

AMERICAN YOUTH PRIORITIES REPORT

2025 - 2026

Findings from the 14th
UNA-USA Youth Observer
to the United Nations'
National Listening Tour



UNA-USA

YOUTH VOICES ON AMERICA'S ROLE AT THE UNITED NATIONS AND IN THE WORLD

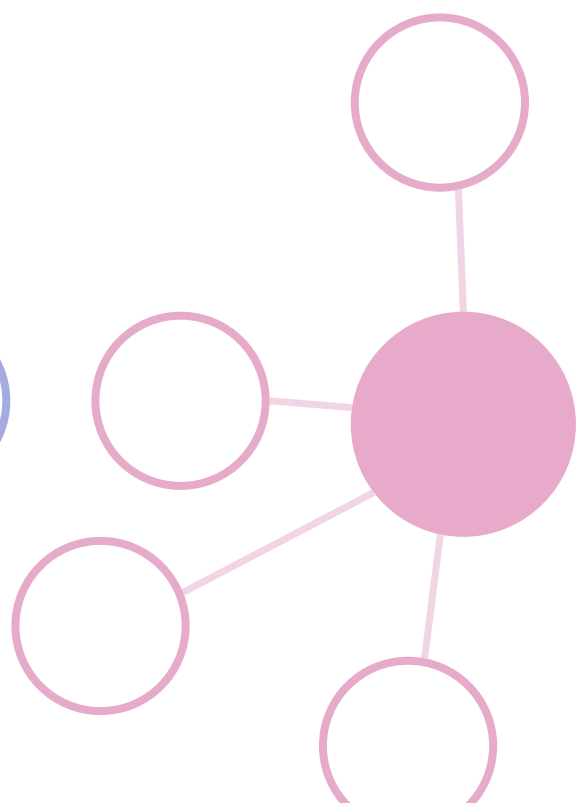
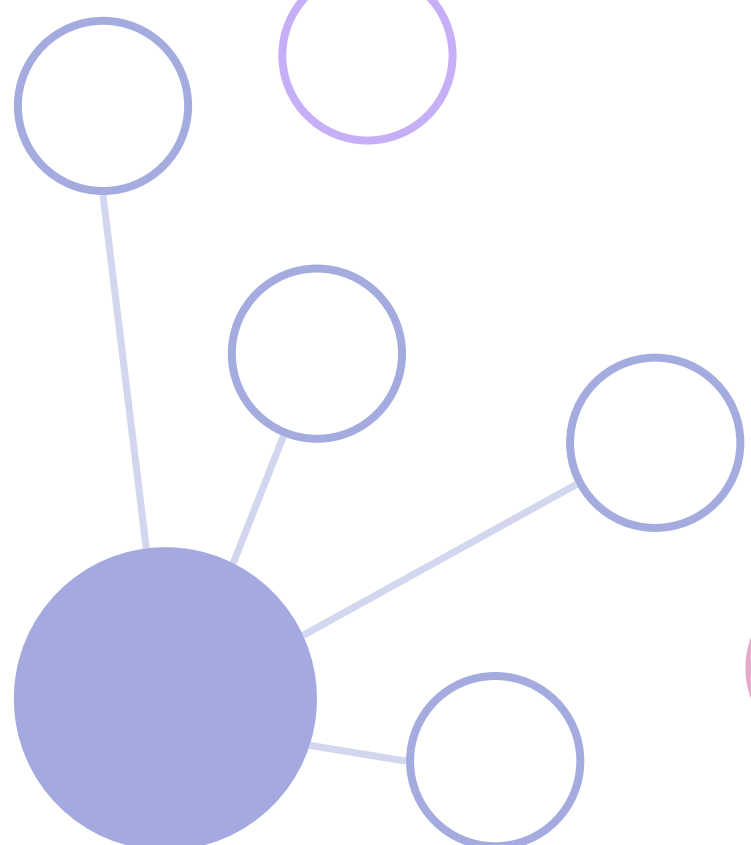
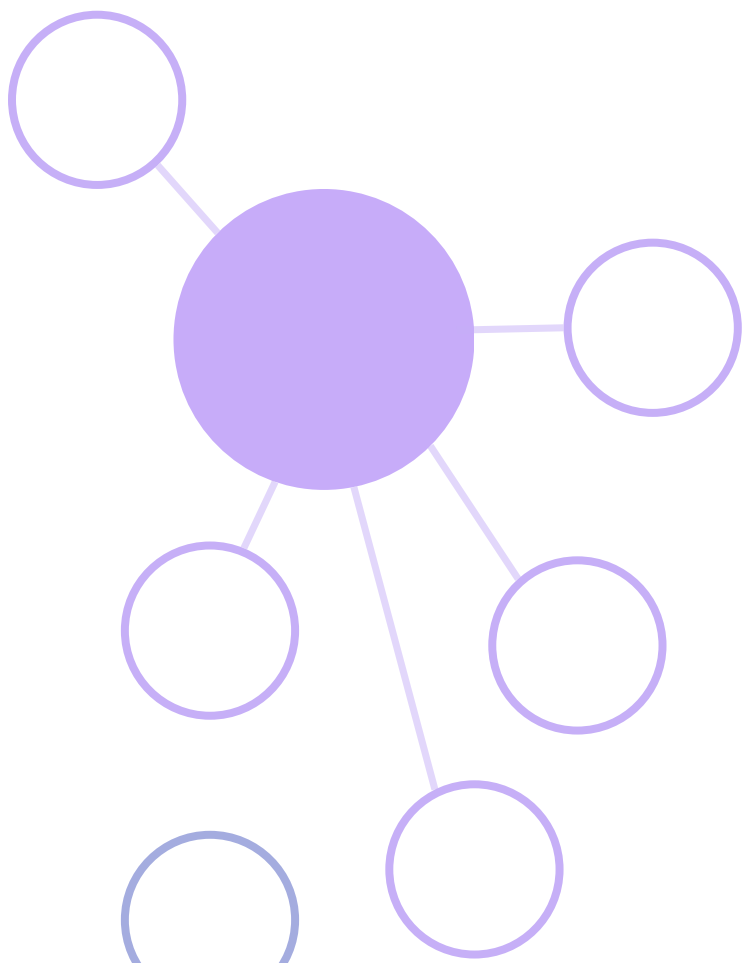


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INTRODUCTION

The 2025-2026 American Youth Priorities Report captures what American youth actually think about the world they're inheriting. As the 14th UNA-USA Youth Observer, I conducted a nationwide listening tour and analyzed data submitted by UNA-USA members through end-of-year chapter reports to produce this report. The result is a portrait of emerging American leadership drawn from the perspectives of young people across UNA-USA's student chapter network.

UNA-USA is a movement of more than 20,000 Americans and U.S. residents who believe in the principles and values of the United Nations. With more than 230 chapters across the country and individual champions in more than 46 states and territories, UNA-USA advocates for a strong U.S.-UN partnership in communities, on campuses, and within Congress. Founded in 1943, the organization helped shape the UN Charter and its ratification by Congress. Today, as part of the United Nations Foundation, UNA-USA connects grassroots supporters with U.S. decision-makers in pursuit of a world that is just, peaceful, and prosperous on a healthy planet.

Through its nationwide chapter network, UNA-USA gives young Americans a platform to make their voices heard, build cross-sector relationships, and engage in meaningful dialogue on the global issues that define our time. The organization is deeply committed to promoting multilateralism, human rights, and sustainable development, and plays a central role in shaping the next generation of American global leaders.

This report is their testimony. It reflects where American youth place their trust, where they see institutions falling short, and what they believe the United States owes the world and itself.



NOTE FROM THE YOUTH OBSERVER

I am the son of a peacekeeper, who once wore the blue helmet representing the United States in what is now the Republic of North Macedonia. From that upbringing, I came to understand that peace and security are neither abstract ideals nor guaranteed conditions. Rather, they are built through service, commitment, and collaboration. This perspective shaped my year as the 14th UNA-USA Youth Observer to the United Nations, a mission I undertook to make the work of this institution tangible for young Americans who might never interact with it, yet whose futures are inseparable from its success.

