, Insights Co-Lead and Behavioral Design Contributor
- ◆ Nicole Laborde, Insights Co-Lead
- ◆ Kishya Mendoza Greer, Designer
- ◆ Erin Ruffedt, Design Co-Lead
- ◆ Pam Scott, Founder/Project Co-Lead
- ◆ Diane Tompkins, Project Co-Lead

The following is a synthesis of the team's work as we listened and learned together.

Some interviewees remarked at the end that they'd never said some of these things out loud and certainly had never had this conversation with their friend or partner who accompanied them. The energy coming from the interviews was amazing. People really wanted to talk and have their thoughts and opinions heard - it's what folks felt best about as they left us. We could very plainly see that people were proud of themselves for having these conversations, proud of the depth of connection.

- Theresa Trujillo, Pueblo Design Fellow





# FRAMING WHAT WE LEARNED

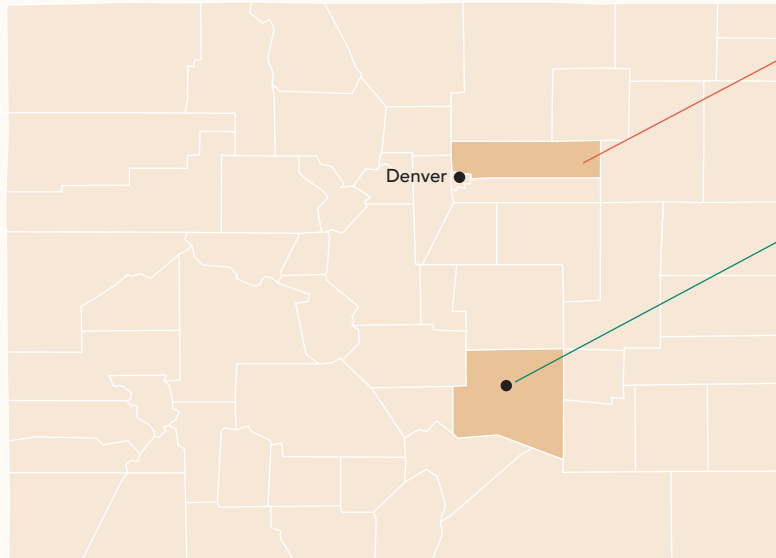
Over the course of the Inspiration Phase, it became clear that pregnancy rates among adolescent Latinas in Adams and Pueblo are just one symptom of systems, services and people disproportionately failing Latinx youth.

- Schools in these communities are failing young people by not maximizing their potential.
- Many parents and caregivers are unable to meet the needs of their children because they don't know how to help them navigate their lives, work multiple jobs, may struggle with substance use, or are unavailable to guide them for other reasons.
- Communities do not consistently demonstrate or offer young people future pathways that are attractive and available to them.
- Multiple systems fail to distribute resources and opportunities equitably, so only a select number benefit.

There are exceptions, to be sure - adults who step up and youth who shine - but with so few options and significant hurdles, many Latinx youth simply aren't exposed to possibilities for which they might otherwise reach.

It's against this backdrop that we outline the insights gleaned in this project. Many illustrate the degree of challenge but all point to opportunities to engage, lift up and support Latinx youth, especially Latinas, as they seek to move into a healthy and happy adulthood.

## ADAMS AND PUEBLO



### ADAMS (County)

- **39%** of the population is Hispanic.<sup>1</sup>
- **16%** of the population is foreign born.<sup>1</sup>
- **76%** of total live teen births are to Hispanic teens (15-19 years old).<sup>2</sup>

### PUEBLO (City)

- **52%** of the population is Hispanic.<sup>1</sup>
- **4%** of the population is foreign born.<sup>1</sup>
- **76%** of total live teen births are to Hispanic teens (15-19 years old).<sup>2</sup>

Latinx households have the highest rate of income inadequacy in Colorado. **47%** of these households earn an income that is insufficient to meet basic needs.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Source: 2017 Census

<sup>2</sup> Source: Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, Vital Records Program 2017

<sup>3</sup> Source: Overlooked & Undercounted 2018 Struggling To Make Ends Meet In Colorado, Colorado Center on Law and Poverty

## TOPIC AREAS

To accurately reflect our conversations in the field, this report starts with a wide lens and then narrows in on the topics related to reproductive health. We open with a discussion of community, family and identity, move into learnings about support and future pathways, and finally discuss intimate relationships, sex, contraception and the clinic experience.

This flow is intended to allow readers to understand these topics as we did, in the larger context of the lives of the young people we met.

COMMUNITY, FAMILY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE

FUTURE PATHWAYS

INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

TALKING ABOUT SEX WITH ADULTS

SEEKING CONTRACEPTION AND CARE





# PART ONE: COMMUNITY, FAMILY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

From our conversations with youth, it's clear that navigating adolescence is fraught with challenges – some distinct to the Latinx community. Latinx identity provides many young people with a strong sense of community and even pride. But, as we'll explore, it also comes with a unique set of tensions, many of which are exacerbated by the negative national narrative targeting the Latinx community and immigrants.

## **Ethnic Identity is Fluid and Confusing**

The relationship with ethnic identity is complex for young people with whom we met. Some have a strong sense of their own personal identity - as Mexican, Mexican-American, Hispanic, Latina/o, and, in a few cases, Chicana/o. Others shared their confusion with, or even lack of awareness of, their ethnic identity and the range of terms used in their community.

For example, in conversation with two young men in Pueblo, we asked if they had heard the term "Chicano," and they said they had but they didn't really understand what it meant. A set of brothers we interviewed in Pueblo answered the question, "How do you identify?" simultaneously with different answers. One said Mexican and the other said Hispanic. They looked at each other with surprise and then the elder, who first said "Hispanic" then said, "Mexican American." We asked the other brother why he quickly responded with "Mexican" and he explained, "Yeah, there's a lot of pride in that." So, even within the same family, people identify differently.

This story exemplifies the highly personal and complex relationship young people experience with respect to their cultural and ethnic identity. We had similar conversations with other young people who suggested that aligning with an ethnic identity belonged to an older generation and that they should be beyond ethnic alliances. In response to being asked what it meant to be Latina, one young woman responded,

I feel like in 2019, it's just like you are who you are... It's not how it was back then, like always having to prove yourself and like knowing...who you are. Now it's like everybody together, like we are all just one...I just feel like, all that whole racial stuff just like needs to go.

- Female, 18, Pueblo (in response to what it means to be Latina)

Our takeaway is that the young people interviewed experience uncertainty around their ethnic identity. Many terms used to explain ancestral origins are not clearly defined or communicated with them. This leaves many young people we talked to unsure about how they "should" identify. Youth then become more susceptible to claiming multiple terms to self-identify but using none of those terms with confidence.

### **Belonging Can Be a Source of Strength**

Despite this confusion, a young person's ties to community, culture and family can create a sense of belonging and offer a strong foundation. Regardless of the language used to describe their cultural identity, most young people we met agreed that there is something special about belonging to Latinx culture.

Our sense of community and family is so much stronger...They are involved in everything...I feel

confident that if something happened to me tonight, I could go to any of my family members, whether they be cousins, uncles, aunts, and they would take me in.

- Influencer, Adams

I feel like [in Hispanic families]...people are actually happy and enjoying themselves. The food's better and the music, like it's just more lively going to those family events...There is something about that community that's really different from my white side.

- Female, 20, Pueblo

We in the Latinx community are communal beings. We look to our communities to feel safe and healthy. When we help young people reflect on how our ancestors cared for themselves and connect them to the stability of their cultural background, they feel powerful strength. This is a kind of support they don't get at school.

- Expert

Geography also contributes to a sense of belonging. For example, youth in Pueblo expressed a strong connection to their city. Many came from families living in Pueblo for generations and were proud to say "the border crossed us," in reference to their families living there before it was a part of the United States. Because Pueblo is relatively small, people know each other, which reinforces a sense of closeness.

A lot of people want to get out of Pueblo...[Because] there seems to be a lack of things to do here...But Pueblo's home to me. It feels safe.

