Fall 2026

Youth Assembly Report on Immigration

Youth Coalition of Montgomery County



"Look in my eyes"

"Loss of concentration in school"

"la comunidad perdio a un amigo"

"Hope"

"I want to help"

"Friends talking to each other"

"are you ok?"

(can't pursue dreams)

MAKES SCHOOL START LATER

FREE SPEECH

"embrace me"

Abrázame

(Me dijo: "esto está bien y es aceptable". ¿cómo va a estar bien?)

"I am concern about my siblings"

"Me preocupa mi familia"

Art by Navah Daun Walley, 2026

CATE

Health Spark Foundation

Beyond the Fear: The Experiences, Resilience, and Leadership of Immigrant Youth

Balances challenges with hope and agency.

Integrated Report: Youth Community Assembly on Migration 2026

Modified 11/13/2026

HealthSpark Foundation and **CCATE (Centro de Cultura, Arte, Trabajo y Educación)** joined their talents, resources, and commitment to community well-being to generate knowledge from the community for the community. This collaboration emerged in response to the challenges immigrant families face during a time marked by heightened immigration enforcement, criminalization, family separation, detention, and uncertainty.

We believe that community voice must be at the center of any meaningful response. The lived experiences of immigrant families should guide the actions of public institutions, nonprofit organizations, schools, healthcare systems, and policymakers. Across our region, individuals and organizations have responded with energy, solidarity, and support to address the anxiety, trauma, and disruption affecting immigrant communities. Yet the families themselves continue to bear the greatest burden.

In February 2026, we convened the first countywide Community Assembly on Migration in Montgomery County using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework. The assembly brought together immigrant families, representatives from all levels of government, public servants, school district leaders, foundation representatives, nonprofit organizations, attorneys, mental health professionals, and faculty and students from the law schools of the University of Pennsylvania and Villanova University.

Through dialogues conducted across twenty facilitated discussion tables, participants identified key challenges and generated important recommendations to align community responses. While many significant themes emerged, one finding was particularly striking: the voices of youth and adolescents were largely absent. Adults spoke passionately about the struggles facing their children and students, expressing deep

concern for their safety, well-being, and future. However, we recognized the need to hear directly from young people themselves.

How are adolescents and young adults experiencing this moment? How are immigration policies and enforcement practices affecting their daily lives, aspirations, educational experiences, relationships, mental health, and sense of belonging? What fears, hopes, and challenges are shaping their futures?

These questions inspired the creation of a *Youth Community Assembly on Migration*, –which took place on October 21, 2026, at the CCATE facilities–, designed specifically to center the voices and experiences of immigrant-origin youth. This report presents the findings from that effort. It reveals the complexity of growing up in an environment shaped by immigration related fear and uncertainty, while also highlighting the strength, leadership, and aspirations of the young people who participated.

The findings document the emotional and psychological impacts experienced by youth, the effects on family life, educational opportunities, social relationships, institutional trust, and future planning. At the same time, the report demonstrates the remarkable strength, insight, and civic commitment that young people continue to exhibit despite these challenges.

It is our hope that this report will inform policy, strengthen community responses, and inspire greater collaboration among all those committed to building a healthy, inclusive, and just community where every young person can thrive.

Obed Arango
Executive Director, CCATE

Emma Hertz
CEO and President HealthSpark Foundation

Synthesizing Quantitative Survey Findings and Community Assembly Dialogue

"¡Somos seres humanos!" "¡Viva la comunidad!" — A collective declaration of dignity, strength, and agency echoed by immigrant youth throughout the Montgomery County Youth Community Assembly on Migration.

Introduction

This report presents an integrated analysis of two complementary sources of evidence: the *English-Youth Analysis survey* and the *Executive Report - Youth Community Assembly on Migration 2026*. Together, these documents offer a comprehensive understanding of the experiences, concerns, aspirations, and policy priorities of immigrant and migrant youth in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. The survey provides quantitative evidence from 49 bilingual youth respondents, while the Community Assembly contributes rich qualitative insights generated through participatory dialogue involving youth, educators, legal experts, public officials, mental health practitioners, and community leaders, with the attendance of 49 youth and 37 adults. By combining statistical findings with lived experiences shared during the Assembly, this report identifies key patterns affecting emotional well-being, educational attainment, family stability, civic engagement, and future opportunities. The synthesis demonstrates significant convergence between quantitative and qualitative evidence, reinforcing the urgency of community-informed responses and providing a strong foundation for program development, institutional reform, and policy advocacy.

