

FROM CIVIL RIGHTS TO CIVIC POTENTIAL: YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN ALABAMA

Summer 2025



Introduction

This landscape scan provides an overview of Alabama's youth civic engagement ecosystem—the collective of organizations and efforts working to build youth voting power and movement infrastructure—centering the voices and experiences of 20 Alabama-based civic leaders. The report examines the current state of youth engagement work, identifies key challenges and opportunities, and assesses the potential for strategic investment to strengthen civic participation among Alabama's 800,000 young people.

The Youth Engagement Fund (YEF) is a donor collaborative focused on building power for young people of color across seven states: Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Texas. This landscape scan explores the possibility of adding Alabama as the eighth priority state, drawing on extensive field research and relationship-building efforts conducted throughout 2025. YEF's approach prioritized on-the-ground relationship building through direct site visits, which created the foundation of trust necessary for CIRCLE to conduct in-depth research interviews with organizational leaders across the state.

The report is organized into three main sections:

- **Part 1** examines the demographic and policy context shaping youth civic engagement in Alabama.
- **Part 2** profiles the current organizational ecosystem and identifies key themes from interviews with civic leaders.
- **Part 3** outlines priority areas for investment and strategic recommendations for funders

Acknowledgement of varying definitions of youth and young adults: This landscape scan defines youth as ages 18-29 and includes Census data that specifies that age range. YEF, however, defines youth as ages 16-35. This extended age range accounts for the demographics of leadership of first-time executive directors identifying as people of color.

This report draws from three sources:

► **Quantitative Data and Policy Context**

To contextualize the insights from the field, we analyzed youth voter turnout data from CIRCLE, demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, and policy research from CIRCLE, Alabama Arise, and other voting rights organizations. These sources helped frame the broader socio-political conditions in which Alabama's youth civic engagement work is unfolding.

► **YEF Site Visit Group Interviews**

Between March and June 2025, YEF conducted site visits in Alabama, traveling across the state to Birmingham, Montgomery, and Mobile. Meeting leaders in these diverse settings allowed YEF to be closer to partner organizations and to deepen its understanding of Alabama's civic landscape, while beginning the crucial trust-building process that would enable the research collaboration between CIRCLE and Alabama's civic leaders. These visits served dual purposes: collecting preliminary information on prospective movement partners' organizational profiles and programmatic work related to youth civic engagement, while establishing the trust and rapport necessary for an honest assessment of challenges and opportunities. YEF's on-the-ground engagement and relationship-building created the conditions for CIRCLE to conduct in-depth, virtual research interviews, demonstrating YEF's commitment to authentic partnership.

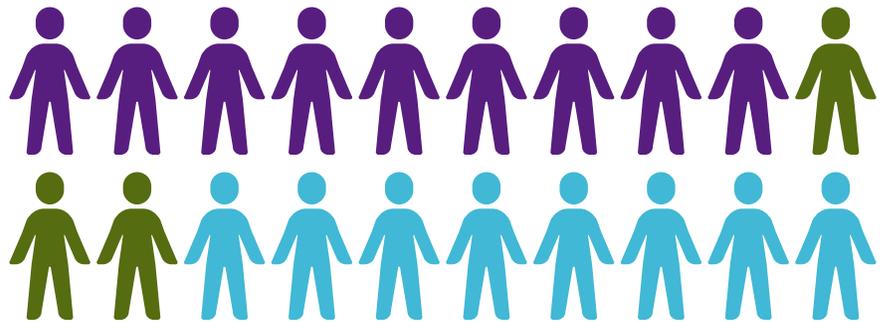
► **CIRCLE In-Depth Qualitative Interviews**

Building on the foundation established through YEF's site visits, CIRCLE conducted 20 one-hour, one-on-one, virtual, semi-structured research interviews between June and August 2025 with staff members and leaders from 10 civic organizations across Alabama. The participating organizations were identified by YEF as having a focus on building the power of communities of color and other marginalized groups in Alabama, addressing issues like economic and environmental justice, reproductive rights, and immigration, and maintaining a commitment to building youth leadership and civic engagement.

These interviews aimed to understand each organization's mission, strategies, programming, capacity, barriers to growth, and long-term visions for youth power-building in the state. See the next page for information about the leaders interviewed and the locations in which organizations operate.