Over the course of the year, I traveled across the country on a National Listening Tour, hearing directly from young people about their hopes, concerns, and priorities. I carried those voices into the halls of Congress and into UN offices from New York to Rome, where discussions on policy, diplomacy, and global governance are often distant from the realities of everyday life. In listening, it became clear that this work was not mine alone; it was ours. Young Americans demonstrated a profound engagement with the issues that define our generation, from climate to human rights, to democratic resilience, and a readiness to act in ways that will shape the world we inherit.

We live in a moment of unprecedented challenge: institutions are under strain, strategic competition is intensifying, and the looming crises of climate, affordability, and technology are converging. Yet these challenges are also opportunities. They remind us that American leadership, when exercised with unity, principle, and foresight, remains essential, not only to sustaining global stability, but to giving young people the space and tools to imagine and build a more secure and just world. This report reflects those priorities, the voices that gave them shape, and the urgency of the moment in which they must be pursued. Because, if we are honest with ourselves, the work before us is critically moral. It asks whether we will continue investing in the tools of division, or whether we will have the courage to build the architecture of peace.



Jarrett James Lash
14th UNA-USA Youth
Observer to the
United Nations

A NATIONAL CONVERSATION



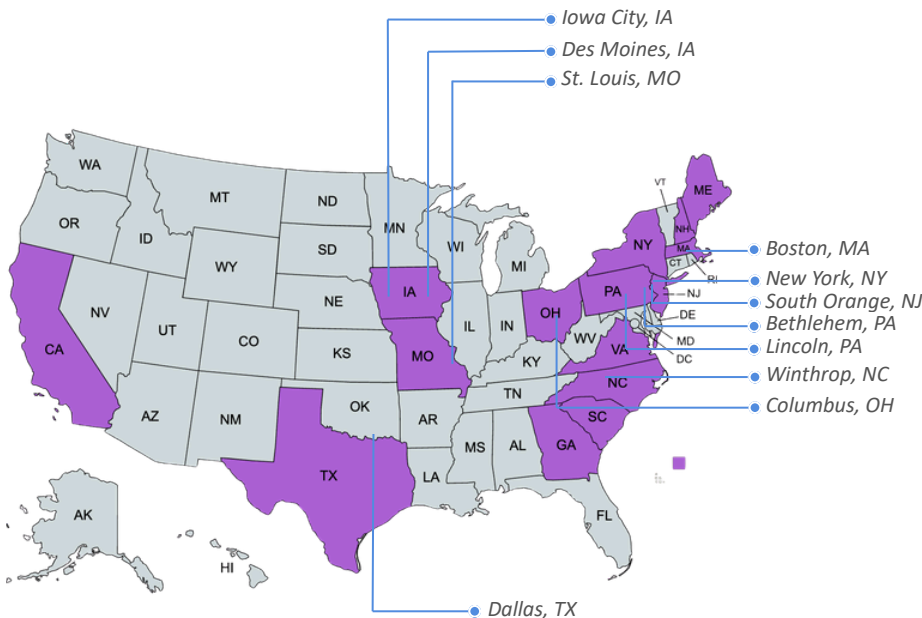
National Model United Nations, cropped from original

This year was defined by a deliberate effort to connect with communities that do not readily interact with the United Nations. While previous Youth Observer Listening Tours concentrated heavily along the coasts, where international institutions can feel more immediate, this year placed special emphasis on broadening that reach. The objective was to ensure that conversations about global leadership, multilateral cooperation, and America's role in the world extended well beyond traditional hubs of engagement.

The tour moved intentionally into the Midwest and the South, into cities better known for manufacturing, agriculture, research, and service than for diplomacy. From the Great Plains to the industrial heartland, from fast-growing southern metros to historic river cities, young Americans engaged thoughtfully on issues often framed as distant or abstract. What became clear is that international affairs are not remote from these communities; they are experienced through supply chains, military service, migration, climate impacts, and economic opportunity.

This commitment was underscored by UNA-USA's first Leadership Summit hosted by a local chapter in the Show-Me State of Missouri. Convening in St. Louis signaled something important: that global engagement is not the province of coastal corridors alone. It is a national undertaking.

Across regions, backgrounds, and political perspectives, one consistent theme emerged: young Americans want to be part of shaping the country's role in the world. This year affirmed that the conversation about the United Nations and American leadership belongs not to a select geography, but to the entire nation.



KEY FINDINGS

1

The most counterintuitive finding is also the most important one. Eighty percent of youth respondents trust the UN only "a little" or "a moderate amount." Not a single conservative respondent said they trusted it "a great deal" or "a lot." And yet 93 percent used negative language to describe U.S. withdrawal. Low trust and opposition to withdrawal are not in tension. They are the same argument from two directions: the institution is imperfect, and American absence makes it worse. For anyone making the case for continued U.S. engagement in multilateral institutions, this is the number that travels.

2

The gap between young Americans and the United Nations is not a values gap. It is an awareness gap. Young Americans described the UN's portfolio without naming the institution. AI governance as a power question, that is the UNGA Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence. Climate inaction as generational betrayal, that is UNFCCC. Democratic backsliding as existential threat, that is the Human Rights Council. The alignment between what young people care about and what the UN is mandated to do is genuine. The problem is that nobody told them the connection existed.

3

What young people say and where they invest are two different lists, and that divergence is the finding. At every stop, naming frequency and resource allocation diverged. Climate was named constantly and funded modestly. Political dysfunction was treated as atmospheric rather than investable. Affordability drew sustained resources because young people believe action there is still possible. That pattern is not apathy. It is a mobilization signal, a more reliable indicator of where this generation is prepared to move than issue salience alone. Policymakers reading only the naming data are getting an incomplete picture.

4

An optimism score of 4 out of 10 is not a number to manage. It is a diagnosis. Youth rated their optimism two median points below non-youth, and their ratings varied less, meaning the pessimism is broadly shared, not driven by outliers. Fifty-three percent said their generation will be remembered for AI and technology. Twenty-two percent named political instability. Eleven percent named economic insecurity, including the specific inability to own a home. And still, three in five expressed hope for change. Pessimism and hope are simultaneous postures for this generation. They are not checked out. They are waiting for a credible reason to invest.

5

The conversation about global leadership belongs to the entire country, and we need to intentionally have it everywhere. Young Americans in Des Moines, Columbus, Dallas, and Winthrop were not less engaged than those in New York or Boston. They were less scaffolded. The infrastructure of international affairs — Model UN networks, UNA chapter presence, foreign policy career pipelines — is concentrated on the coasts. The concerns that animate the multilateral agenda are not. Closing that gap is not a program adjustment. It is a strategic obligation.



In this report, youth is being defined as people under the age of 25. Today, those are people born after the year 2000.

YEAR IN REVIEW

A YEAR CARRIED FORWARD BY AN UNYIELDING PACE

This period unfolded at a consequential moment for the international order, one defined by conflict, strategic competition, fiscal strain, and rapid technological change. The institutions and alliances that have shaped global stability for decades were tested in real time.

For our generation, these events reinforced a clear truth: Global stability is neither automatic nor permanent. It requires stewardship. It requires cooperation. And it requires young people prepared not only to inherit the existing order, but to strengthen it.



Ted Eytan, CC BY-SA 4.0, cropped from original

Multilateral White House Security Summit on Ukraine

U.S. convenes European allies to reinforce long-term security guarantees.

80th United Nations General Assembly Opens

World leaders debate war, climate, AI, and institutional reform.