- Male, 18, Pueblo

[One of the best things about Pueblo is] I would say, how everybody knows each other. You know, like, when I meet friends - their family knows my family.

- Male, 18, Pueblo

We heard less in Adams about deep community ties. One factor contributing to this could be that the county is more geographically dispersed, making it harder to connect physically to places and other people. Also, we met with more first-generation youth in Adams than in Pueblo. In contrast to the numerous Pueblo families who have been in this country for generations or are indigenous to it, many families in Adams arrived more recently and have had less time to build relationships.

### **Strong Expectations That Youth Will Succeed**

Many Latinx parents hold a clear value around education and expect their children to “go as far as they can.” Parents defined success differently. For some parents it means their child goes to college. For others it means starting a career or “wearing a suit.” And, for some parents it means living out the dreams that sustained them while they sacrificed and struggled to immigrate and establish a life in this country. While not all young adults we met had these kinds of expectations set on them, those who did valued them and wanted to meet their parents’ expectations, making their parents’ sacrifices worthwhile.

Both of us have this, like, respect for our parents that we would not want them to look at us negatively ever. Not in a scary way, but in like, I love them so much. And they’ve done so much for me that I wouldn’t want to let them down.

- Females, 24 and 18, Adams

My mom was always the one pushing me pushing me...She’s always telling me that I want you to focus on school. Your job is second. ‘How are your grades? How are you doing today?’ She’s just there for me in every way. So I get a lot of support from her. And it also gives me, like, motivation to not let her down. So it helps a lot...She doesn’t get it. She just wants to see me graduate. She’s like, ‘I don’t care where, just graduate.’

- Male, 20, Adams

### **The Guilt Associated with Success**

Some young people experience a tension between the desire to succeed and the guilt of succeeding. Many we spoke with want to attain success (be it higher education or better job opportunities), but struggle with the pressure of carrying their family’s hopes and dreams on their backs. This is especially a burden for young people who will be the first to graduate high school or the first to go to college.

She tells us all the time that she’s here [in the United States] for us, and it’s our education first. So I, you know, have a lot to be thankful for my mom... Sometimes [it feels like] pressure to have good grades. Because, you know, sometimes you’re so tired. You don’t want to go to class? Well, you know what? My mom sacrificed so much to be here. I gotta go.

- Male, 24, Pueblo

For those young people who “surpass” their parents’ education or career achievements, there is a fear they will no longer “belong” to their community or family. The tension exists between wanting

to become “better than,” but not “too good for” your family. This introduces an associated guilt with moving forward in life, but not wanting to leave others behind.

Like crabs in a bowl, when one member of the family is trying to excel and climb up the side, the rest of the family begins pulling them down back into the bowl.

– Yesenia Beascochea, Pueblo Design Fellow



In a closely-knit community without many opportunities, real or perceived, success might mean moving away. And that can be terrifying, even if your family supports you unconditionally.

I think a lot of them think because their family stays here, they have to stay here. Like we don't leave Commerce City. Like, it's important for them to know, it's okay to stay in Commerce City. But there's so much more out there to see. Yes, come back and yes teach the rest of our community. But let's educate yourself and go see and then come back and teach what you've learned.

– Influencer, Adams

#### Gender Roles Define and Can Confine

Part of not getting “too good” for your family is respecting and carrying on family values and roles within the family. For the young women we interviewed, the pressure to assume the role of “good daughter” or “good wife” is pronounced and explicit, especially in first generation families.

And it was even in like, small things, growing up in a Hispanic household. I remember, my dad would get home from work and I would take off his shoes. Like my mom, would make dinner and he would get served first...And growing up, I didn't think that was weird...My partner - he's white - was at a family party and the food was ready, and so I got up and served his plate, and I brought it back and he just looks at me. And he's like, 'Well, thank you, but you don't have to do that.' And I was just like, 'Yeah, you're fucking right...' It took dating someone from outside of my community to see that.

– Female, 23, Adams

Young women we spoke with said they were taught at a young age to listen, follow and defer. Young Latinx women often are cast in the role of caregiver, which has implications for how they value themselves and view opportunities outside the home.

I'm very overprotective with my mom. Like, I feel like I'm her baby. I'm her last one. So if I don't take care of her, who's going to take care of her? And I feel like that's why maybe she is the way she is with me. Like she doesn't want to let me go [away to college]. Because I'm always there. Like, when she needs something I'm there. So that's why I thought like, if I leave, if something happens who is she going to go to? Yeah, that's why I didn't leave [to go to college]. But if I could go back in time, I definitely would have left.

- Female, 24, Adams

I really believe that girls are born powerful. They don't get their power from us. They are socialized in a way that their power is contained.

- Expert

In contrast, many shared that gender norms in Latinx culture reinforce men's roles as providers, protectors and arbitrators. Additionally, fathers, brothers and male relatives are perceived to be more valued and have more authority in Latinx households. We spoke with a young man who lived in a two-bedroom house with his father, stepmother and five sisters. He escaped the tight quarters to hang out on the street, while his sisters had to stay home to help with the younger children. On the other hand, he felt he needed to work, contribute financially and help his father. Many of the young

women we spoke with expressed that they are routinely expected to honor their male relatives' opinions and defer to their decisions.

In our culture, boys are basically raised to think that they are more important than us and that whatever they say is more important than us.

- Female, 20, Adams

Within our Hispanic community there is definitely a double standard. They hold the women way more accountable than men. Men are like they walk on water type thing, which isn't good.

- Female, 23, Adams

#### **Racial Hostility and Legal Status**

While young people may struggle at times to understand their relationship to their cultural heritage, they also grapple with the way they are seen by others. Most young people we met experienced racism either systemically or personally. Some recounted stories of being personally targeted with discriminatory language or actions. Many experienced systemic racism in the form of failing schools, segregated neighborhoods and more limited opportunities than their white counterparts.

People calling us like the traditional 'wet back' and I don't like that...That doesn't go light on me.

- Female, 18, Pueblo

For those who are undocumented, the impact on their lives is direct and immediate, limiting access to opportunities such as scholarships and jobs.

My dad is a trucker. And my grandpa was a trucker. So I did that and then drove for, like, a year straight. And then when I turned 21, I went to get my upgraded commercial driver's license...and they were like, 'Oh, you can't get your CDs anymore.' Because apparently, there was a law that came into effect and all like DACA recipients and everybody with a non-permanent residency, couldn't have a commercial driver's license anymore. So I had to start over.

- Male, 23, Adams

Racism and precarious legal status can leave young people feeling isolated and excluded from "mainstream" society. Combined with the negative national narrative about the Latinx community and immigrants in particular, these experiences contribute to feelings of fear, shame and uncertainty.

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**What it means to be Latinx is complicated for the young people interviewed. Pride, belonging, and encouragement mix with pressure, constraints and racism. It is critical to build on the strengths and assets that Latinx communities and families offer while recognizing that Latinx identity is not singular or well defined. Solutions require a nuanced, responsive approach.**

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I won the scholarship. And then I was going to go against other kids from Colorado...But I wasn't able to [receive the scholarship after winning it] because I didn't have my social [security number]. So that hit hard. And I was like, whoa, I might as well just be a stay-at-home mom.

- Female, 23, Pueblo





# PART TWO: SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people crave guidance and validation from friends, families, teachers, mentors and even strangers; however, our overwhelming sense is that adults do not show up consistently, constructively or compassionately for Latinx youth in Adams and Pueblo. This lack of adult support has a negative impact, but when “champions” do show up for young people, there is a measurable and meaningful impact on their lives.

### **Young People and the Adults Around Them**

Young people want more support and guidance from the adults in their lives and schools they attend. In the interviews we conducted, Latinx youth said adults are inconsistent in their involvement in the development of young people in their communities. In some cases, this may be because some adults haven't gone through these experiences themselves or may struggle with their own self-value.