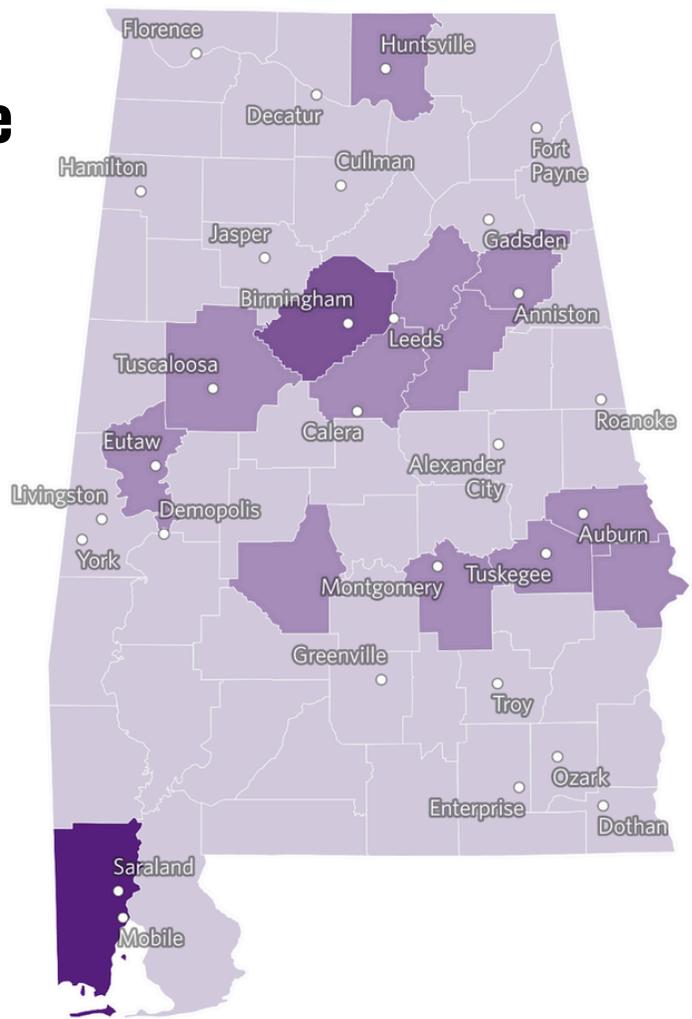
Of 20 Staff Members/Leaders Interviewed:

- 9 Executive Directors
- 3 Directors or Presidents
- 8 Coordinators, Managers, Junior Staff or Volunteer Leaders



Where Interviewed Organizations Are Active

This heat map displays how many interviewed organizations are active in each county. Five interviewed organizations operate statewide.



Note: While the five statewide organizations claimed that they operate in all counties, staff confirmed during interviews that they focus on a select number of counties, and all counties do not have an equal level of organizational presence.

Summary of Findings

Alabama is home to over 800,000 young people ages 18-29 who comprise one in five of the state's voting-age population and represent the future of an increasingly diverse state where 41% of youth identify as people of color. Despite facing significant structural barriers, these young Alabamians demonstrate remarkable resilience and readiness to lead, supported by unique assets including the highest concentration in a state of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and a deep civil rights legacy. For funders, Alabama represents a high-potential, underinvested opportunity for youth civic engagement.

Young Alabamians' civic participation will fundamentally shape Alabama's trajectory for decades to come. Youth civic engagement represents far more than a democratic ideal: it is an essential investment in Alabama's future. Youth bring fresh perspectives to longstanding issues, innovative approaches to problem-solving, and a deep stake in today's policy decisions. Further, investing in youth civic engagement means investing in improved educational outcomes, stronger community connections, and enhanced leadership skills—assets that will yield strong economic development and community problem-solving capacity in the region. In the words of one Alabama civic leader, young leaders serve as catalysts who "act as a solvent for the apathy of older people," energizing broader movements while ensuring diverse viewpoints are heard in civic spaces.

Alabama's youth civic engagement ecosystem is chronically underfunded and structurally constrained. Youth voter turnout has lagged behind national averages by 5-8 percentage points in recent elections, while restrictive voting policies, economic hardship, and inadequate digital infrastructure create persistent barriers to participation.

Nonetheless, Alabama possesses unique but underutilized assets for youth engagement:

- **Large youth population of 800,000**, comprising 1 in 5 of the voting-age population
- **41% of the youth population are people of color**, with Black youth comprising 29% of all young Alabamians— a larger proportion than the 25% Black representation in the overall adult population, indicating increasing diversity
- **14 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)** —the most of any state— serving as natural youth hubs "ripe for organizing," in the words of one civic leader interviewed for this report
- **Living civil rights legacy** connecting today's youth directly to movement elders
- **Strong collaborative culture** among civic organizations that already work in coalition
- **Motivated young people** who mobilize quickly around critical issues despite a conservative climate and limited resources

Based on the 20 interviews, five priority areas for investment emerged:

Dedicated funding streams for youth-specific programming

Staff capacity expansion, particularly youth organizers and campus liaisons

Rural and non-college youth outreach to reach populations beyond metro areas and university campuses

Professional development for staff in strategic planning, digital communications, and youth engagement

Transportation and infrastructure support to overcome geographic barriers

Alabama's civic leaders consistently emphasized that the state's challenges are resource-driven, not capacity-driven. Organizations possess the imagination, relationships, and expertise to significantly expand their programming with sustained support. The convergence of Alabama's unique assets—its HBCU network, civil rights heritage, and collaborative nonprofit ecosystem—creates conditions where strategic investment could yield transformational returns. For funders, Alabama represents a critical opportunity to build durable civic infrastructure in a region that has been systematically underfunded, while leveraging existing strengths that position young Alabamians to drive change throughout the South.