Secretary-General António Guterres unveils sharply reduced 2026 budget

A smaller UN budget signals deep financial stress in the multilateral system

Security Council Approval of the International Board of Peace

Multilateral effort to formalize structured mediation and conflict prevention mechanisms

August

September

October

November



CCO 1.0 Universal



UNA-USA Advocacy Summit

U.S. Congress Debates UN Funding

Domestic U.S. budget politics directly affect foreign assistance flows to UN funding

Election Process for the next Secretary-General

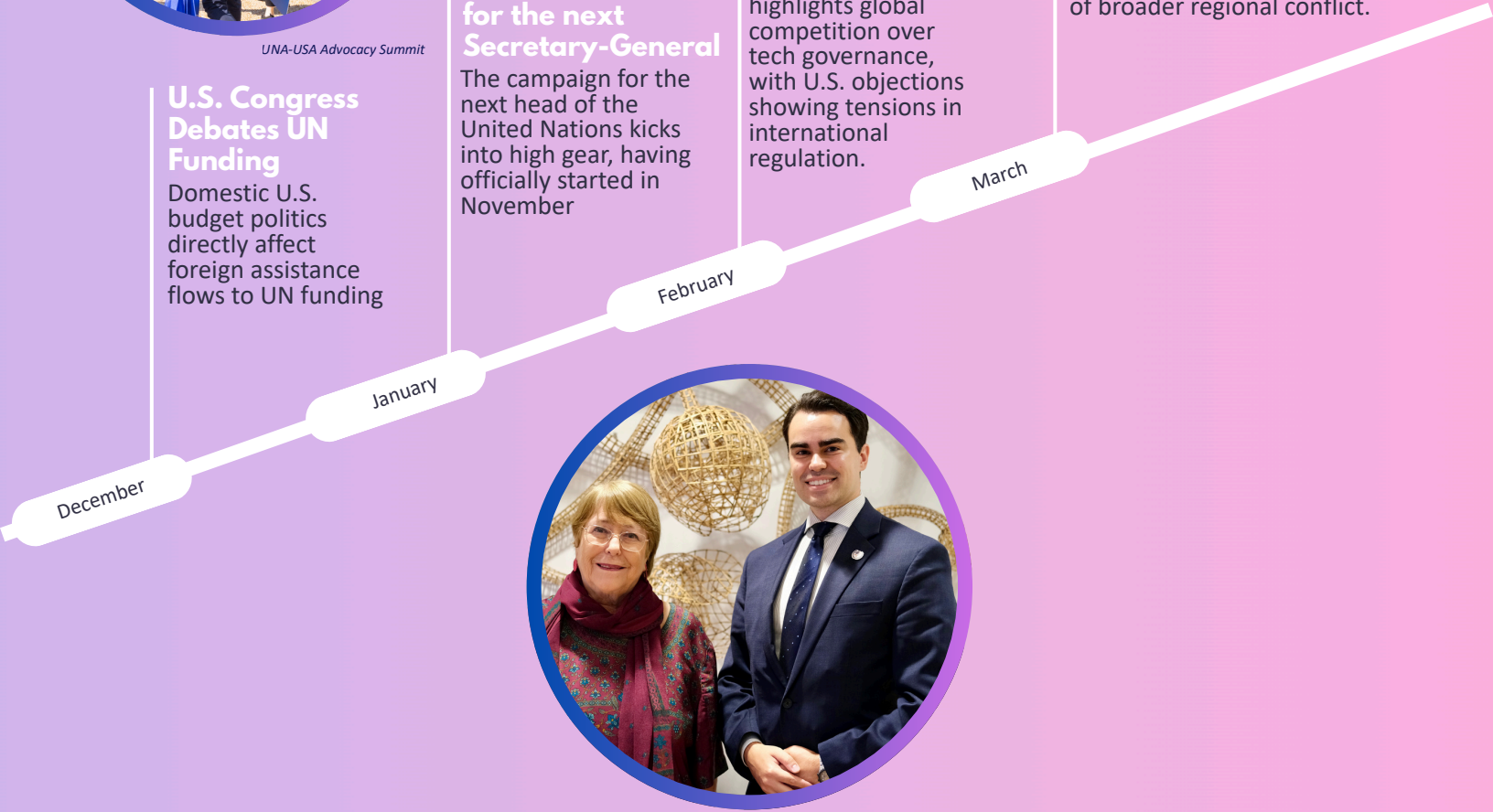
The campaign for the next head of the United Nations kicks into high gear, having officially started in November

UNGA approves Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence

A scientific AI panel highlights global competition over tech governance, with U.S. objections showing tensions in international regulation.

United States and Israel begin coordinated strikes in Iran

Joint strikes targeting Iran's military and nuclear infrastructure mark a major escalation in Middle East tensions and raise the risk of broader regional conflict.



Taken together, these events formed the quiet backdrop to the Listening Tour. While many of the students and young professionals I met were not always referencing these events directly, the moment we were living in was unmistakably present in the questions they asked and the concerns they raised. There was a heightened awareness that the world feels more uncertain than it did even a few years ago, shaped by geopolitical tensions, technological change, and growing pressure on international institutions.

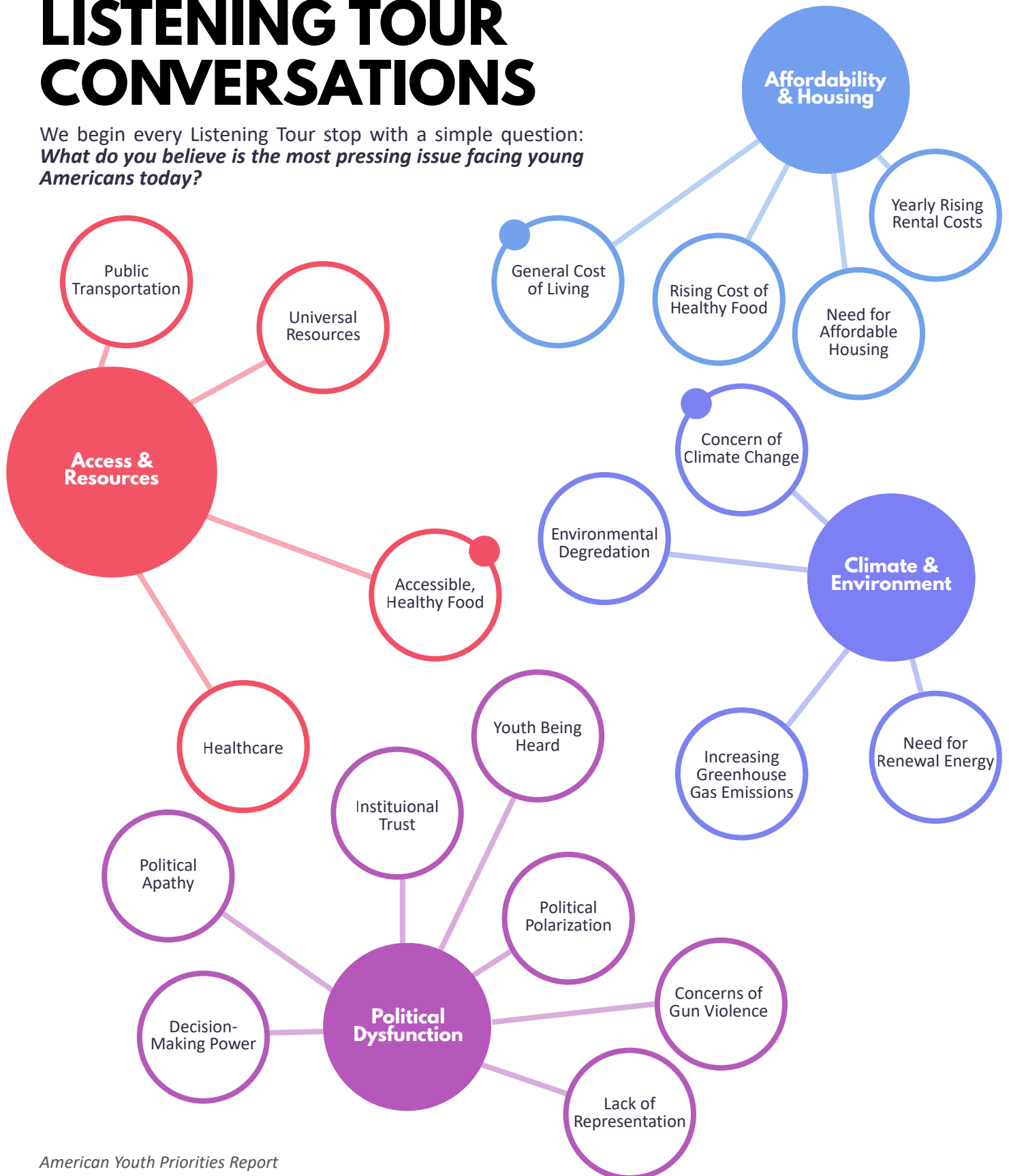
In conversation after conversation, this translated into a deeper curiosity about how global systems actually work and where young people fit within them. The events unfolding throughout the year did not dominate the discussions, but they shaped the atmosphere around them, reinforcing a shared sense that the stability and cooperation many generations have taken for granted are not inevitable. They are choices that must be continually renewed, and increasingly, choices that our generation will be called upon to help carry forward.