No hay un manual...pero si yo tengo el conocimiento y las bases yo puedo de ahí agarrarme y trabajar con eso. Y yo pienso que eso no solamente le va ayudar al niño y lo va guiar y lo va apoyar pero a mi tambien me va hacer crecer como persona - voy a hacer diferente.\*

- Caregiver, Adams

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\* There is no manual...but if I have the knowledge and the foundation I can get a hold of it and work with it. And I think that not only will help the child and will guide and support him but I will also grow as a person. I will do things differently.

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In some of the best cases, youth find adult champions who support, encourage and guide them. We heard a story of a young woman whose school counselor simply stopped her in the hallway one day and asked her, “What’s going on?” when the young woman appeared down. The young woman remembered this moment and explained that she felt “noticed” by this adult. A young man said he felt supported by a teacher because she “respected” him and didn’t judge him.

### **Champions Can Have an Outsized Impact**

Those young people who connected with a positive role model - a consistent, reliable parent, teacher or coach - spoke of the difference it made. We heard stories about coaches checking in on athletes about their grades, guidance counselors having regular conversations with young people about their feelings, and even a social worker providing long-term, consistent support to a young person struggling in the judicial system. We heard stories about young people spending time at their best friend’s house because they preferred being around their friend’s family. There were stories of how a simple, “How are you?” or “Are you doing okay today?” from an adult was enough for a young person to feel supported, seen and heard.

There’s a whole eco-system of support that surrounds young women, but it’s implicit, not explicit. Tias, cousins, abuelas, coaches, teachers, folks across the community who believe in supporting youth. But they often don’t know what to do or what to say and need educating.  
– Expert

**Honestly, for me, my coaches were always more than just on the field. They were [for me] in the classroom, personal, home life.**

– Female, 18, Pueblo

Champions can be parents, guardians, relatives, community members, coaches, teachers, counselors and even friends. Many champions are unaware of the positive impact they have had in the lives of young people - simply by checking in.

### **Unfortunately, Not All Adults Show Up**

Many we spoke with shared stories about adults or systems run by adults who fail to support young people’s development. In some of the worst cases, influential adults undervalue youth and set future expectations low, humiliating them, or even abusing them. We heard numerous experiences of familial substance use or gang participation, or parents who had left the family. One young woman’s mother told us a story of her eldest daughter’s experience in truancy court in Adams County where the judge told the young woman she should drop out of high school because she was going to “have different kids from different men.”

### **Underperforming Schools Failing Youth**

The public schools in Adams County and Pueblo notoriously underperform. Many schools in both areas have been or are on turnaround status or on the state’s accountability clock. Several school districts moved to a four-day week. An out-of-state, for-profit company has been brought in to turn around schools in both communities, creating further discord and division.

Young people know their schools do not meet minimum standards. Many we spoke to referred to their high schools by derogatory nicknames or commented on how the school offered little to no rigor. Many young people believe the schools show bias in what types of students they support. Those more likely to benefit from extra attention and access to programs include athletes, high performing academic students or, in some cases, students from more affluent backgrounds who have a higher likelihood of attending college due to access to financial resources or schools in “whiter” neighborhoods.

In all reality, I feel like my school didn't really help me. Like, they help the people...that are the IB students that are, you know, very smart and like, do have potential. But, the other ones it's like, it's like cattle.

- Female, 23, Adams

We took honors classes in middle school, like, we're already ahead on every deal. And you're [high school teachers] having me read books I've already read...it's just boring. You're not pushing me, like, I can't even reach my full potential if you're not supporting that.

- Female, 18, Adams

Tengo otra chica que está en la escuela, y se me sale a veces...se va a la casa porque no le gustan las clases...tampoco interesen los maestros en la escuela para que los alumnos les interese la escuela. Dice, es que no nos enseñan nada. Nada más nos tienen allí viendo una película. Para que me quedo? Asi me dijo mi hija.\*

- Caregiver, Adams

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\* I have another girl in school who cuts sometimes. She goes home because she doesn't like her classes. The teachers also aren't interested in engaging students in school. She says, 'They aren't teaching us anything. They just have us there watching a movie. Why should I stay?' That's what my daughter says.

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One young person described an experience on the Health Academy Team. The team won the state championship - the first time a Pueblo-based team achieved such success. The public school, however, would not allocate funds to support the team in attending the national championship out of state. This young person felt the school was very supportive of sports teams and their opportunities that necessitated financial resources but the same was not true for the academic extracurricular activities.

Many parents and caregivers feel disappointed by the schools and how they underdeliver. Some parents in Adams who attempted to become more involved in their teenagers' academic lives felt "shut out" by teachers and administrators.

La misma escuela te excluye. O sea porque, porque los niños ya son grandes, 'Tienes que dejarlos que encuentren su camino.'\*

- Caregiver, Adams

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\* The same school excludes you. I mean, because the children are already big, the teachers say, 'You have to let them find their way.'

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### Youth Turn to Their Peers for Critical Support

Because they don't feel they can rely on the adults in their lives, young people we spoke with look to their peers - friends or relatives - for guidance and emotional support. In some cases, young people help one another navigate the complexities of intimate relationships, make academic or work decisions, and even raise one another's babies. Young people show up for each other and provide important emotional support and encouragement, but because they are still learning and developing themselves, they often are unprepared to offer one another the kind of critical support they all need and deserve.

A group of male high schoolers all talked about how they had to come together to support one another when their friend died in a car accident. Another young man confided in his best friend when the girl he was recently intimate with had a “pregnancy scare” but didn’t notify any adults in his life. A young woman in Adams County was “rejected” by her mother when she became pregnant at 12 years old - her best friend helps her to raise her now 5-year old son.

**I feel like honestly, like the most support came from all of our friends here.**

- Male, 18, Pueblo

As we discuss in a later section, young people frequently are the first - and only - source of sexual health information for their friends, despite many of them not having personal experience or access to accurate information. This likely exacerbates the misinformation cycling through teenage peer groups.

#### **Young People Desire Human Connection**

At the end of the day, the young people we spoke with want to be heard and seen. They want to belong. They want to feel valued. Adults feel the need to provide guidance and material support, but often may not recognize young people’s need for human connection and understanding. In many cases, the disconnect youth experience is more significant due to the biological and chemical changes happening during puberty.

**It’s nice to be able to talk to somebody about this stuff and...the fact that you guys are adults and, like, aren’t, like, judging us is, like, nice.**

- Female, 19, Pueblo (on her experience talking to the interviewers)

**So...it’s hard to find people to talk to, I guess. And...when you’re feeling like all alone and overwhelmed...then I guess it’s also hard because...again...that kind of alone feeling. And it’s kind of hard...when...your normal supports - maybe they’re doing better...maybe they can’t necessarily relate. So it’s nice to have that.**

- Female, 18, Adams (on why it’s nice to have a therapist to talk to)

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**The good news is that the solutions young people in Adams and Pueblo are requesting don’t require sophisticated innovation or complex technology. Instead of digital or technology-based solutions, the young people we spoke with asked for more conversations, more access to programs and resources, more face-time time with influential people, and more personalized and tailored support from adults.**

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As a young person I had to find people who had time to love me. My parents worked so hard they just didn't have the time.

- Influencer, Pueblo



# PART THREE:

## FUTURE PATHWAYS

There are few aspects of transitioning into adulthood that are more daunting for a young person than determining the right path to choose for their future. For most, navigating that passage requires tremendous support which, as noted in the previous section, young people typically do not receive. Young people may lack clarity about the pathways available to them and, perhaps more hindering, how to successfully and practically pursue them. There are systemic, cultural and individual family reasons for this. The result, however, is the same: the onus is on youth to navigate the passage to adulthood on their own and few feel confident that they know how.

### **Future Pathways are Difficult to See and Reach**

Many young people don't have a good grasp of the future pathways available to them, much less how to pursue those pathways. An exclusionary and haphazard system leaves few young people exposed to the multiple educational, career and life options to consider for their futures. Additionally, families and the broader community are only able to model the pathways that they themselves have experienced, which often may be limited in nature. For most, moving into parenthood, a job, or enrolling in a

local community or four-year college are the most obvious choices after high school, but for many, exploring appropriate and desired potential pathways is not easy or readily available.