Part 1: Alabama Youth Sustain Civic Engagement in Challenging Landscape

1 in 5 of the Voting-Age Population in Alabama is Composed of Young People

Alabama is home to over 800,000 youth ages 18-29, making up one in five of the state’s total adult (18 and over) population. This proportion is similar to the proportion of youth in the country, and youth in Alabama are evenly split between males and females.

There is greater racial/ethnic diversity among Alabama youth than among the general population, with 41% of youth in the state identifying as a person of color compared to 34% among the 18+ population overall. Notably, Black youth make up the largest non-White group among youth: 29%. Furthermore, the proportion of youth of color exceeds the proportion of people of color in the total adult population in Alabama, indicating that Alabama’s population will become increasingly diverse. The table below summarizes the diversity of Alabama’s next generation.

Race/Ethnicity	Proportion of race/ethnicity group among youth (18-29)	Proportion of race/ethnicity group among total adult (18+) population
White (Non-Hispanic)	59%	66%
Black (Non-Hispanic)	29%	25%
Hispanic	6%	4%
Asian (Non-Hispanic)	2%	1%
Multiple Races/Ethnicities, Other	4%	3%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey 2023 5-year

Trends in Alabama's Youth Voter Turnout Show Persistent Gaps

While acknowledging the importance of elections beyond the national level, as well as the weight of civic engagement beyond voting (e.g., volunteering, community organizing, participating in local organizations), we examine the turnout rate of Alabama youth in recent national elections to consider the health of Alabama's youth civic participation. Youth turnout rate is calculated as the proportion of 18-29-year-old youth citizens who voted in any election.

Alabama has seen recent successes in terms of the electoral engagement of its youth, but there continue to be persistent gaps in the state's youth turnout rate when compared to the national youth turnout rate. In recent elections (2024, 2022, 2018), Alabama's youth turnout rate trailed behind the national average by 5 or 8 percentage points, underscoring the urgent need for greater support of youth civic participation in the state. However, there were some exceptions: the state surpassed the national average by 2 percentage points in the 2016 Presidential election, and the gap with the national voter turnout rate was very small (-3%) in the 2020 Presidential election as well. As we explain further below, these turnout rates are notable given that Alabama does not benefit from factors that typically drive youth turnout, including heightened partisan competition and deep investment in youth and civic engagement infrastructure.

	Youth (18-29) turnout in Alabama	National youth (18-29) turnout	Gap between Alabama and national
2024 (Presidential)	42%	47%	-5%
2022 (Midterm)	15%	23%	-8%
2020 (Presidential)	47%	50%	-3%
2018 (Midterm)	23%	28%	-5%
2016 (Presidential)	40%	38%	+2%

Source: CIRCLE analysis of Catalist voter file data

Alabama Youth Face Systemic Barriers To Electoral Participation

The over 800,000 youth living in Alabama face pernicious structural barriers to electoral participation in terms of the election policy landscape, as well as investment in important infrastructure for civic participation.

Alabama has a web of restrictive electoral policies (see table below) that present numerous obstacles for young voters. These policies disproportionately affect young voters, particularly those who are low-income, rural, or first-time voters. Furthermore, in more than 70% of Alabama counties, fewer than half of households have high-speed broadband internet access at home, impeding young people’s ability to access civic information and register to vote online [1]. These barriers align with a 2024 analysis of national political engagement, which ranked Alabama the second least politically engaged state overall based on 10 key indicators, including voter turnout, political donations, and voter accessibility policies [2]. Notably, however, the same report ranked Alabama as 35th in youth political engagement (ages 18-24)—a relative bright spot that underscores the proclivity of young Alabamians to participate civically despite electoral laws and systemic conditions that work against them.