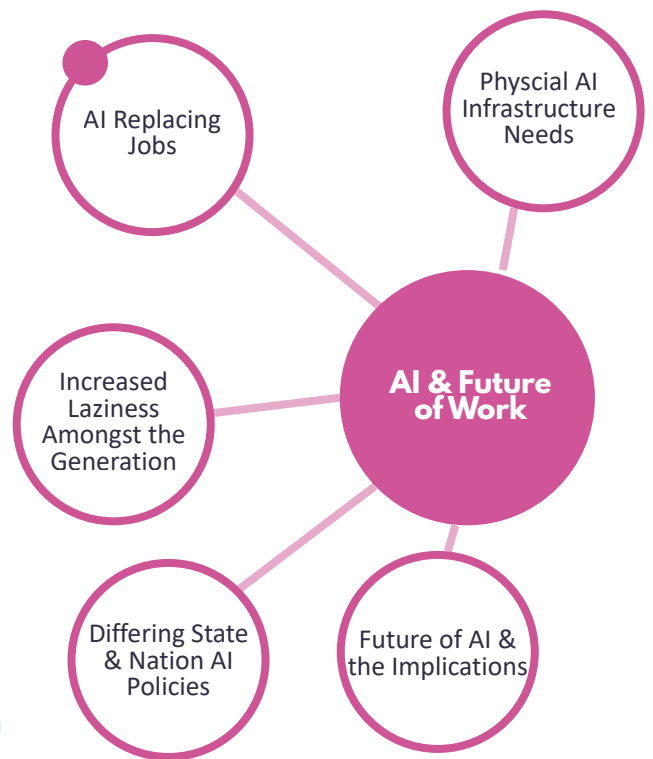
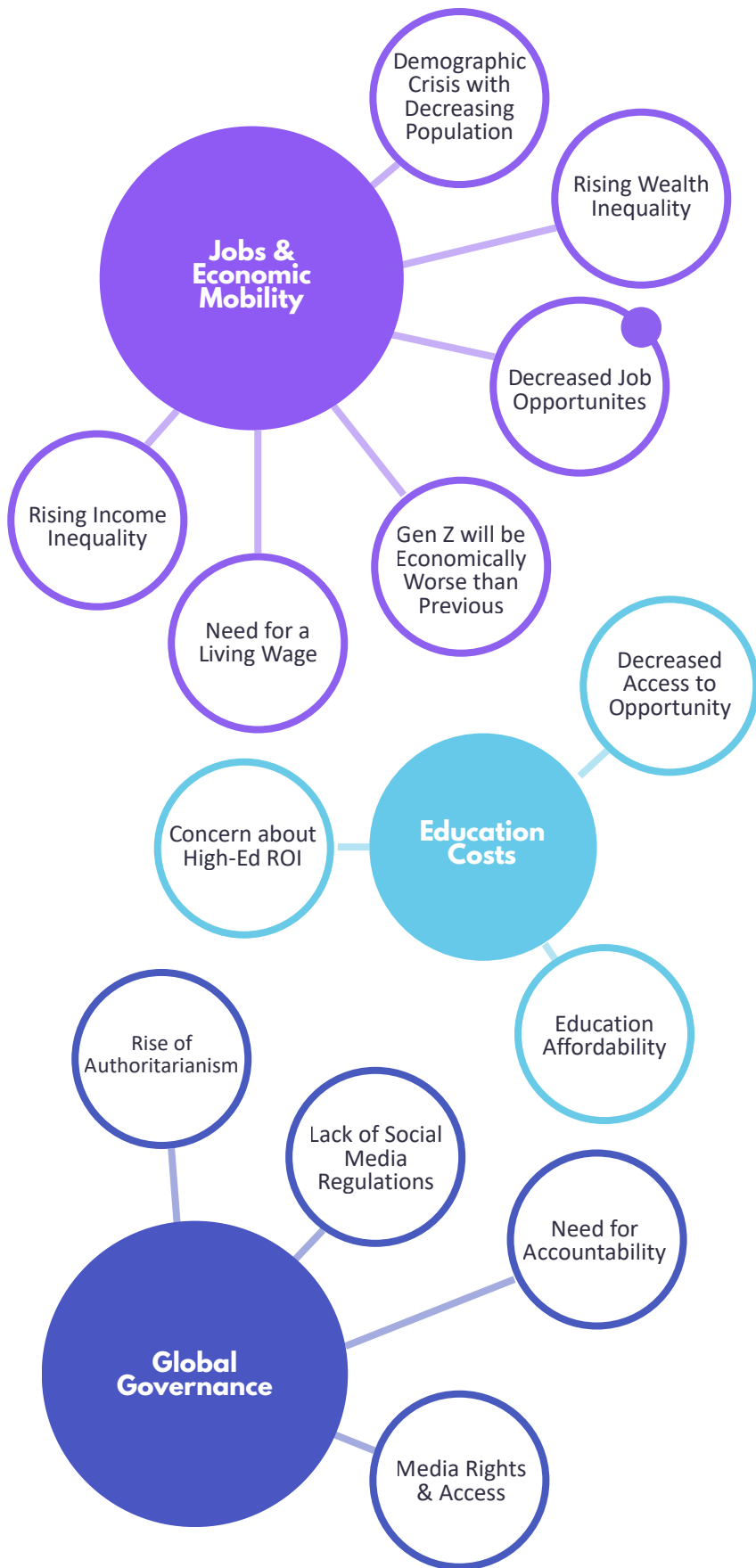
NATIONAL LISTENING TOUR FINDINGS



MAJOR THEMES OF LISTENING TOUR CONVERSATIONS

We begin every Listening Tour stop with a simple question: *What do you believe is the most pressing issue facing young Americans today?*





Across geographies, backgrounds, and areas of study, students consistently raised similar concerns. These responses have been grouped into **eight major issue areas** that emerged repeatedly throughout the tour.

During each session, students are also asked to consider where meaningful change can most effectively occur, whether at the local, state, federal, or multinational level, and to think through how they would allocate limited resources across the many challenges facing their generation.

Five subpoints, indicated by the additional shaded bubble, were the points brought up most frequently throughout the Listening Tour.

WHERE YOUNG AMERICANS NAME PROBLEMS VS. WHERE THEY PUT THEIR ENERGY

After participants wrote down their single most pressing issue facing young Americans today, they placed their issue on a shared wall divided into four columns: local, state, federal, and multinational government. Students are asked to make a genuine judgment about which level of government they believe holds the most responsibility for the problem they named. Where they place their issue tells us as much as what they wrote.