Some of the paths, like attending college (both four-year and community), are daunting if young people don't have strong support scaffolding. Youth likely will struggle with determining the steps to take to even attend. This might make the alternative options feel all the more out of reach or impossible to attain.

Yeah, it's just kind of hard because there is just no one to be like, 'Okay, I did this before you, Okay, so all you have to do is this. Go to this person.' Someone who had done it already. That can say, 'Go to this person. They can help you.' Or, 'If you do this you can get this much money.' We are just winging it.

- Females 18 and 19, Pueblo

#### **Access is Systematically Exclusionary and Haphazard**

Educational, recreational and youth development programs are not equitably accessible to all young people in Pueblo and Adams. While some barriers are systemic (lack of resources at a particular school, for example), other barriers to access have more to do with biases of decision-makers.

Young people perceive that their peers are "categorized" into having potential to "achieve" (or not) after high school graduation. This perception among teachers, administrators, and other decision-makers informs the kind of exposure kids get to future pathways at a young age. The high performers are selected for resources and programs, but it might be the under-achievers or "average" students who most need access and exposure to these offerings.

One young woman detailed her experience as an academically gifted student but shared that she came from an unstable family

involved with gang activity and financial scarcity. Her older siblings were teen parents and her mother was not present in the family due to personal challenges. Despite her academic excellence, guidance counselors at her high school did not push her to apply for college scholarships because of the perception that her family would not support her and the belief that she would not succeed.

Like no one was pushing us to apply for it. Like, no one. Like, you could tell that it's not just us [students] thinking that because we go to an alternative school, they're not going to look at it [our application].

- Female, 18, Adams

Expense often is a barrier to participating in programs and activities. The cost of uniforms, supplies or transportation may prevent young people from engaging in transformational opportunities. Youth development programs that subsidize uniforms or provide transportation are greatly desired within these communities.

They went out for like sports and they got cut. They were really good. And they had been training...But, out in the county...if you don't have the money, then you can't get in.

- Caregiver, Pueblo



## Transportation Barriers

The role that transportation plays in contributing to “social exclusion” is widely discussed in conversations about equity and justice. Cities become more inclusive when they increase mobility and access to resources and services for their most excluded populations (i.e., people of color and low-income families). Expansive public transportation systems are one solution. Unfortunately, the public transportation systems are limited in both Pueblo and Adams. Youth shared that having a car is central to being able to work, go to school and get around, to the extent that some drive early without a license or insurance. A car makes a huge difference; if a young person can access one, even a beater, it can change everything.

### Early Exposure Plants a Seed

The students we met who were exposed to academic and youth development activities at a young age described them as important milestones in their personal development. Several young people talked about visiting a local college campus during an eighth-grade trip and how that was the first time they ever thought they might be able to continue their education after high school.

*Interviewer: When was the first you guys thought about college?*

**8th grade. Yeah. We went to PAA [Pueblo Academy of the Arts] and like they made us...fill out these papers on like, what colleges we'd like to go to. And they made us...look at how to get there.**

**- Males, 18 and 18, Pueblo**

Something as simple as a college campus visit can be a changing moment, but many young people explained that the students who went on college visits, especially four-year colleges outside of their immediate geography, were the students already performing well academically and who had been identified by the school as having “high potential.” Once students participate in one program, they are frequently the ones chosen for future academic and development opportunities.

It is not just access to programs and resources that sets certain young people up for success and others for failure, it is also the act of exposing young people to different environments that can open their minds to a world of possibilities.

**We had a principal a couple years ago and he offered a trip. They went to Ireland one year, to Florida another, and up to the mountains one year... The purpose was for them to see that Commerce City is a small, minute piece of this world, like you have so much more that's out there. And it was so fun for them to...get on a plane for the very first time...to eat at a restaurant for the first time.**

**- Influencer, Adams**

### Young Navigating On Their Own

Again and again, we heard the onus is on youth to navigate the system, generally on their own or with little support from schools and families. The lack of quality, coordinated personal development services prevent young people from identifying and following paths appropriate for them. Young people are not supported by their schools in determining an appropriate, personalized pathway. Guidance and college counselors have limited bandwidth and only see students a couple of times. Frequently, the advice provided is standardized across the students; the counselors are not able to support young people in determining a personalized path.

She [the guidance counselor] was constantly busy. And it was hard for anyone to get, like, in contact with her.

- Female, 20, Adams

This results in some young people choosing the path of least resistance, which may be parenthood or work rather than higher education or technical programs. This may mean that younger siblings follow the same path as older siblings because it is familiar and seems attainable. Several younger siblings we spoke with chose nursing school because their older siblings went that route. Other young people we spoke with worked in construction after graduating high school because their older cousins or uncles worked in that field and could provide opportunities.

Some young people we spoke with experience “choice paralysis” because even navigating a limited number of options was overwhelming and challenging without support. For others who aspire to continue their education, this may mean choosing educational programs with lower barriers to entry. One young woman we interviewed explained that the reason she got into early childhood education as a major in college was because it was the only college-level course she could take in high school that didn’t require passing an Accuplacer exam. She struggled to pass other Accuplacer exams for topics she was interested in so she decided to choose the course with no exam barrier.

If young people don’t have some sort of post-graduation path in place by the beginning of their senior year of high school, chances are it might be too late. Timing is critical for navigating the future. The limited support structures in place begin to taper off during senior year and are nearly non-existent after graduation.

We heard a story from one young woman who struggled to raise adequate financial resources for college so she was forced to take a break from her studies while she worked three jobs. Her family, immigrants from Mexico, didn’t know how to help her find scholarships and she didn’t receive support from her high school

because she had already graduated.

For young people whose schools provide comprehensive support programs (e.g., for teen parents), such programs end abruptly with graduation - creating new barriers and challenges. So, when the scaffolding falls away, the young people may tumble.

Unfortunately, she just almost self-sabotaged herself. Like ‘what am I supposed to do if I don’t have you guys supporting me? What am I supposed to do on my own?’ And her mom now has custody of her three kids...And we find that a lot with our kids, not just our teen parents, but our kids in general... They kind of self-sabotage because they’re so comfortable with people finally caring about them.

- Influencer, Adams

“Success” is defined for many young people as getting a four-year college degree but this may not be what every young person aspires to. Young people would benefit from learning how to plan, build and navigate a pathway that is personalized, realistic and desired. As one design fellow articulated it, when it comes to how young people think about their futures in Pueblo and Adams, the “what” is big and clear while the “how” is very small and unclear. We need to make the steps young people can take to pursue their desired future clearer, and make it easier to explore a variety of potential pathways that might be desirable and appropriate.

### **Parental Involvement in Young People’s Futures**

For many parents and grandparents we interviewed, supporting youth in attaining the dream of college is difficult if they haven’t taken that path themselves. As already noted, many parents have dreams for their kids, and kids pick up on that. But the young people don’t have an example in their lives of how to get there, so the path to attain the dream is vague.

My family don't really care about going to college but I want to go to college because I want to be a firefighter. I need to pass a test. I need to do all that...My dad used [to say], 'I don't want...you...to be working with me. I want to be working for you.' Yeah, like that kind of just stuck in my head for a while.

- Males, 18 and 18, Pueblo

Otros saben que necesitan ayudar a sus hijos pero no saben cómo.\*

- Caregiver, Adams

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\* Others know they need to help their children but do not know how.

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While parents frequently set high expectations for their children to "do better" than they did, communities and schools set expectations incredibly low for young people. This tension can be difficult for young people to navigate.

I started at [my first] high school. They dropped me because my attendance was awful. I was missing too much. And so they didn't want me there because I was a full-time mom and a full-time worker, because at the time I was working at Walmart. And the principal there, she just told me to get my GED. And I was like, 'No, I know [an alternative school] and I'll go there.' I felt like I was disappointed in myself.

- Female, 18, Adams

As explained in Part One, some young people, especially those with strong and present families or champions, are able to develop self-efficacy and self-worth. These young people have brighter visions for their own futures. But other young people struggle with internalizing the negative messages influential adults communicate.