Barrier	Why It Matters for Youth
Photo ID requirement	Students and low-income youth may lack IDs
No in-person early voting	Reduces flexibility for young voters juggling school/work
Notarization or two-witness signature requirement for absentee voting	Burdensome for students and low-income youth
Criminalization of absentee ballot assistance [3]	Organizers cannot safely help young or marginalized voters vote absentee
No same-day or automatic registration	Higher risk of youth missing deadlines
No pre-registration for 17-year-olds	Fewer opportunities for first-time voters to register
Digital divide	Online registration is inaccessible to rural youth

Alabama's Commitment to Investing in Youth Despite Resource Challenges

Poverty is a pervasive issue in Alabama—20.9% of children in Alabama live in poverty, compared to the national average of 16.9% [4]. The state also has a lower-than-average median household income of \$59,943, significantly below the national median of \$69,201. Minimum wage in Alabama remains \$7.25 per hour, despite a rising cost of living over the 16 years since the last federal minimum wage increase [5]. Additionally, scholars have linked the state's poverty rate with a low-ranking education system (compared to national standards), a regressive tax system, lack of Medicaid expansion, food insecurity, and persistent social segregation [6]. Alabama's Gini index, a statistical measure of income inequality on a scale of 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality), was 0.49 in 2022, an increase of 3 percentage points since 2008 [7]. This indicates that income inequality in Alabama has exacerbated over time. Alabama's Gini index is equivalent to the U.S. national Gini index, which was also 0.49 in 2022 [8].

Despite an inadequate focus on equitable wealth-building and economic mobility, there is a demonstrated commitment to youth in the state via educational spending and youth-serving nonprofit work.

2.7%

of nonprofits in Alabama serve youth, which is on par with the national average of 2.5%, despite fewer resources at the state level. [9]

48.6%

of Alabama state expenditures are invested in education (elementary, secondary, and higher education), which is significantly higher than the national average of 27.6%. [10]

Bottom Line: Barriers, Bright Spots, and the Path Forward

Alabama's youth civic engagement landscape reveals both promise and persistent challenges. While the state demonstrates meaningful commitment to its young people through above-average educational investment and youth-serving nonprofit activity, structural barriers continue to limit the electoral participation of the over 800,000 young Alabamians. The fluctuating gap between state and national youth turnout rates—ranging from Alabama exceeding the national average in 2016 to lagging 8 percentage points behind in 2022—underscores the need for Alabama's youth to receive consistent and increasing support to remain civically engaged, given their challenges with restrictive voting policies, economic hardship, and inadequate digital infrastructure. Moving forward, addressing these systemic barriers and building upon existing investments in education and youth development with targeted investments in youth civic engagement will be essential for ensuring that Alabama's next generation can fully participate in shaping their communities and the state's future.

Part 2: Insights from Alabama Civic Leaders

Interviews with 20 movement leaders across Alabama reveal a youth civic engagement ecosystem marked by both serious structural challenges and notable assets. Organizations report persistent barriers such as a lack of dedicated funding, limited staff capacity, difficulty reaching rural and non-college youth, and restrictive state policies. At the same time, Alabama's history of civil rights leadership, its network of HBCUs, and the resilience of young people themselves represent bright spots that point to the state's promise as a site for deeper philanthropic investment. Ultimately, while Alabama is a challenging environment for youth civic work, it is also a place where increased, targeted funding would unlock transformational progress.

Below is a summary of the key themes and takeaways from the interviews. Our methodology involved coding full transcriptions of each interview and then conducting an analysis of the codes into salient themes. These themes reflect the challenges that Alabama organizations face and the bright spots that point toward growth. While the themes do not capture every interviewee's experience, we aimed to synthesize the most consistent insights across conversations, supported by illustrative examples shared by interviewees.

Chronic Underfunding and Programmatic Decline Underscore the Urgency of Philanthropic Investment

The 10 organizations that CIRCLE and YEF interviewed represent a wide spectrum of size and capacity. Some operate entirely through volunteer labor, while others employ more than 20 full-time staff. Funding sources are similarly varied but limited in scope. A majority (approximately 70% of interviewed organizations) rely on a mix of private national foundations and private community or regional foundations. Only one organization reported receiving support from state and local government, and just one had secured a corporate grant. Two groups are state affiliates of national organizations and therefore receive some funding from their parent entities. Meanwhile, another reported relying almost exclusively on a regional foundation and subgrants from the state table.

Despite this range, a consistent theme emerged: **a lack of dedicated funding streams for youth civic engagement.** Most organizations sustain youth programming within their general operating budgets, making youth programming especially vulnerable when budgets tighten. As one nonprofit leader explained, youth engagement is “the first to go if tough times come” due to the prioritization of core services over civic and educational programming. Leaders described running deficit budgets, being unable to innovate, and struggling to maintain even their current offerings.

Interviewees also noted that **national funding strategies disadvantage Alabama**, since funders often direct civic engagement dollars toward competitive “swing or purple states.” Consequently, organizations often experience funding surges tied to election cycles or litigation campaigns, followed by sharp declines once those moments pass. Additionally, one executive director explained that youth-focused funding that does reach Alabama tends to be limited to education and workforce development, “helping them learn how to assimilate into society” rather than “building up their ability to change things.”

This scarcity of funding has already led to the **decline or closure of youth-serving civic programs.** Interviewees described how grassroots leadership development programs have shuttered after losing funding, how long-standing organizations laid off all their staff and sunsetted, and how cuts to local nonprofit budgets have hollowed out programs that once offered youth training and afterschool engagement. .