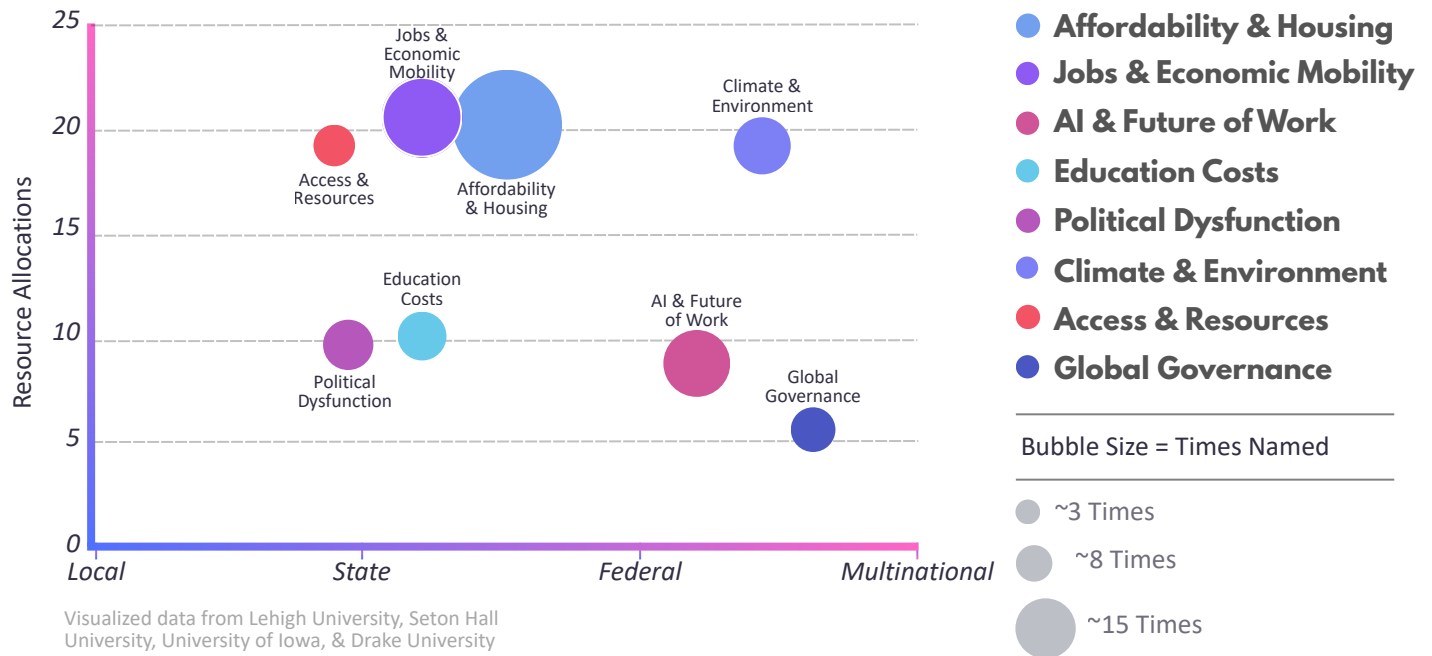
Finally, each participant received three resource stickers. Before placing them, they were told the stickers could represent anything finite in their lives: time, money, attention, energy. The only constraint is that those things are limited, and choices about where to direct them are real. Participants could place all three stickers on their own issue, spread them across others, or allocate them based on what they heard from the room. There was no requirement to follow their own submission.

This two-step design, naming then investing, is intentional. Issue salience surveys tell us what people are aware of. They do not tell us what people are willing to act on. The sticker allocation creates a low-stakes analog to real resource decisions, surfacing a second signal that often diverges from the first. That divergence is where the most useful findings live.



Each bubble represents a theme cluster. Horizontal position shows the level of government students most often held responsible. Vertical position shows total resource stickers allocated. Bubble size reflects how many times the issue was named. The gap between naming and investing is the story.

Listen Tour Stop Resource Prioritization



FINDING 1: Issue Salience Alone Is an Incomplete Mobilization Metric

Naming frequency and resource allocation diverge at every stop. The issues students raised most often were not where they placed their resource chips. That gap is a more reliable mobilization indicator than issue salience alone and policymakers reading only the naming data are getting an incomplete picture.

FINDING 2: The problems students see as global are exactly where the UN has a mandate to act.

The problems young Americans placed in the multinational column map directly onto active UN frameworks and mandates. Sometimes, the UN was not named directly, but they described its portfolio. The gap is not between young Americans and the UN's agenda. It is between young Americans and their awareness that the institution is already working on what they care about most.

FINDING 3: Climate is a consensus concern but not a consensus priority.

Climate was named consistently but funded modestly at most stops. One outlier submission drove the cluster's total sticker count; remove it and climate ranks among the most underfunded named clusters on the tour. Broad concern does not equal mobilization.

FINDING 4: AI speaks to more than labor story. It is a power story.

While most stops framed AI as job displacement, they also named it as equity and systemic control over opportunity, without prompting. Legislators framing AI as a jobs bill are answering one dimension of what young people are actually describing. The more durable frame is governance: who controls these systems, and who gets left out.

NATIONAL SURVEY FINDINGS



AMPLIFYING NATIONAL VOICES

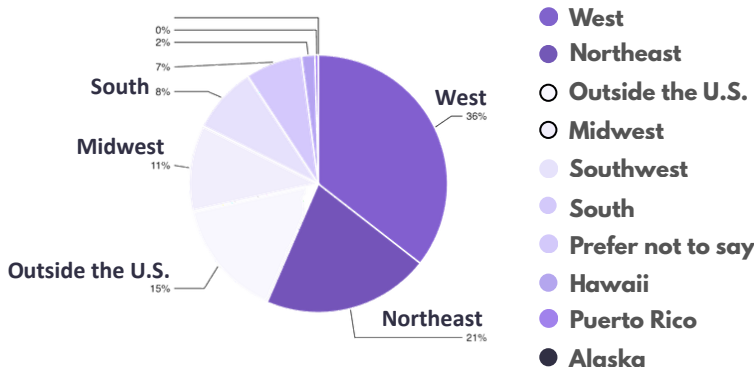
Survey Methodology

To complement qualitative insights gathered through the Listening Tour, we partnered with 180 Degrees Consulting UCLA to design and administer a national survey aimed at capturing the perspectives of American youth at scale. The survey was conducted between January and February 2026 and sought to better understand how young people perceive the most pressing issues facing their generation, as well as how those perspectives compare to older cohorts.

A total of 247 respondents participated in the survey, including both youth (ages 14–25) and a smaller sample of non-youth respondents (ages 26 and above). Unless otherwise noted, findings presented in this report reflect responses from youth participants only. The youth sample included 96 respondents aged 14–18 and 108 respondents aged 19–25, providing a balanced view across high school and postsecondary-aged individuals.

Respondents represented a range of geographic and community contexts. The largest share of participants reported growing up in the Western United States (36%), followed by the Northeast (15%) and Midwest (8%), with additional representation from other regions. In terms of community type, 60 respondents identified as coming from suburban areas, 24 from urban areas, and 12 from rural areas or small towns. While the sample is not nationally representative, it reflects a diverse cross-section of lived experiences and regional perspectives.

As with any voluntary, convenience-based survey, findings should be interpreted as directional rather than definitive. However, when paired with qualitative insights from Listening Tour engagements, the survey provides a valuable layer of validation and depth, helping to identify consistent themes, emerging priorities, and areas of divergence across the American youth landscape.



247

Total Respondents

Age Groups Represented

96

Aged 14 - 18

108

Aged 19-25

43

Aged 26+

Types of Communities Represented

60%

from suburban areas

24%

from urban areas

12%

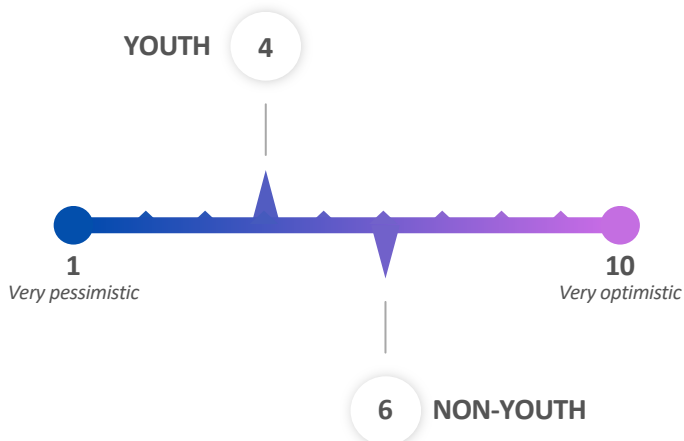
from rural areas / small towns

American Youth Priorities Report

A PESSIMISTIC OUTLOOK

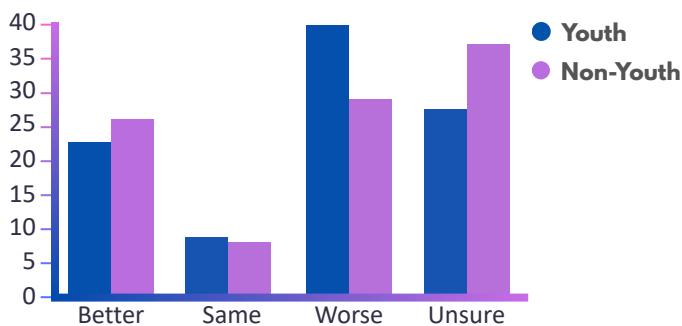
Compared to older generations, youth tend to be both more pessimistic about the future and more certain about their judgment. This is evidenced by the differences between youth and non-youth responses when asked to reflect on the future.