I just tell them [my kids] don't give up on your dream. Don't give up on yourself. Because that happened with my daughter. Because the judge told her, 'You're just gonna have different kids from different men.'

- Caregiver, Adams

Finally, some parents and caregivers desire support in becoming better guides and champions for their young people.

Si se les presenta la oportunidad y si se les dan los recursos necesarios donde se les pueden dar pláticas, seminarios, donde se les explique se les enseñe que es importante que los hijos sean apoyados, guiados y respetados como seres independientes...Yo pienso que todos nosotros como padres es lo que queremos.\*

- Caregiver, Adams

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\* If the opportunity presents itself and if they [parents] are given the necessary resources where they can be given talks, seminars, where they are taught that it is important that the children be supported, guided and respected as independent beings...I think that is what all of us want as parents.

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### Young People and Parenthood

For many, parenthood at a young age is a familiar - sometimes the most familiar - pathway. Many young people know family members or peers who have experienced teen parenthood. For some of the young people we interviewed, their parents were teen parents themselves. For most young people, the reference point is established based on their own family. So, if their parents or siblings had children at a younger age, that feels appropriate or at least familiar.

For some of those born to teen parents who struggled, this became a reference point for the young people and manifested into a desire to wait until they are older to have their own children.

She had such a hard time raising two young girls at a young age. You know, like, my mom, my mom was an athlete in college, she had a division one softball scholarship to go play and then she had me instead...She doesn't want to see us not necessarily throw that away, but take an alternative route of having a baby instead...She's like, 'I don't want you to have to struggle to, you know, put food on the table and keep a house because that was such a struggle for me...'It's not necessarily a mistake, you know, having a baby, but she doesn't want us to struggle. She wants us to be married and have a financially stable job in a stable house and a living situation to raise a family rather than all over the place.

- Female, 20, Pueblo

While young parenthood comes with challenges and sometimes stigma, becoming a parent feels to many like a role young people

can successfully take on. Teen pregnancy is initially "prohibited" by Latino parents but then celebrated and supported. For caregivers who did not attend college, supporting youth in having babies and becoming parents is something they can do with relative ease. This might mean that caregivers more easily support and share praise for parenthood than they do for other pathways that might feel less familiar.

Everybody has a kid besides me. Like, I'm the only one who doesn't. Like all the siblings...everybody... none of them reached 20 without a kid, and my sister, she turned 17 today, actually. And she's due any day now with her baby. And it just felt like my grandma was more proud to go to her doctor's appointment than it was for me to get a diploma.

- Female, 18, Adams

A friend of mine, she got married out of high school. And she's having kids with her husband. And that's like, a culturally appropriate thing, 'cuz family is so important in Hispanic-Latin cultures. That could be a route that they could go rather than college, if they don't get a job out of high school. And she's happy and like, I completely respect that, that's her path and she's proud of that. And that's what's important to her.

- Female, 20, Pueblo

But for those young people who have difficulty navigating potential educational or work pathways, having children sometimes seems like an obvious next step. Turning 18 years old and graduating high school is considered adulthood by many, so having a child is not an unreasonable choice.

We're like in a place in our lives where it's like, 'Well, I am going to have kids now.' Yeah, like I have nothing else to do.

- Females, 18 and 18, Pueblo

#### **Financial Stability as Motivation to Delay Pregnancy**

We spoke with many young people who want to delay their first pregnancy until they establish [financial] stability. They talked about waiting to have children until they are "older" and "financially stable." After probing, we determined this generally meant waiting until 25 or "a few years after graduating college."

I just wouldn't have a kid at my age. I'm not ready. I'm not ready for a kid now. I am trying to be financially stable before I have a kid so I can give them what I want to give them...a house, food, water, all of that.

- Male, 18, Pueblo

Uh, like 25. I think it...gives me enough time to put my life in motion. Yeah. And then it gives me enough time to enjoy time with my friends. And I won't be 95 when my kids graduate from high school.

- Male, 18, Pueblo

#### **Young People are Determined**

Young people persevere despite their circumstances and some adults' lack of belief in them; this lack of support from adults often becomes fuel to succeed. In particular, teen moms who were not supported by family or schools became determined to prove naysayers wrong. Similarly, we heard stories from young men who

were told they would not achieve much professionally and who turned the disbelief into motivation to go to college.

No one believed I could, so I showed them.

- Female, 19, Adams

My biggest point in life is to prove everybody wrong.

- Male, 18, Pueblo

I had to push myself to keep going. I slacked off because I was pregnant. And I was like, why do I need school? What is it to me? But I felt like I heard people in the background: 'You won't do it. You're gonna drop out,' and I kept hearing my mom's voice and...my cousins. And my grandma...Yeah. So when I walked across the stage, I held my diploma high. And I said, 'Yes, I did do it.'

- Female, 18, Adams

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Based on our interviews, it appears young people are forced to self-determine, self-motivate and self-navigate in an area of their life that is complex and daunting. It is no surprise that so many young people feel overwhelmed and alone when thinking about the possibilities for their futures. As members of a community that want to support the next generation, we must find ways to provide stronger, more consistent and clear support to young people as they begin to navigate their futures into adulthood.

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## PART FOUR: INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

As previously mentioned, gender and cultural norms make it hard for Latinas to assert their needs or find their voices. Nowhere is that more apparent than in intimate relationships. As this section explores, a lack of agency and autonomy leaves young Latinas particularly vulnerable to unhealthy and sometimes even dangerous sexual relationships.

### **'In a Relationship' At All Costs**

Even the determined, driven and ambitious young women we met shared stories of having sex more often than they want, having kinds of sex that is different from they want, and not getting pleasure out of the experience.

Most young women we interviewed put her partners' pleasure and desire in front of her own pleasure or comfort; in fact, a woman's pleasure during sex was rarely mentioned. One young woman described having sex with a new boyfriend and indicated that he was very sensitive because he made sure he wasn't hurting her, setting the bar for caring sexual relationships quite low. Many young women indicated that they felt they needed to prioritize boys' needs and wants over their own.

**Girls go with the flow when it comes to sex. Girls are more weak-minded and don't make decisions...just because it feels good to the boys.**

- Female, 23, Pueblo

I feel like you have to please a guy. If you want to be with somebody, you have to give it up...Boys are sexually selfish as hell.

– Females, 18 and 19, Adams

I have been shocked at things we do as Latinos that increase the risk of our children being sexually assaulted or molested. One of them is this cultural norm we have of grooming our children to say “Hi” with hugs and/or kisses. We start at an early age to invade their personal space and overlook teaching them boundaries. Many of our elders in my family find it disrespectful when our kids don’t say “Hi” or “Bye” in this way.

– Mirna Castro, Adams Design Fellow

Furthermore, in seeking connection and support, many young women shared that they engage in relationships that do not meet their emotional needs and, in some cases, are unhealthy. One young woman talked about struggling to get out of a relationship with a controlling and emotionally abusive older boyfriend. Because she felt like she had no one else to turn to, she stayed with him for too long because she wanted to feel loved. Another described a relationship she got into while her parents were going through a divorce:

I was in a relationship that wasn’t really a relationship I was supposed to be in...He was older than me by quite a bit...It was enough where I

should not have been where I was at that time. And it sucks, because I really do regret it now.

– Female 18, Pueblo

### **Sexual Trauma is a Common Reality**

We found that many young women are vulnerable in their intimate relationships because they do not have a sense that they can have boundaries or know how to set them for themselves. They’ve never been taught that they can say ‘no,’ that they can advocate for themselves, and that they can do both of these things in relationships with intimate partners. These young women bring incredibly low expectations of having their sexual or emotional needs met by their male partners. Specifically, in fact, many young women and several caregivers describe experiencing sexual abuse and assault but few labeled it as such. Sexual violence (rape, incest, coercive sex, physically violent sex) seems common - either as a direct experience they had themselves or something they witnessed.