One interviewee remarked that she saw “a clear line” between the decline of nonprofits and “a steady increase of crime among our youth.” Another reflected that, compared to when she grew up, “there’s a decrease in Boys & Girls clubs. There’s a void. There’s not a lot of city orgs— a gap in the area.”

For funders, this pattern illustrates both the urgency and the opportunity. Without sufficient resources, organizations struggle to retain staff and sustain programming, resulting in a patchwork system where youth opportunities come and go depending on shifting budgets and short-term grants. **Dedicated, sustained investment in youth civic engagement could prevent the rollback of existing programs and foster new infrastructure for long-term growth.**

Rural and Non-College Youth Are Challenging But Crucial To Engage

Geography and socioeconomic barriers make engaging Alabama youth particularly difficult outside of the state’s largest metro areas. Leaders described how young people in the **Black Belt and Wiregrass regions**, largely agricultural regions in south-central and southeastern Alabama, face a unique set of obstacles: underfunded schools, limited job opportunities, and virtually no infrastructure to support civic life. As one interviewee explained, these areas “have the fewest number of organizations for young people to plug into.”

Basic infrastructure challenges further isolate rural youth. Several leaders noted that, outside of Birmingham, Montgomery, Mobile, and Huntsville, young people lack access to public transportation, Uber/Lyft services, and reliable high-speed broadband internet. As one leader put it, many rural communities don’t even have the “basic things people take for granted, so imagine trying to organize and do things.”

In addition to rural challenges, organizations highlighted **non-college youth** as an overlooked but critical group. Because many civic programs are anchored to college campuses, young people who enter the workforce directly after high school have few opportunities to engage. One interviewee emphasized that campuses provide a natural gathering space for outreach, but for young people working outside higher education, “it can be a lot harder to find them.” Another noted that much of the available funding and programming flows to traditional educational institutions, leaving out “a great subset of the youth that are not present in schools.”

Without intentional investment in outreach strategies and infrastructure tailored to these populations, **rural and non-college youth will remain disconnected from civic life.** Yet these young people represent some of Alabama’s most important and underutilized voices, illustrating the urgency for funders to support efforts that reach beyond campuses and cities into every corner of the state.

The Double-Edged Sword of Alabama’s Culture

Interviewees described Alabama’s political and cultural context as both a barrier and a catalyst for youth civic engagement. The state’s conservative climate and slow pace of institutional change create real obstacles for young people and the organizations that serve them. Leaders spoke of “regressive” policies and deeply ingrained “stigma” that foster fear and mistrust among families. According to interviewees, this stigma often takes the form of narratives circulated by politicians and media that vilify DEI, critical race theory, and sex education and portray civic engagement groups as disruptive and harmful to children. As a result, many parents are hesitant to allow their children to participate in programs that encourage political learning or advocacy, even when they align with community needs. One leader who has worked in six states said Alabama is “the most difficult state” she has worked in because “the stigma factor in Alabama is through the roof.” These perceptions create a chilling effect: organizations must devote significant time and energy to relationship and trust before they can even begin engaging with youth, making recruitment slower and more resource-intensive than in other contexts.

At the same time, this very environment often **fuels activism and resilience among youth.** When discriminatory or restrictive policies surface, young people are quick to mobilize. For example, during the debate over SB 129, the state’s anti-DEI bill, college students organized protests and testified in legislative hearings [11]. Leaders described this as evidence that Alabama youth are bright and ready to lead, if given the resources and pathways to sustain their engagement.

For funders, this paradox highlights both the challenge and the opportunity: while Alabama’s cultural context presents barriers, it also produces **youth who are deeply motivated to advocate for change.** Investing in their resilience and leadership is key to unlocking this potential.

Civil Rights History Catalyzes Current Movement Building

Alabama's role as a birthplace of the civil rights movement provides youth with a powerful sense of **legacy and identity**. Cities like Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma were epicenters of landmark struggles for racial justice, from the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott to the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery marches, that captured national attention. Many of the movement's most visible leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and John Lewis, worked alongside young people in Alabama who risked their lives to challenge segregation and expand voting rights. That legacy remains tangible today. Leaders emphasized that today's young people are directly connected to the movement's history, not only through school curricula and historical markers in places like Birmingham and Selma, but also through living relationships with elders who participated in the struggle. Youth in Alabama often grow up hearing civil rights stories from grandparents, pastors, or community members, which creates what one leader described as "ancestral roots in organizing" and avenues for "informal teaching." Others noted that the presence of "foot soldiers" who are still alive and active offers young people a unique opportunity to learn directly from those who shaped history.