On a scale of 1-10, how optimistic are you about the future?



In addition to rating their optimism 2 median points lower than non-youth, youth ratings varied less, suggesting a more universal sense of doubt about the future.

Do you believe the world in 2050 will be better or worse than today?



When asked about the predicted state of the world in 2050, youth were more likely to answer "Worse" (and less likely to answer "Unsure." A similar trend is observed when asked about whether they believed their generation would be better or worse off than their parents'.



WHAT DO YOU THINK OUR GENERATION WILL BE REMEMBERED FOR?

This key question reveals the primary causes behind youth pessimism. Topics are ranked by percentage of respondents that mentioned them in an open response question.



53% Technology & AI

By far the most mentioned topic, youth are concerned about the cognitive, social, and environmental implications of AI, social media, and other technologies. Having grown up in the digital age, they are the most cognizant of the threats technology presents and thus feel burdened by its legacy.

“Losing human connection and authenticity to an age of validation and the internet.”
Age 14-18, West

“The failure to stop AI from destroying the economy and the environment”
Age 19-25, Midwest

14% Hypocrisy

While many youth are highly aware about domestic and global issues, some also turn that criticism inward to themselves and their peers. Many stated that hypocrisy and apathy were defining characteristics of their generation, alongside concerns of how that would lead to negative outcomes.

“Having loud opinions but quiet actions.”
Age 14-18, Midwest

“I think generally it will be remembered for apathy and lack of global action.”
Age 19-25, West

22% Political Instability

There is also a pervasive sense of political fragmentation and impending global disaster. Although they protest against such issues, some have also seemed to accept political polarization, violence, and international conflict as inevitable within their lifetime.

“Pre-World War 3”
Age 14-18, West

“Growing up as the ‘school shooting’ generation, which has many of us to advocate for change.”
Age 19-25, West

11% Economic Insecurity

Finally, concerns about disruptive technologies and political instability also feed into significant worries about their own financial security. When it comes to finding jobs and buying their own home, youth often think they are much more out of luck than their parents.

“The inability to own a home.”
Age 19-25, Northeast

“Early career disruption from various systemic factors, including but not limited to AI.”
Age 14-18, South



CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM FOR CHANGE

How does change happen?

#1

Policy
(35%)

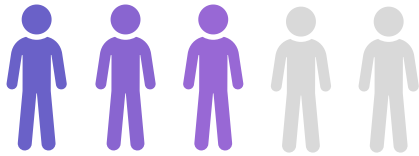
#2

Movements
(25%)

#3

Culture
(13%)

Who has hope?



3 in 5 youth respondents expressed *hope for change* in the future



“I hope my generation will be remembered for ushering in an era of peace in the world.”

Age 14-18, Midwest



“My generation will be remembered for being the tipping point into collective action and change.”

Age 19-25, West

American Youth Priorities Report

While youth perceive the world to be at a precipice, they also know that this means they have the power to tip the future in their favor. As a result, despite their concerns about the world, many youth express cautious optimism for change, often in the same breath as their fears.

As one respondent put it, they see their generation's role as *"picking up old pieces and refurbishing them as much as we can"* to create a functional future.

Leadership & Resilience

Youth hope to be remembered as *"activists and leaders of change."* Despite critiques about their own behavior, some maintain that they are *"very politically aware, empathetic"* and believe this will result in *"positive change"* in the long run.

Using Technology for Good

Youth also hope that their generation will be remembered as one *"that used new technology to gather voices and act together."*

Taking on the Challenge

Youth don't necessarily believe that the future will improve by default, but rather, it might if they have access to the right tools. Young Americans believe that if they take advantage of their access to fully leverage these tools, they hope to help mitigate global crises like climate change and usher a shift towards peace.

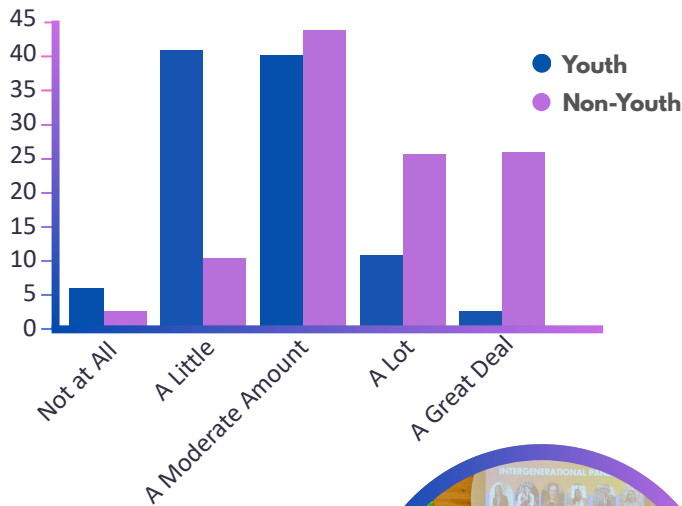
“I think we have a lot of access to means that our parents didn't and we can use it for good”

Age 19-25, Southwest



YOUTH SENTIMENT TOWARDS THE UN'S ROLE

How much do you trust the United Nations to improve global outcomes?



Youth skepticism about the world extends to their views on the United Nations' efficacy, with **40%** of youth reporting that they only trust the organization to improve global outcomes *"a little"*, compared to only **10%** of non-youth.

However, when asked to comment on the US withdrawal from the UN, respondents **strongly disagreed**, with **93%** using negative language to describe the decision.

About U.S. withdrawal from UN organizations:

“An erosion of international norms. Other nations will follow the U.S.'s decisions to abandon commitments.”
Age 19-25, West

“This was, in my opinion, destructive to so much of our diplomatic processes and relationships.”
Age 14-18, Southwest



How much do you trust the United Nations to improve global outcomes? (By Political Ideology)

	A Great Deal	A Lot	A Moderate Amount	A Little	Not At All
Liberal/ Very Liberal	2%	13%	36%	42%	7%
Moderate	3%	8%	53%	37%	—
Conservative/ Very Conservative	—	—	50%	36%	14%

The same question, separated by political ideology, suggests **less a partisan divide** and more a **broader fragility in trust**. Across ideologies, confidence in institutions is cautious and limited, even as people still see them as necessary. The takeaway is clear: institutions aren't being rejected by young Americans, but **across the aisle**, they are being held to a higher standard, where legitimacy must be earned through tangible results.

These reactions suggest that while youth may question the UN's current effectiveness, they ultimately still believe in its **continued importance in maintaining global cooperation and stability**. Thus, to gain a better understanding of what youth expect from the UN moving forward, respondents were asked to identify the roles they believed the organization was best positioned to fulfill today.

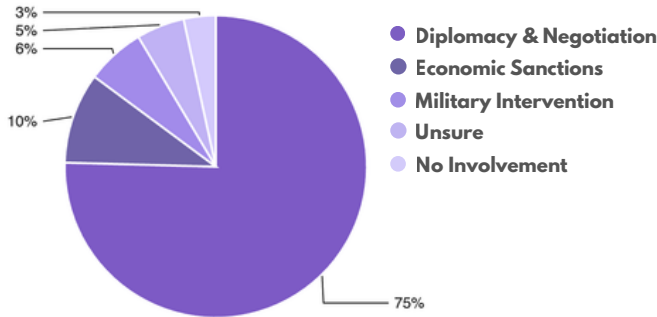
American Youth Priorities Report

What do you believe is the most valuable role the United Nations plays today?