And then he just started like, forcing it on me. Of course, I was telling him ‘No.’ And I was trying to kick him off me...So I would say, ‘No, no.’ And then he would be like, ‘Well, yes, yes, yes.’ And then that would be it. And I just felt like shit. I felt like I had no family who was there for me. And I just was like, I want this boyfriend to be here. And I like just wanted him to be there for me so bad. And he would always tell me, ‘Well, if you loved me...’That was terrible for me. All I wanted was somebody to love me to be there for me.

– Female, 19, Pueblo

Some stories we heard were clear cases of sexual assault. In other instances, sexual experiences “happened to” the women we met.



They didn't necessarily label these experiences as rape or assault but it was clear they were acts that the young women did not consent to.

I don't even know what he did to me...Don't know if he was wearing a condom...I didn't even look at a penis the first time I had sex.

- Female, 18, Pueblo

In assault or coercive situations, very few young women shared that they pushed back in the moment or used their voice - literally or figuratively. Many shared how they felt isolated and alone. As explained above, they craved connection, leaving them more vulnerable to further abuse. Connections to their perpetrators came at a cost, but many didn't question the price they paid until later.

I can't say 'no' because I don't have a voice. And because no one has my back.

- Female, 18, Adams (on not being able to say 'no' to male family members who touch her inappropriately and how this influences her relationships with young men)

I had no family that was there for me...Back then I wasn't strong enough, I didn't know how to ask [for help], and I felt so terrible for letting someone do that to me when clearly I did not want it. I just wanted so badly someone to be there. Now I have a totally different perspective. If you're doing something bad to me, I'm gonna be the one to walk away. You do not get to do that.

- Female, 19, Pueblo

Often times, someone does not call what happened to them sexual violence - possibly because of their relationship to the perpetrator, possibly because of past abuse, but that does not discount the fact that it is. Even though girls may not call it sexual assault, by definition it is.

- Kristi Roque, Pueblo Design Fellow

### Red Flags in Relationships

Young women and men repeatedly said they want instructions on how to have healthy relationships with intimate partners, as well as with friends and family. Few have role models they can look to and feel unsure of how to take care of themselves or be in partnership with someone else. There were exceptions - young women, for example, who risked having difficult conversations with their partners or couples who learned to be caring of one another - but for the most part, youth have much to learn about how to communicate and set boundaries for themselves. It becomes most pressing when things aren't going well.

I wish I had learned to spot the red flags and learned to follow my brain and not my heart... To know where [I] should be and shouldn't be [in relationships].

-Females, 18 and 19, Pueblo

When I was in a relationship with my boyfriend, my baby's dad, nobody once ever asked, like, 'What's something you don't like about your relationships?' And I feel like that would have been really helpful.

- Female, 23, Pueblo

It's almost teaching young boys, this is how you should treat partners...If I could do it, I would start really young with, like, this is what a healthy relationship looks like. If we started there, we would like attack the problem at the root instead of teaching them at 15-16 how to prevent rape. Like, why is rape even an issue?

- Influencer, Adams

#### **Contraception: Don't Talk About It**

As discussed earlier, gender norms are restrictive. Specifically in this context, they discourage young women from talking about sex or asserting themselves in sexual relationships. For many young women, their first sexual experience is unplanned and unprotected. They are uncomfortable discussing using protection, especially in these early experiences. Others shared that they found ways to protect themselves from pregnancy without having to talk about it with their partners.

So I was under the influence, it was at a party, and it was not planned at all. It was not comfortable.

*Interviewer: And did your partner use a condom that time?*

I honestly don't remember.

- Female, 20, Pueblo (describing her first sexual experience)

When I first started having sex...I was a virgin. So I wasn't on birth control. I only got on birth control after I think the second time we had sex because I was like, I was scared. Like, no...I was horrified. So I was like, I need to take these precautions. And I didn't tell him [that I got birth control] at first because I don't know why I thought it would be embarrassing for me to tell him.

- Female, 18, Pueblo

In order to avoid talking about birth control or condoms with their partners, some young women come up with alternate strategies, such as using Plan B after having sex. Others make excuses, such as saying that a doctor had advised against sex for several weeks, so that they could avoid having sex with their boyfriend.

Young men reported they frequently use the pull-out method instead of using condoms, and both young men and young women in serious relationships shared the attitude that, 'If you really love your partner and end up pregnant, it wouldn't be the worst thing. You will just have the baby and form a family.' In these serious relationships, it is understood by many young people that, after a certain level of commitment, couples no longer use condoms. Doing so is perceived to violate the couple's trust and commitment to one another.

It would kind of feel like you are dirty.

- Female, 23, Adams (on how she'd feel if her serious boyfriend wanted to use a condom)

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**In sum, Latinx young women are looking for connection and relationships. Many know they want to feel better, safer and in more control in relationships, but few have the know-how, guidance or role models to help them achieve the safe, loving connections they seek.**

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My last semester of college, I took an interpersonal communication class. And that really helped because she taught us about how to be in intimate relationships and friend relationships. I feel it should be a policy to teach this in high school.

- Female, 20, Pueblo



# PART FIVE: TALKING ABOUT SEX WITH ADULTS

In the best of situations, talking about sex is, well, awkward. The young people we met with suggested that learning about sex is one more area where adults do not show up consistently. But young people want the adults in their lives to talk to them about sex, whether that is educators in schools or parents at home.

Yo creo eso de la sexualidad, el problema lo tenemos nosotros los adultos, que tenemos esa idea. Yo me acuerdo como crie a mis hijos. No se hablaba de sexualidad. Mucha gente viene con esa cultura, con esas ideas. Y a los niños desde chiquitos se les tiene que hablar con la verdad. Y ahora yo lo entiendo - no lo entendía - que a las niñas se les debe decir - tu vagina! Tus partes privadas! No le puede permitir a nadie que la toque. Es un tabú en nuestra cultura.\*

- Caregiver, Adams

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\* When it comes to sex, it is really an adult problem. I remember how I brought up my children. You didn't talk about sex. A lot of people maintain that culture, those ideas. We have to be direct with children. Now I understand. I didn't understand then that, you have to tell girls, 'This is your vagina. These are your private parts. Don't let anyone touch you there.' It's taboo in our culture.

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### Caregivers Avoid Discussing Sex with Young People

Based on our conversations, parents and caregivers avoid talking about sex with youth and even those parents who might want to, do not know how. Parents and caregivers lack accurate information about sexual health, relationships, consent and intimacy so they avoid initiating the conversation altogether.

I never, like, talk to my mom about it. If anything, I teach my mom about sex...My grandma doesn't even know what an orgasm is for a woman, you know? My mom...grew up really, really religious. So she's like, 'Masturbation for girls is sin. You can't watch porn', you know? So it's like, I teach my mom. My mom is not teaching me.

- Female, 19, Pueblo

Caregivers often use vague language to preach pregnancy prevention or explain sexual health. 'Cuidate' (and other variations) is a 'code phrase' used by Latinx parents to describe safe sex. This coded language is confusing because caregivers rarely give specifics regarding how to prevent STIs or pregnancy. By using vague language, adults force young people to do the mental processing of what 'Cuidate' and other coded mandates mean. Many young people presume, due to tone or body language, that 'Cuidate' means 'don't get pregnant' but they are rarely given information about how to prevent it.

Simplemente 'Cuidate', no te llenas de hijos luego luego, porque es importante.\*

- Caregiver, Adams

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\* Just take care of yourself. Don't get filled up with babies right away.

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I knew that she meant, 'Please don't be going out and having sex. But, if you are going to rebel, and do that...please be careful. And just think about your future.' And, she said that literally, with her tone of voice and her look.

- Female, 24, Adams

By avoiding speaking directly about sex, caregivers not only fail to give young people the information they need to navigate intimate relationships, they also hinder young people from developing the vocabulary and confidence they need to build a sense of sexual autonomy.

### Discomfort and Taboo

During our conversations, we identified an interesting distinction between the two communities. In Pueblo, it seemed adults avoid talking to young people about sex because it is awkward and uncomfortable. In Adams, it seemed adults perceive discussing sex with young people as completely taboo. In recently immigrated Mexican families, the taboo links to respect. Specifically, young people don't reference or talk about sex around adults out of respect for their elders. Across both communities, we met families who believe that talking about sex with young people provides an invitation for them to be sexually promiscuous.