Section 2. Institutional Representation & Key Stakeholders

One of the key findings that emerged from the **first Community Assembly on Migration in February 2026** was the limited representation of youth voices in discussions and decision-making processes concerning issues that directly affect immigrant youth and their families. Participants identified not only the absence of youth perspectives, but also the lack of meaningful youth oversight, autonomy, and power in shaping community responses and institutional priorities. In response to these findings, **HealthSpark Foundation** and **CCATE** partnered with the **Montgomery County Youth Coalition** to design a youth-centered assembly grounded in principles of shared

leadership and participatory decision-making. Planning began in July 2026 through a series of collaborative meetings in which young people played an active role in identifying priorities, shaping the agenda, developing outreach strategies, and influencing the overall direction of the Assembly.

A defining feature of the **Youth Community Assembly on Migration** was its broad cross-sector participation. The Assembly brought together government leaders, educators, legal advocates, law enforcement representatives, community organizations, mental health practitioners, researchers, and youth leaders in a collective effort to better understand and address the realities facing immigrant youth. The process intentionally elevated youth as key stakeholders rather than passive participants, creating opportunities for young people to exercise leadership, contribute to decision-making, and engage directly with institutional representatives. This diverse representation fostered meaningful dialogue, strengthened community partnerships, and affirmed the critical role of youth voices in shaping policies, programs, and community responses that impact their lives.

Key participating institutions and stakeholders included:

Community and Philanthropic Leadership

- The **Center for Culture, Art, Training and Education (CCATE)** served as the primary convener and organizer.
- **HealthSpark Foundation** provided support and partnership in advancing youth-centered dialogue and community engagement.
- The **Youth Coalition of Montgomery County** helped mobilize youth participation and ensured that young people remained central to the process.

County and Municipal Leadership

- **Montgomery County Commissioner Jamila Winder** participated to hear directly from youth regarding immigration-related challenges and opportunities for policy intervention.

Public Safety and Community Trust

- **Norristown Police Chief Michael Trail** engaged in conversations concerning public safety, community trust, transparency, and relationships between immigrant residents and law enforcement institutions.

Diplomatic Representation

- The **Consulate General of Mexico in Philadelphia** provided institutional support and representation for immigrant families while contributing expertise regarding legal protections and transnational family issues.
- **Educational Institutions**

Representatives from:

- Norristown Area School District
- North Penn School District
- School administrators
- Counselors
- Educators

participated in discussions focused on school climate, mental health supports, attendance barriers, safety measures, and educational opportunity.

Higher Education and Legal Advocacy

The Assembly benefited from the participation of:

- University of Pennsylvania Carey Law School
- Villanova University Charles Widger School of Law
- Villanova University Department of Global & Latin American Studies

These institutions contributed expertise related to immigration law, civil rights, human rights protections, social policy, and community-based research.

The participation of these diverse stakeholders demonstrated a shared commitment to translating youth experiences into meaningful institutional and policy responses.

Section 3. Participant Demographics

The integrated findings are based on a diverse group of participants representing multiple stages of youth development and educational attainment. Survey respondents and Assembly participants included:

- High school students
- College and university students
- Working youth and young professionals
- Adolescents and teenagers
- First-generation immigrant youth
- Youth from mixed-status families
- **Age Distribution**

Among survey participants:

Age Group	Percentage
13–15 years	24%
16–18 years	38%
19–21 years	23%
22–25 years	15%

A majority (62%) of participants were adolescents between ages 13 and 18, highlighting the importance of schools and families as central sources of support and stability.

Educational Representation

College and university participants included students from:

- University of Pennsylvania
- Villanova University
- Yale University
- Thomas Jefferson University
- Saint Joseph's University

- Montgomery County Community College
- Temple University
- Ursinus College

High school participants included students from:

- Norristown Area High School
- Upper Merion Area High School
- Plymouth Whitemash School District
- Methacton School District
- Private high schools throughout the region

The Assembly also included youth already participating in the workforce, many of whom described balancing educational goals, family obligations, translation responsibilities, and financial pressures. These participants added important perspectives concerning employment barriers, higher education access, and economic mobility.