At the same time, interviews revealed that organizations in Alabama engage youth at very different levels. One organization did not have any dedicated youth-specific programming, while others involved young people primarily through junior boards, internships, or fellowships. At least five of the interviewed groups, however, are centering youth leadership, with adults serving in more supportive roles, or adopting intergenerational collaboration models where youth and adults share decision-making authority. Moreover, in at least four organizations, staff and volunteers themselves are majority under the age of 35, which further shapes how programs are designed and led.

This proximity to history and the varied degrees of youth involvement create both opportunities and tensions. Leaders observed that while elders bring invaluable experience and moral authority, they "expect things to look a certain way," and younger activists often bring a different approach to organizing, communication, and diplomacy. The result is sometimes siloed work, with older and younger generations "working parallel instead of together." At the same time, interviewees noted that youth play a vital role in "holding older people accountable and pushing the envelope," ensuring the movement continues to evolve. As one leader framed it, "it's up to young people to provoke and dislodge advocates who get comfortable in their positions and uplift new ways of thinking."

For funders, this dynamic points to both a challenge and an opportunity. Investing in **youth leadership development and intergenerational bridge-building** would not only strengthen continuity between past and present movements but also ensure that the lessons of Alabama’s history fuel, rather than constrain, the civic engagement of future generations. Research from CIRCLE reveals that youth-adult partnerships—where young people are treated as equal collaborators in decision-making, problem solving, and strategic planning—are among the most effective ways to foster lifelong civic engagement. These collaborations build civic skills like communication and empathy, expand young people’s sense of power, and help organizations themselves become more innovative and inclusive. In Alabama, where the civil rights legacy is both a source of inspiration and tension, intentional investment in intergenerational partnership could transform those relationships into a powerful driver of youth engagement.

HBCUs Are “Ripe For Organizing”

A significant bright spot across interviews was the recognition of Alabama’s **historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs)** as vital yet underutilized hubs for youth civic engagement. With 14 campuses, the highest number of HBCUs in the country, Alabama holds a unique advantage in being able to tap into dense, interconnected student communities where leadership skills, civic awareness, and organizing traditions are already strong. Student networks, including Black fraternities and sororities, were described as particularly rich entry points for engagement and mobilization.

At the same time, leaders emphasized that **capacity constraints and geographical limitations restrict their full engagement with these institutions.** While HBCU students are often deeply rooted in faith communities and highly attuned to racial and social inequities, organizations struggle to maintain a consistent presence across campuses. One leader noted that long distances between universities, combined with limited staff, make it difficult to build and sustain relationships with faculty, students, and student groups. As one leader explained, HBCUs are “ripe for organizing, but really challenging” without dedicated staff and resources to serve as liaisons. Another leader described running promising pilot programs, such as student-led voter engagement initiatives on three campuses, that could expand statewide if more funding were available.

For funders, HBCUs represent a **high-leverage investment opportunity.** Strategic resources could turn these campuses into durable organizing anchors, supporting leadership pipelines that begin with civic education and on-campus mobilization and extend into long-term community engagement after graduation.

Leaders Identify Resources That Can Propel Youth-Focused Work

Priority Area	Necessary Resources Identified by Civic Leaders
Program Expansion	Develop new civic engagement or leadership programs; expand existing initiatives
Staffing	Hire campus/youth organizers, membership coordinators, data specialists, and digital communications specialists
Dedicated Funding For Youth Engagement	Student internships, fellowships, leadership institutes, boot camp training, ambassador programs with stipends
Professional Development For Staff	Mentorship and skills training, with a focus on strategic planning, data/technical infrastructure, digital communications, leadership development, community relationship/trust building, and youth engagement
Transportation Assistance	Support for community members to attend events, given the lack of public transit and rideshare options

When asked about their priorities and aspirations, Alabama leaders consistently pointed to the same core needs: **more staff capacity and dedicated funding for programs focused on youth civic engagement.** Many expressed a desire to expand or launch new initiatives such as youth fellowships, student internships, education/advocacy institutes, ambassador programs, boot camps, or leadership pipelines. Several noted that comparable opportunities often exist for white or more affluent youth, but are rarely available to young people from Black and Brown communities, underscoring the need for equitable investment.

Staffing was another recurring theme. Leaders highlighted the strain of trying to cover an entire region with only one organizer and described the difference additional positions could make. With more staff—particularly campus/youth organizers, membership coordinators, data specialists, and digital communications leads—organizations could build more intentional, tailored programs. One executive director explained that she currently only has “one community organizer per region who’s supposed to be reaching everybody,” leaving little capacity and time to “develop initiatives that are specific to young people.” “If we had two or three [community organizers] in a region, that would give us the flexibility to have an organizer who could really focus in and dig in on youth engagement and another one that could dig in on older adults.”

With increased staff capacity, organizations could engage rural youth, expand programming to more college campuses, and experiment with new program models.