Out of respect for our parents, we turn the channel when a sex scene comes on the TV.

- Maria Zubia, Adams Design Fellow

Si, pero por ejemplo entrar en detalle exactos, especificando los puntos, No, muy general. Yo trate de hacer lo mejor que pude. Hasta ahí - nunca hemos hablado - yo se que ella está sexualmente activa y solo le he dicho cuidate y están estas cosas en la clínica, y si ella se ha cuidado, pero no me gusta hablar de esto. O preguntarle.\*

- Caregiver, Adams (on why she struggled to discuss sex with her daughter)

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\* Yes, but for example you are supposed to go into exact details. Nope. I stayed general. I tried to do the best I could. So far - we have never spoken - I know that she is sexually active and I have only told her to take care of herself and about clinics, and has she taken care of herself, but I do not like to talk about it. Or ask her about it.

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Nunca había hablado con nadie acerca de sexo... y eso se sigue repitiendo desgraciadamente generacion tras generacion.\*

- Caregiver, Adams

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\* I had never spoken with anyone about sex and, sadly, that continues to repeat generation after generation.

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### Caregivers are Overconfident

Caregivers tend to greatly underestimate the degree to which young people in their care are engaged in intimate relationships; instead, they look for 'cues' and avoid discussing sexual health until they're sure it's absolutely necessary. However, many young people told us they did not plan their first sexual experience or did not anticipate having intercourse for the first time when it happened. This leads many caregivers to miss the window of opportunity to discuss sexual health with young people before they're sexually active. That, in turn, can result in unintended outcomes.

I was really surprised because I'm working a lot. And I didn't see her because it was for me, like, she was really quiet and she didn't tell me about her boyfriend or anything like that - being involved. And I was really surprised. And this time, when they told me about the baby - this one, the second one - I told her, 'Let's go and check because we were not ready for the first one.'

- Caregiver, Adams (on finding out her 12-year-old daughter was pregnant)

My parents, like my mom, didn't ever teach me about it. The most she told me, like, 'Hey, like, you're a girl. You're gonna have a period.' But that didn't come up until it happened. Compared to like, some friends that were in [sex ed] class. They're like, 'Oh, yeah, I know what this is.' And, I was like, 'Oh, wow.' I guess I'm happy I'm learning about this, because I didn't know anything.

- Female, 20, Adams

### Schools Are Not Providing Adequate Sexual Health Education

Families and young people expect schools to teach sexual health, but most schools teach health topics in short modules that lack the kind of detail and specificity that young people want. The school-based sex education provided tends to focus on anatomy and prevention of STIs and pregnancy. Rarely is sexual health put in the context of autonomy, relationships or healthy sexuality. Additionally, these school-based approaches are typically "one and done" - one-off discussions that don't provide adequate information for young people.

One young couple we spoke with told us about their experiences learning about sex in middle and high school. The young woman explained she was brought into the gym for an assembly where the entire fifth-grade class watched a graphic video of a birth. After the film was over, all the students filed out of the gymnasium. No questions. No discussion. No further information. The young man had a similar experience:

They made us watch...a video of...a birth. I don't remember anything else but that...I remember...it was towards the end of the school year. And like, we watched it and everyone was shook. And then I go home, maybe because it was my last period or something. But as I watched it, and then like, there's the bell.

- Male, 20, Adams

Simply showing a video or holding one session on sexual health, anatomy or prevention is insufficient. Young people are curious but reticent to ask questions. They need adults to proactively guide the difficult conversations and initiate discussions around these sensitive and emotional topics.

### **Young People Rely on One Another**

Because caregivers and schools do not provide the kind of detailed, helpful or relationship-based information young people desire related to sex and their physical development, young people again turn to one another and the Internet.

Everything I learned was from friends, the Internet, social media, references I would hear here and there in school. And, like, I would start to understand what they were, you know...When kids

make fun of, like, the number '69' or 'BJ' or...stuff like that...I didn't know what that was...But slowly talking with friends at school I started to, like, put it all together.

- Male, 20, Adams

Sex ed in school or health, whatever teaches you nothing. It's like, 'Ahh genital warts. Don't have sex!'...But I learned from my friends and the Internet.

- Female, 19, Pueblo

One young man in Pueblo told us a story about the first time he experimented with condoms. He and his girlfriend talked about having intercourse for the first time and she planned to come over after school. No one ever taught him how to use condoms so he went to the local convenience store and bought a package because he wanted to be prepared. Upon returning home, he read the usage instructions in the box and experimented putting condoms on himself.

In other more positive stories we heard, young people asked older siblings or cousins for advice and received accurate and helpful information. It seems that having an older relative (approximately five to seven years their senior) means that young people receive marginally more fact-based information.

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**Not surprisingly, however, young people may not be the best source when it comes to accurate information about birth control, STIs or emotional intimacy. They frequently rely on anecdotes they hear from classmates or peers, causing inaccurate information to spread across friend groups.**

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You [parents and adults] have to be clear. It's only half the job to say, 'Don't have sex.' It's also important to say, 'Here's how to protect yourself and prevent pregnancy.'

- Female, 20, Adams



# PART SIX: SEEKING CONTRACEPTION AND CARE

Given the lack of open, honest discussion about healthy sexuality with adults, many youth approach pregnancy prevention under a cloud of shame, stigma and misperceptions. Clinic staff and providers can be strong advocates for young women, but it takes a lot to get youth to clinics. And positive provider experiences are by no means the norm.

## **Misperceptions, Stigma, Barriers to Seeking Contraception**

Many of the young women we interviewed receive negative messages about birth control from friends, parents and/or the church. They're taught that contraception is "dangerous" or "inappropriate."

My mom didn't like me to be on birth control. She said [it] like lowers your chances of in the future trying to have a baby or stuff like that, because some of it stops your period. And she says our bodies are made to produce not to be stopped.

- Female, 18, Pueblo

Whenever I asked my mom about [contraception], she made it seem like, 'Oh, those are for the girls that are out there doing things they aren't supposed to be doing. So, you don't need that.'

- Female, 19, Adams

With this drumbeat of negative information, the young women we talked to were easily put off by birth control methods. Many experienced and heard about side effects from hormonal contraception and assumed that all methods would be similar. Furthermore, many did not have a trusted provider they could talk to openly and thoroughly about various methods.

### Accessing Clinics

The young people we met received general and reproductive health care in a wide variety of settings, including pediatricians' or primary care physicians' offices, public clinics, school-based clinics and hospitals. Some knew they wanted to use birth control (either for contraception or to address other issues such as acne or irregular periods) and sought out contraception on their own. Others had conversations with a health care provider during a visit that a caregiver arranged.

Some caregivers strongly believed that their children should not be able to access health care on their own, largely because they feared that availability of contraceptive methods encourage young people to be sexually active. This was a particular concern with school-based clinics that were seen by caregivers as doling out birth control too freely.

**Respecto a la sexualidad, no soy a la antigua, pero no estoy de acuerdo con muchas cosas que hacen aquí en la escuela. Que les da los condones. Para mí eso es darles permiso para tener relaciones.\***

– Caregiver, Adams

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\* With respect to sexuality, I'm not old fashioned, but I don't agree with a lot of things they do here at the school. That they give out condoms. For me, that is giving them permission to have sex.

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### Note on Abortion

Among the people we met, opinions about and experience with abortion are varied. Some sought abortions and were deterred by "pregnancy centers" or family members. One couple was told erroneously that an abortion costs thousands of dollars and they were unable to save enough to pay for it. Another couple was told by a sister that they needed to take responsibility for their "mistake." Others voiced opinions both in support of and against the right to abortion. And many had questions about what abortion was like for women and why people are invested in whether a woman gets an abortion. In the end, what is most striking about these conversations is the diversity of opinion.