YOUTH SENTIMENT TOWARDS GLOBAL AFFAIRS

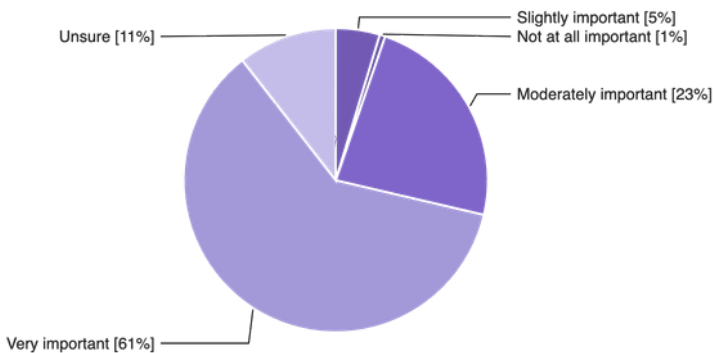
When responding to threats, which approach do you think is best?



In a politically unstable world, youth tend to be conflict-averse and thus perceive the role of the United Nations in crisis situations to be *fundamentally peaceful*, prioritizing its usage of *soft power to de-escalate* and *provide humanitarian aid*. Furthermore, youth's favor for diplomacy and negotiation extends to their opinion on the U.S. role in global affairs.

Today's youth approach global challenges with a strong preference for *cooperation over confrontation*. When asked how the United States should respond to major international threats, a significant majority believed the best approach was to resolve threats using negotiation, while only **6%** supported military intervention.

How important is U.S. support for NATO and other collective defense commitments?



Youth respondents **strongly supported** US participation in NATO and other collective defense commitments, reiterating a strong perceived importance on global collaboration and contributions over unilateral action.

Youth Opinions on U.S. Foreign Policy

Youth respondents' preference for diplomacy is reflected by their thoughts on U.S. foreign policy. Regarding events involving military intervention or unilateral action, respondents **consistently expressed concern** about violations of international law and damage to diplomatic relationships.

61%

of youth said U.S. support for NATO and other collective defense commitments were *'very important'*

50%

of youth said that U.S. military involvement in other countries' governments was *'rarely necessary'*.

38%

of non-youth shared the same opinion, with most non-youth instead believing necessity was *situation-dependent*.

INCREASING ENGAGEMENT WITH YOUNG AMERICANS



YOUTH VOICES & THE UN'S MANDATE

This section translates the priorities identified in the American Youth Priorities Report into actionable areas for the United Nations. Across the National Listening Tour, young Americans consistently articulated concerns that align with the core domains of multilateral governance. The challenge is not a lack of alignment, but a lack of connection between youth priorities and the institution tasked with addressing them.

What follows is a structured effort to bridge that gap, identifying where youth concerns intersect with the UN's existing mandate, where perception gaps limit institutional legitimacy, and where targeted action can strengthen engagement with the next generation.

The objective is straightforward: to convert youth voice into institutional direction.

Issue Area Alignment: Where the UN is Already Working

<i>Issue Area</i>	<i>What Youth Said</i>	<i>UN Framework</i>
AI & FUTURE OF WORK	Who controls these systems? Who gets left out?	UNGA Scientific Panel on AI; Pact for the Future AI commitments
CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT	Generational betrayal; lack of visible action	UNFCCC; Paris Agreement; Loss & Damage Fund (COP28)
GLOBAL GOVERNANCE	Rise of authoritarianism; breakdown of norms	Human Rights Council; Rule of Law frameworks; UNGA resolutions
JOBS & ECONOMIC MOBILITY	Rising inequality; can't buy a home; no living wage	SDGs; ILO labor standards; trade governance architecture
AFFORDABILITY & HOUSING	Yearly rising costs; locked out of homeownership	SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities); UN Habitat; global supply chain governance

One of the most consistent patterns across the National Listening Tour was this: young Americans described problems that belong to the United Nations without knowing the institution was already working on them. When students named AI governance as a power and equity issue, they were describing the mandate of the newly approved UNGA Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence. When they named climate inaction as a generational betrayal, they were describing the terrain of UNFCCC negotiations. When they named democratic backsliding as their defining geopolitical fear, they were describing the Human Rights Council's core brief.

YOUNG AMERICANS AREN'T SITTING IDLE.

The data from the American Youth Priorities Report tells one story. The young people behind it bring it to life.

62% of young Americans surveyed believe in the power of NATO. Alexander Iancu believes it too. A first-generation Romanian-American, Iancu has spent his young career advocating for pro-European and transatlantic partnerships from his campus at Oral Roberts University to the NATO Youth Summit. He was selected as one of ten members of NATO's inaugural Youth Advisory Board NATO, and at the 2025 NATO Youth Summit, facilitated a session on the future of peace and security alongside senior policymakers. The survey says young Americans believe in the alliance. Alexander is making sure they have a voice inside it.



Courtesy of Alexander Iancu

Young Americans believe in their agency over our digital future. Aliza Kopans is helping make it happen. The Brown University graduate co-founded Tech(nically) Politics alongside Emma Lembke after the two connected at a youth digital advocacy meeting, frustrated that members of Gen Z, users at the heart of The Social Dilemma, had no meaningful seat at the table when it came to legislative regulation. Their answer was to build one. Through Tech(nically) Politics, Aliza interviewed over 60 young people about their experiences with digital technology and how they want to see its design and regulations change. She converted these video testimonials into episodic content for digital wellness and legislative communities, turning lived experience into policy fuel. Aliza didn't stop there. She co-created Design It For Us, a campaign-turned-coalition advocating for safer online platforms that helped secure passage of California's Age Appropriate Design Code. Aliza believes that sharing our stories builds bridges across difference and sparks collaborative action. In her digital wellness work and beyond, she works to create spaces where people of all ages feel empowered to contribute to meaningful change.



Courtesy of Aliza Kopans

What makes Aliza's story resonate isn't just the legislation she was pushed. At its core, she didn't wait for incumbents to hand down solutions. She and her co-founder set out to replace the image of teens as passive victims of social media with one of a resilient generation unwilling to accept the status quo. That work has drawn national attention, including a feature on 60 Minutes. This report's data shows young Americans care deeply about who controls their digital lives. Aliza is proof they're not waiting for permission to shape it themselves.

Young Americans believe AI is the defining innovation of their generation. The UNA-USA Youth Affinity Group is showing how to use it for good. Through the AI for SDGs Campaign, members are exploring how artificial intelligence intersects with all 17 Sustainable Development Goals UNA-USA, and their white paper, AI for the SDGs, puts young American voices at the center of one of the most consequential policy conversations on the planet. The survey says young Americans see AI as their generation's defining challenge. UNA-USA youth are treating it that way.





Young Americans believe individual action matters when it comes to sustainability, but many lack access to systems that make those actions possible. Lauren Click built Let's Go Compost to close that gap. Composting stands out as one of the fastest, lowest-cost ways to cut greenhouse gas emissions at the source, yet affordable, accessible options remain out of reach for most households and communities. After learning to compost in her own apartment during the pandemic using worms and discarded bakery buckets, she saw firsthand that the barrier to reducing food waste is rarely willingness, but access and affordability. What started as a simple, low-cost system for her own food waste became a national nonprofit focused on turning personal climate action into real infrastructure.

At the core of her model is education paired with small-scale, low-cost materials as a high-leverage starting point for broader systems change. When people are given the tools, training, and a simple way to begin, they build the foundation for stronger, locally led composting efforts. They do not need a complex system to start, they need a clear entry point. Today, Let's Go Compost supports more than 500 public institutions across 47 states, including schools, libraries, museums, botanical gardens, and science centers, directly reaching more than 50,000 people annually. Instead of asking individuals to figure it out alone, the model embeds composting directly into the places people already learn, work, and gather, making it practical, scalable, and durable.