Leaders also emphasized the importance of **professional development and training for staff**, ranging from technical and data skills to digital communications, relationship building, and youth engagement. Many described creative program ideas, such as environmental justice workshops in schools, deep canvassing initiatives in every county, student-run boards and events, that remain out of reach or scope-constrained without sufficient funding. One statewide network leader captured this dilemma by noting that while there is no shortage of talent or ideas, “resources tend to be so scarce for this work that people typically have to go out of state to receive training, and then once they receive training, there's not typically too many options to plug back in, especially if you're talking about employment. Additionally, she stated that “mentorship in Alabama is based on who you know or generational,” suggesting that collaboration and peer learning is another staff need.

These aspirations demonstrate both the readiness and imagination of Alabama’s civic organizations and the urgency of philanthropic support to bring those ideas to scale. With sustained investment, groups could not only stabilize their operations but also cultivate leadership pipelines, expand programming, and build durable infrastructure that keeps young people engaged for the long term.

Toward Flourishing: Pathways for Growth

Despite significant challenges, leaders highlighted numerous bright spots that demonstrate the resilience and promise of Alabama’s youth civic ecosystem. One is the state’s strong culture of collaboration: several issue-based coalitions (e.g. voting rights, immigration, environmental justice) already operate in Alabama, providing a foundation for cross-organizational partnerships. Interviewees noted that most coalition members include youth-focused components in their work. This history of coalition work suggests that Alabama has the connective tissue to build a stronger statewide infrastructure for youth civic engagement.

Another bright spot is the creativity and energy of Alabama’s young people themselves. Leaders consistently described youth as resourceful, motivated, and capable of inspiring older generations. Even when working with limited resources, young people are leading on campuses and in communities—marching, organizing vigils, and raising awareness on critical issues. As one leader observed, “young people's energy and enthusiasm acts as a solvent for the apathy of older people. It gets the older people inspired, and they're like, maybe the kids are all right. Maybe the kids are going to help us move this thing forward.”

These bright spots reinforce a central theme of the interviews: **Alabama is rich with potential, but underfunded. With its diverse youth population, extensive HBCU network, strong coalition traditions, and deep civil rights legacy, the state is uniquely positioned for growth in youth civic engagement.** What is missing is sustained, targeted investment to stabilize programs, expand staff capacity, reach underserved youth, and build leadership pipelines. With strategic philanthropic support, Alabama’s youth civic ecosystem can evolve from fragile to flourishing, driving change not only for the state but for the South and the nation as a whole.

Part 3: Recommendations for Funders

This table outlines strategic recommendations for funders seeking to strengthen youth civic engagement in the state. The recommendations span six priority areas, from providing dedicated multi-year funding to building long-term civic infrastructure beyond electoral cycles. Each priority area identifies specific, actionable steps that funders can take to support youth organizing capacity, expand access for underserved communities, and leverage Alabama's unique assets. Together, these recommendations provide a roadmap for funders to move toward sustained investment in building durable youth civic power.

Priority Area	What Funders Can Do
Dedicated Funding	<p>Provide multi-year, unrestricted support specifically for youth civic engagement</p> <p>Currently, most youth programming is sustained by general operating funds, leaving initiatives vulnerable when budgets tighten. Dedicated, flexible resources would allow organizations to plan long-term, experiment with innovative programming, and ensure that youth civic engagement is not the first line item cut in lean years.</p>
Staff Capacity	<p>Fund new positions (youth/campus organizers, coordinators, data/digital staff) and expand internship/fellowship pipelines</p> <p>Leaders consistently noted that a single staffer often covers an entire region, leaving little time for youth-specific work. Dedicated youth organizers, especially those embedded in HBCUs or rural communities, would expand reach and build consistent relationships, while structured fellowships, such as student internships or training institutes, could prepare young leaders to become the next generation of organizers. Leaders also expressed a need for staff focused on digital/communications and data analysis.</p>
Professional Development	<p>Invest in staff training and mentorship in strategy, digital, data, leadership, and youth engagement</p> <p>Alabama organizations frequently lose promising staff because opportunities for skill-building and professional growth are scarce. Philanthropy can close this gap by funding peer learning and mentorship programs that build the technical and relational skills required to sustain youth civic ecosystems over the long term.</p>
Access for Underserved Youth	<p>Support transportation stipends, rural convenings, and programs for non-college youth</p> <p>In the Black Belt and Wiregrass regions, lack of public transportation and broadband access cuts young people off from civic opportunities. Addressing these barriers could mean underwriting travel for youth leaders, funding regional convenings in hard-to-reach areas, or supporting programming tailored to young people entering the workforce instead of college.</p>