While accessing school-based clinics is problematic for some parents, for many teens the idea of having ready access to a provider who can provide contraception is very appealing. Having a clinic in schools means they do not have to locate another care provider and find transportation. School-based clinics vary in the care that they provided, however, and parents, providers and young people express uncertainty around confidentiality.

### Negative Provider Experiences

Many young women shared stories of bad clinic experiences. We heard stories of dismissive providers, of providers asking about sexual activity in front of parents, and of clinics calling parents and breaching confidentiality. One young woman was forced to reveal her pregnancy to her mother after the school clinic called and spoke with the mother instead of the daughter.

And then we finally checked out our school - Wellness Center, okay. But they have my mom's number. And they said that they wouldn't call my mom or any of that stuff. But I guess the community health center wanted to, like talk to me...And so like they call my mom, and she's like, 'It's either you're pregnant, or you're on birth control'...She's like, 'So the wellness called me. Do you have anything to tell me?'

- Female, 18, Pueblo

Other young women told stories of being made to feel shamed or stupid for asking questions of providers. As we listened, it became clear that some clinicians bring their own value systems, often amplifying shame and stigma.

It's even hard to get the confidence to walk in and tell [a provider] that I'm having sex.

- Female, 18, Adams

#### **Positive Clinic Experiences Encourage Further Engagement**

Young women who had positive experiences with providers, on the other hand, were visibly moved in recounting the experience of being treated respectfully and without judgment by a person with authority.

At the Children's Hospital clinic you don't feel stupid for asking. They make you feel so safe. It sounds like you are talking to a really sweet grandma or auntie who has been around.

- Females, 22 and 20, Adams

[The school clinic] was really cool. Because I think this is the age when you start making your own appointments and stuff. And it offered a lot. I mean it was a whole clinic in our school. It was easy access and provided a lot of information...The clinic doesn't treat you like a child. They treat you like a serious patient.

- Female, 18, Adams

He's amazing...He's a really good doctor...Because of my [sexual trauma] in the past...He explained everything he was gonna do...before he did anything. He said, 'Oh I need to do a pap smear. So I'm going to do this, this and this.' And then as he's doing it, he explains everything instead of just coming in using all the instruments...He explains everything and he gives you options and is just really caring.

- Female, 23, Pueblo

Positive experiences with providers can be transformational. At their best, they create respectful human connection and affirm a woman's control over her own body.

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While critically important, clinic interactions are only one aspect of young women taking charge of their sexual and reproductive health. Our experts remind us that access to birth control is critical, but it must be understood in the larger context. Interventions need to support Latinx young women and their partners in many facets of their lives.

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Information about birth control is one of the many tools to get to a desired future - along with workforce training, mental health support and a degree.

- Expert

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# KEY FINDINGS + THE ROAD AHEAD

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## KEY FINDINGS + THE ROAD AHEAD

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The conversations conducted in Pueblo and Adams County were rich and deeply personal. Each young person's story was beautifully unique, but contained similar themes - from bright moments with adults, peers, schools and families to struggles and challenges in their everyday experiences. The more stories we listened to, the more we saw common threads woven throughout the individual experiences of the young people and adults we spent time with during this research.

The four key findings below are not standalone; rather, they illustrate the interconnectedness of the thematic areas presented in this document. While they are specific to the Latinx communities we spent time with during this research project, some of the ideas and concepts may resonate with other communities and individuals.

### **ONE: Self and Autonomy**

The journey to belonging to oneself and to one's culture is a challenge - not just for young Latinx women but also the generations of women who surround them. So many of the young women we met are taught to attend to other people's needs, to accommodate, and to be "good girls." These messages are pervasive and made explicit in Latinx families. When it comes to sexual relationships, many Latinx women we spoke with take these directives to heart and feel uncomfortable asking for what they

want or need. Children are expected to give hugs and kisses to all relatives, possibly contributing to an inability to identify and establish safe boundaries as they mature. Many told stories of deferring to men, prioritizing their needs and giving them power over important decision-making - including in intimate relationships. At best, this results in imbalanced relationships where the needs of one are elevated over those of the other. At worst, it results in sexual trauma and abuse. Generally, consent is taught as a life principle, let alone as something to be present in all sexual encounters. The sense of duty to be a good daughter, good mother, good girlfriend or good wife runs deep.

When looking back at all the forces that combined to create young women's sense of self, their voice, and their ability to negotiate the terms of who touches them and when, there was a long road of silencing and subjection that taught them that they had absolutely no body autonomy. They had no right to say 'no' to anyone who wanted to touch them; they were not practiced in telling anyone that their bodies were off limits. Consent can only be granted if you feel like you have the ability to say 'yes' or 'no.' Without autonomy, there is no consent.

- Merrick Weaver, Adams Design Fellow

### **TWO: BIG WHAT, little how**

Many young people we spoke with want big things for themselves - some aspire to live up to the dreams and expectations their parents have for them, while others want to build a better life



than what they see around them. Both young people and adults have a sense of WHAT kinds of futures are desirable, even if the options are somewhat limited but HOW to achieve those futures is vague and difficult to determine. Navigating through adolescence to adulthood is challenging for any young person but particularly so for Latinx youth whose families face inequities in opportunity, have fewer resources or have little knowledge on how to help their children navigate a better future for themselves. The desire for Latinx children to do well is strong, but the means to enable them to achieve success are not always clear, leaving many youth feeling confused and unsupported.

### THREE: The Generational Effect

Caregivers' histories have a direct impact on how their youth move into the world: the futures young people feel they can reach for, the relationships they enter into, the conversations they have about sex and becoming a parent, and their ability to overcome trauma. Most families of the youth we spoke with have experienced racism, poverty, and violence across generations. As adults strive to show up for the youth in their lives, they often are challenged to support them in ways most were rarely supported themselves. Mothers who experienced sexual traumas indicated being unable to discuss sex with their daughters, for example. Part of supporting youth should include providing multi-generational support and solutions that help heal some of the previous generation's wounds to end the passing down of trauma, stigmas and restrictive social norms that are holding today's youth back.

### FOUR: Desire for More Connection

Adolescence is a time of development transitions, from biological (i.e. puberty) to social (e.g. changing roles in the family, transitioning from middle school to high school and onward). This period of great instability and change is one that most young people we met are navigating on their own. Many Latinx families live in financial scarcity and work multiple jobs, juggling many responsibilities, including childcare. Young people earn money to put themselves through

school and contribute to their families. They also find themselves navigating the emotional turmoil of adolescence and transition to adulthood without feeling valued, seen or heard. They wait for, and typically do not receive, the support they need from their parents, family members, teachers or counselors. Even young people who have caring adults in their lives are not likely to initiate requests for support; instead, they wait for adults to reach out to them. But caring adults may be passive because they do not feel equipped to support youth. Without an activated youth-adult connection, young people instead turn to older cousins and siblings, peers, intimate partners and, at times, to having babies of their own to form a connection. Young people want role models, as well as education, to help them develop and sustain healthy relationships. In the absence of this kind of support, many fall into relationships without healthy boundaries or ones that undermine their safety and well-being. Ultimately, the young people we spoke with crave more human connection and support than they currently receive.

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**These key findings and the content from the thematic areas we detailed in this book, serve as the foundation for the design process the team will embark on later in 2019. Our goal is to generate culturally relevant solutions that respond to the unique needs, desires and experiences of the community members with whom we spoke. We will revisit both communities, meeting with many of the young people and caregivers we met in Phase One as well as individuals who are new to us. While our work shifts to focus on generating solutions, our commitment to listen to the community and learn from and co-create with them remains the same. We look forward to sharing the outcomes of this next phase early in 2020.**

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**Onward!**

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There is great power in the depth of conversation we've had with folks. I've learned so much by listening not with the goal of responding, but listening to understand. I've organized in this community my whole life and it's opportunities like this, these deeper exchanges, that challenge me, sustain me, and give me hope.

- Theresa Trujillo, Pueblo Design Fellow



Illustrations by Sophie Standing  
Design by Erin Ruffedt





# **OUR VOICES** **NUESTRAS VOCES**

Life, Relationships, Sex and Reproductive Health