

Grief, Loss, Young People and the Workplace

PRESENTED BY THE WEALTH + WORK FUTURES LAB

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Context & Purpose

Philadelphia faces a Grief Gap: about 1 in 5 residents will lose a parent or sibling before age 25, and among Black youth the risk rises to about 1 in 4, a disparity that persists across cohorts. These figures exclude losses of caregivers, close friends, teachers, or neighbors and the long-term effects of incarceration, displacement, and eroding public services. Together, these structural and social losses compound through adolescence and early adulthood—often unrecognized—driving disconnection, instability, and economic exclusion; workplaces typically respond with minimal leave and limited understanding, forcing trade-offs between healing and livelihood. As one participant put it, “the very real need to choose between caring for my grief and caring for my finances.” In Fall 2024, we engaged Philadelphia young adults (18–26) to explore wealth, work, grief, and loss—especially grief paralysis, safety, and scarce resources—to inform policies, practices, and cultures that better align work, healing, and financial well-being.

Grief paralysis: the ways in which unprocessed grief can impede personal growth and the pursuit of new opportunities



Guiding Question

How might we inform policy, practices, and cultural perspectives, influencing resource allocation for youth development and support in Philadelphia (especially focused on resources and policy intersecting with grief, loss, work and financial well-being)?

Methods & Timeline

November - December 2024: Refined our key questions, discussed outreach and reviewed key qualitative interview skills and strategies.

December 2024 - February 2025: We connected with about 30 young people. Each conversation lasted between 40-75 minutes.

March - April 2025: We reflected on our own conversations and brought key quotes back to the group. We made a virtual mural board, so we could cluster themes and sub-themes.

May - June 2025: We hosted three events to share our insights with our interviewees and the broader public.

Findings: Intersection of Grief, Loss, Work and Well-Being

Conditions, Not Character

Young people reject deficit labels of Gen-Z and recenter context: disinvestment in schools, soaring costs, and rapid tech shifts. Outcomes reflect environments. When conditions are dignified and resourced, young people’s creativity, work ethic, and civic ethos show up.

“[I heard] a lawyer speaking about Philly said ‘why are we worried about funding people who are on a burger flipping track?’ they don’t see the point of putting more funding in our schools”

“The whole narrative that most youth are robbing and stealing—I can’t agree with that. There are creative people here trying to work, but they just don’t get the spotlight...If you put most people my age in better environments... more people would be working. It’s more about where we’re at than who we are.”

Layered Loss, Living Grief

Youth grief spans bereavement and “living losses” including missed opportunities, severed ties, disrupted schooling, and the loss of childhood itself. Accumulated and often silenced by “be strong” norms, these losses demand spaces that validate, process, and transform grief together.

“I think about grief all the time — family members I lost, job opportunities I lost, relationships that I lost...When I lost my uncle, my cousin... from switching schools and just having to leave people....”

“During the pandemic I lost my study-abroad trip to South Africa; I didn’t realize how impactful losing an experience could be until years later....Recently losing both my uncles and my grandmother means I’m grieving with my family while still processing that earlier opportunity I lost.”

Dignity Is the Missing Infrastructure

Employment exists, but without living wages, empathy, and safety, it doesn’t add up to well-being. Young people want room to grow—mentorship, supportive spaces, and workplaces that value people over numbers.

“Employment opportunities are there, yet not always fruitful – workplaces still treat young people as ‘just another employee ID’....What’s missing is empathy and respect; without that, none of the policies or jobs really serve us.”

“I feel safe at work when I know physical, emotional, racial abuse isn’t tolerated and leadership will genuinely help me.”

Participatory Data Walk

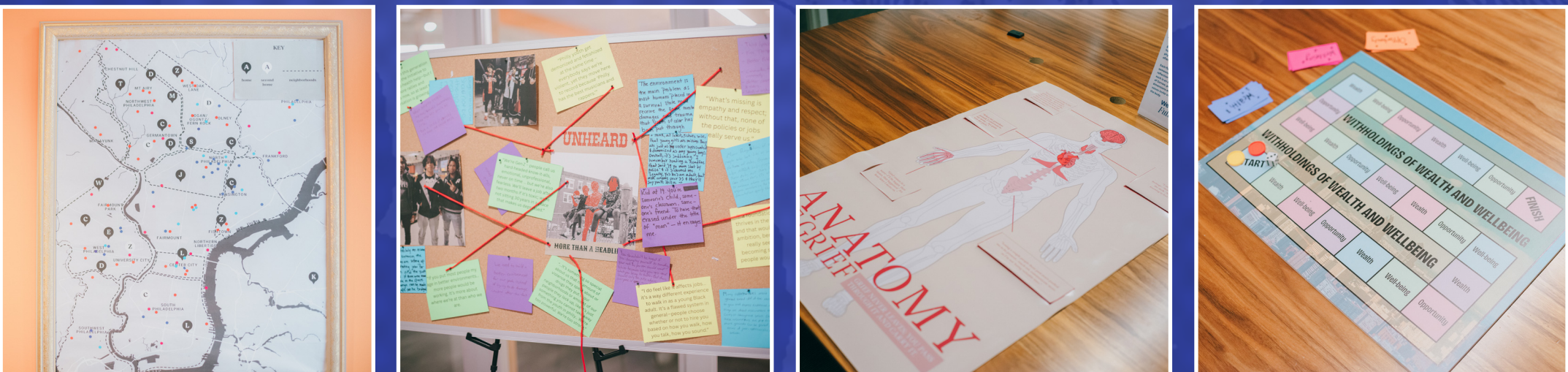
We hosted a data walk to return the stories to the community and invite collective interpretation. Rather than analyzing youth experiences from a distance, we created space for young people to engage directly with the words, patterns, and themes that emerged. Participants moved through a series of stations featuring quotes, visualizations, and key insights from the interviews — asking not just what’s here, but what does this mean for us? The data walk became a space of reflection, storytelling, and sensemaking — where we attempt to share, shape, and deepen knowledge together.

Implications

Workplaces still treat grief as a short, linear event—a few days of bereavement leave tied to specific relationships. That quietly dictates who we’re allowed to grieve and how we’re allowed to tend to it. What’s needed now: recognize grief and layered loss as ongoing, non-linear, and diverse—and build cultures where people can bring an authentic self, not just a compliant worker.

Limitations

Findings reflect a small, self-selected convenience sample and are descriptive, not generalizable. This phase was a proof-of-concept to test narrative methods, tools, and safeguards and to inform a larger, more representative next phase. We did not interview employers or systematically assess employer policies, so workplace practice insights come solely from youth narratives.



Next Steps

The stories we gathered and the insights co-created through the data walk are just the beginning. We will continue to listen, learn, and expand our understanding of what’s needed to build futures that centers young people’s well-being, honors their grief, and invests in their healing. We are advancing a portfolio of work to reveal, measure, and ultimately disrupt the ways grief and structural loss suppress development and mobility across two key generations: young people (ages 18-26) and working-age adults (ages 34-46).

Over the next three years we will:

- **Survey of 150 young adults (18–26) and 150 adults (34–46)**
- **80–100 interviews per cohort**
- **Two participatory design labs per cohort**
- **Build a Community Loss Index**
- **Economic modeling of cumulative loss and workforce barriers and exclusion**



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