<p>Leverage Alabama's Assets</p>	<p>Invest in HBCU-based organizing, intergenerational leadership, and coalition infrastructure</p> <p>Alabama has more HBCUs than any other state, and leaders described them as “ripe for organizing.” At the same time, the state’s rich civil rights legacy and existing coalition networks offer natural anchors for civic work. Funders could amplify these assets by supporting campus organizers at HBCUs, funding intergenerational bridge-building programs, and resourcing coalition tables that already bring organizations together.</p>
<p>Long-Term Commitment</p>	<p>Move beyond short-term electoral funding to a sustained partnership that builds a durable civic infrastructure</p> <p>Leaders stressed that Alabama is often overlooked because it is not considered a “swing state,” which results in episodic funding tied to national election cycles. A sustained partnership would mean investing in the underlying capacity of organizations year over year— building pipelines of trained youth leaders, funding civic education outside of election season, and supporting institutions that can carry work forward regardless of electoral outcomes.</p>

Document Citations:

- 1] CIRCLE, [10/16/20](#)
- [2] WalletHub, [10/16/24](#)
- [3] AL.com, [3/20/24](#)
- [4] [CIRCLE Data Tool](#)
- [5] University of Alabama, [1/27/20](#)
- [6] UAB, [3/27/24](#); Alabama Reflector, [11/4/24](#); Alabama Public Radio, [8/13/24](#)
- [7] SSTI, [1/25/24](#)
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] [CIRCLE Data Tool](#)
- [10] NASBO, [2024](#)
- [11] WBHM, [3/18/24](#)
- [12] CIRCLE, [7/7/23](#)

Appendix:

Interview Protocol

Below is the interview protocol that was used in CIRCLE's semi-structured research interviews with all participants.

Introduction

In this interview, we will focus on the topic of youth civic engagement in Alabama. We would like to hear about your experiences and ideas related to strengthening youth civic engagement in the state of Alabama. We want to hear about your perspective on promising practices and approaches related to youth civic engagement, as well as any current restrictions and barriers to deepening and expanding this work. For your awareness, we aim to complete about 15 questions in the hour that we have, so there is no need to spend more than about 2-3 minutes on each answer. I may step in to move us to the next question, but this is so that we can address all of the questions we have planned for the hour.

Geographical Focus: Alabama Counties

1. Before we start, when YEF visited and gathered information about your organization, they captured the counties that your organization operates in. We'd like to confirm these counties with you. Could you let us know if this list of counties is accurate?

Defining Youth Civic Engagement

1. How does your organization define civic engagement?
2. How does your organization define "youth"?
3. What do you see as the role of youth in building power for racial justice, economic justice, and other forms of sociopolitical justice in the state of Alabama?
4. What unique opportunities exist in Alabama for youth civic engagement?
5. What are historical or current factors specific to Alabama that affect how youth engage?

Resource Landscape and Barriers

1. Could you describe your organization's current funding sources for youth civic engagement work? How stable or sustainable are these sources?
2. If your organization had sufficient and sustainable funding, what would be on your organization's wish list? Do you have any examples of projects that your organization would pursue if funding wasn't a barrier?
3. What are the biggest gaps you see in funding for youth civic engagement work in Alabama?
4. Are there particular regions or communities in Alabama where youth civic engagement is especially difficult or under-resourced?
5. What training or capacity-building resources are currently available to support youth civic engagement work in Alabama?
 - a. Are there any shared resources or services that organizations currently access together?
6. What types of need for non-financial resources or support do you see across organizations doing this work? What kinds of training, mentorship, or peer learning would strengthen your work?
7. What are other major barriers to youth civic engagement work in Alabama? For example, are there dynamics related to national organizations, or other power dynamics that function as a barrier?

IF TIME:

Collaboration

1. How well connected do you feel to other youth organizers or groups doing similar work in the state?
Have you ever felt isolated in your work?
 - a. Could you tell us about any current collaborative efforts your organization has with other groups working on youth civic engagement?
2. Thinking about past collaborations, could you share an example of a particularly successful partnership? What made it work well?
3. What have been the biggest challenges you've encountered when trying to work collaboratively with other organizations?
4. What resources or support would make it easier for your organization to engage in meaningful collaborations?

Current Assets in Alabama Landscape

1. From your perspective, what are examples of successful models or programs related to youth civic engagement? What has worked for your organization?
 - a. What are any recent successes or wins that you have experienced related to youth civic engagement?
2. How were youth voice and youth leadership part of these practices and approaches?

Closing

1. Is there anything we haven't asked about that you think is important for us to understand about the youth civic engagement landscape in Alabama?



The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) is a non-partisan, independent research organization focused on youth civic engagement in the United States. We conduct extensive research on youth participation, and we leverage that research to improve opportunities for all young people to acquire and use the skills and knowledge they need to meaningfully participate in civic life. CIRCLE is part of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.

Learn more at circle.tufts.edu