This work has gained international recognition. Lauren was selected as the North American winner at the World Food Forum's AgX Fair in Rome, where she presented this model to government officials and global agrifood leaders as a proven pathway to reduce methane emissions through accessible, community-based systems. Lauren is continuing to grow her work through a new Buy One Give One model.

Young Americans believe civic engagement shouldn't depend on your zip code. Momin Ahmed is acting on it. At his first international Model UN conference, Momin watched capable students struggle simply because they lacked access to quality resources, especially in languages other than English. He built Model UN Academy in response, a free platform offering guides in over 100 languages to students of all backgrounds. At 17, he became the youngest honoree on the 2025 Forbes 30 Under 30 list. The survey says young Americans believe in civic engagement. Momin decided access to it shouldn't be a privilege.



Young Americans believe the UN is stronger when we are in it. The UNA-USA Fellowship Initiative show us why. From New York to Buenos Aires, fellows completed internships across the UN system carrying American youth perspectives into rooms where global decisions get made. On a listening tour with program participants, one theme came through clearly: proximity changes everything. The survey says young Americans want a seat at the table. These fellows took one.

Four Findings with Direct Implications for the UN

1 THE GAP IS AWARENESS, NOT ALIGNMENT

Young Americans' values are more consistent with the UN's agenda than their trust scores suggest. The institution should invest in making its work on AI, climate, and democratic governance visible to audiences that have never heard the connection stated plainly.

2 LEGITIMACY IS RESULTS BASED, NOT PROCEDURAL

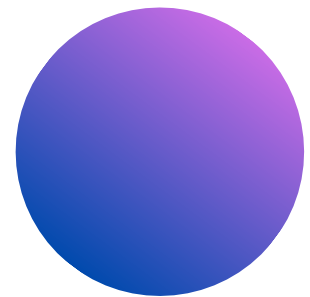
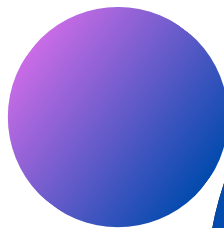
Across ideologies, confidence in institutions is cautious and limited. Procedural arguments for the UN do not land with this cohort. Outcome arguments do. Legitimacy must be earned through tangible results.

3 WITHDRAWAL HAS ACTIVATED YOUTH ACROSS THE AISLE

93% used negative language to describe U.S. withdrawal. Conservatives in the sample showed low UN trust while still opposing withdrawal. Young Americans who distrust the UN still want the U.S. inside it.

4 AI GOVERNANCE IS THE ENTRY POINT

No other issue cluster generated as much unsolicited elaboration on systemic power. If the UN can communicate its role in AI governance credibly, it has an audience already asking the questions the institution is positioned to answer.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UNITED NATIONS

1

COMMUNICATE OUTCOMES, NOT PROCESSES

Young Americans do not respond to institutional proceduralism. They respond to visible wins. The UN should develop a sustained communications strategy targeting 18-30 year olds in the United States that leads with concrete outcomes, lives saved through peacekeeping, emissions reduced through UNFCCC mechanisms, standards set through multilateral AI frameworks. The institution's greatest credibility asset with this generation is its track record. That track record is not being deployed.

2

NAME THE AI GOVERNANCE MANDATE EXPLICITLY

The UNGA Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence represents a genuine opportunity. Young Americans are already asking who controls AI systems and who gets left out. The UN should be far more aggressive in communicating this mandate to American youth audiences, through campus partnerships, social media, and UNA USA's network, before the narrative hardens into one where the UN is absent from the most consequential technological governance debate of the century.

3

BRIDGE THE DOMESTIC-TO-GLOBAL GAP ON ECONOMIC ANXIETY

Young Americans experience economic precarity as deeply personal, housing unaffordability, student debt, uncertain labor markets, but do not naturally connect those experiences to multilateral systems. The UN should invest in materials and partnerships that make those connections explicit for American youth, particularly in communities where economic anxiety is highest and UN visibility is lowest.

4

TREAT YOUTH PESSIMISM AS A DIAGNOSTIC, NOT AN OBSTACLE

An average optimism score of 4 out of 10 is not a number to manage. It is a signal about the gap between what institutions have promised and what they have delivered. The UN should approach this cohort with honesty, acknowledging where the multilateral system has fallen short, naming what structural reform would look like, and inviting young Americans into that reform conversation rather than asking them to trust a system that has not yet earned that trust.

5

INVEST ENERGY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE COUNTRY

Young Americans in the Midwest and South are engaging with global issues through lived experience, supply chains, military service, climate impacts, migration, but encounter little institutional infrastructure connecting those experiences to multilateral governance. The UN and its associated agencies should prioritize partnership with universities and civic organizations in these regions. Global engagement cannot be confined as a coastal project.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UNA-USA

UNA-USA occupies a distinctive position in the American civic landscape. It is neither a government agency nor an advocacy organization in the traditional sense. It is the connective tissue between American civil society and the United Nations, and this listening tour surfaced both the depth of that potential and the distance between current reach and what the moment demands. We were there when the United Nations was formed, and we will be there to continued to advocate for its success.

1

BUILD ON GEOGRAPHIC EXPANSION

The decision to extend this year's tour into the Midwest and South was correct. Students in Des Moines, Columbus, Winthrop, and Dallas were not less engaged than those in New York or Boston. UNA-USA's strategic decision to host the first Leadership Summit outside of the coast cemented this fact. Next year's in Houston, Texas builds on that momentum. The Young Americans I met in America's heartland understand their place on the world matters too.

2

REFRAME THE PITCH FROM INSTITUTION TO ISSUE

Young Americans did not often lead with the United Nations. They lead with AI governance, housing, climate, democratic resilience, and economic security. UNA-USA's programmatic framing should lead with the issues young people care about, then show where the multilateral system is the relevant site of action.

3

DEVELOP A DEDICATED AI GOVERNANCE PROGRAM

No issue cluster generated more unsolicited depth on the tour. Young Americans are already thinking about AI as a governance and power question. UNA-USA is positioned to be the primary translator of the UN's AI mandate to American youth audiences. This should be a standing program: Model UN curriculum focused on AI governance, partnerships with computer science and policy programs, and a communications track that makes the UN's AI work legible to audiences already paying attention.

4

CLOSE THE LOOP ON WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE SAY

The listening tour surfaces a consistent divergence between what young people name and where they invest resources. That gap is not apathy, it signals that young Americans have identified problems without believing they can act on them effectively. UNA USA should build a feedback mechanism into successor programs: not just collecting what young Americans say, but communicating back, or in other words, this is what we did with what you told us. The loop should close faster and at smaller scale, with follow-up communications to tour participants naming specific policy moments where their input mattered.

5

DOUBT IS NOT DISENGAGEMENT

An optimism score of 4 out of 10 is a recruitment asset, if framed correctly. Young Americans who are pessimistic are not checked out. They are paying attention and have concluded the stakes are high. UNA-USA's communications should speak directly to this: not reassurance that everything will be fine, but an honest account of what is at stake and a specific invitation to be part of the response. The 3-in-5 youth who expressed hope despite their concerns are the target audience.

TO YOUNG AMERICANS ACROSS THE COUNTRY,

The current political moment is loud. It tempts even the most committed among us toward the exits. But the data in this report tells a different story. You are not disengaged. You are watching, weighing, and looking for an entry point that feels real.

That entry point exists. And right now, it needs you.

The UN is not a distant institution accessible only to diplomats and heads of state. It is a system built on the participation of people who believe the hardest problems are worth working on together. Multilateralism does not run on autopilot. It runs on the sustained commitment of people willing to show up, speak clearly, and refuse to walk away when the work gets harder. That has always been the job. Today it is our job.

UNA-USA exists to close the distance between your campus and that system. The chapters, the advocacy, the listening tours that produced this very report, all of it is infrastructure built for this moment. Use it.

The world does not need you to have all the answers. It needs you in the room. It needs your ambition, your frustration, your refusal to accept that the current moment is the permanent one. History has never been made by the generation that sat it out, and this moment is no different.

Lean in. The system needs young people more than it has in a very long time, and, from everything I have witnessed this year, our generation is much more ready than many assume.