Section 4. Integrated Findings and Analysis

Note: *In this section, we begin with operational definitions, based on our years of experience at CCATE, to facilitate a better understanding of the concepts presented.*

The survey data and Assembly discussions produced remarkably consistent findings. The quantitative evidence confirms and strengthens the personal narratives shared by youth throughout the Community Assembly.

Climate of Fear and Psychological Stress

"It is a condition in which immigrant families experience chronic anxiety, fear, uncertainty, isolation, and emotional distress due to ICE enforcement, detention threats, family separation, and possible deportation."

The most dominant theme emerging from both data sources is the pervasive impact of immigration-related fear on young people's daily lives.

Survey results indicate that 83% of participants reported either severe (54%) or moderate (29%) disruption to their daily well-being resulting from immigration enforcement concerns.

During Community Assembly discussions, youth repeatedly described living under constant fear of deportation, detention, family separation, and unexpected immigration enforcement actions. Participants connected this fear to anxiety, depression, panic attacks, and chronic stress.

Together, both forms of evidence demonstrate that immigration-related uncertainty functions not as an occasional concern but as a persistent social determinant affecting emotional health, educational engagement, and family stability.

Family Separation and Household Impact

"The disruption of family unity caused by detention, deportation, or fear of immigration enforcement, resulting in emotional trauma, economic hardship, caregiving challenges, and long-term instability for children and households."

Survey data revealed that 71% of households had altered their daily routines to avoid potential contact with authorities, limiting participation in community activities, recreation, religious events, and public spaces.

Assembly participants described similar patterns of social withdrawal and self-isolation, emphasizing how fear extends beyond individual youth and affects entire family systems. Youth explained that parents frequently transfer stress and anxiety to children, creating household environments characterized by uncertainty and emotional strain.

Youth Adultification and Family Responsibility

"The process by which immigrant youth assume adult roles and responsibilities within their families, including caregiving, translation, financial support, and advocacy, often due to immigration-related fears, instability, or parental vulnerability."

One of the strongest areas of convergence concerns the phenomenon of youth assuming adult responsibilities.

Survey respondents aged 19-25 described acting as translators, legal navigators, and economic contributors to their families. Many reported carrying responsibility for understanding legal systems and helping parents access services.

Assembly participants similarly reported serving as interpreters, advocates, caregivers, and decision-makers for their households. These responsibilities frequently emerged long before young people reached adulthood.

Educational Barriers and Academic Disruption

"The challenges immigrant students face in accessing and succeeding in education due to fear of immigration enforcement, family instability, economic hardship, absenteeism, stress, language barriers, and interrupted learning."

Educational concerns emerged as a major issue across both data sources.

Survey findings indicate that 61% of youth experience difficulty concentrating and retaining academic information due to immigration-related stress. Additionally, 51% expressed uncertainty regarding college planning and educational futures.

Assembly participants described anxiety, fear, transportation problems, and delays caused by security procedures as barriers to learning. Students argued that punitive security measures often undermine rather than support educational success.

School Climate and Safety

"The extent to which schools provide a safe, welcoming, and supportive environment for students. Immigration enforcement fears can undermine trust, participation, attendance, emotional well-being, and students' sense of security at school."

The survey found that many youth perceive surveillance-oriented environments as contributing to mistrust and institutional anxiety.

Assembly participants provided detailed critiques of school metal detectors and prolonged security procedures, describing them as stigmatizing and counterproductive. Students advocated for investments in prevention, mental health, restorative practices (conflict resolution, intercultural communication) , and community-building rather than punitive approaches.

Legal Vulnerability and Preparedness

"The degree to which immigrant individuals and families face risks related to detention, deportation, or legal status uncertainty, and their readiness to respond through legal knowledge, documentation, emergency planning, and access to trusted legal resources."

The survey documented a major preparedness gap: 68% of families reported being unprepared or completely unprepared for detention-related emergencies, while only 11% had comprehensive preparedness plans.

Assembly discussions echoed these concerns, highlighting urgent demands for legal literacy programs, Know Your Rights workshops, legal aid, and stronger protections against information sharing between institutions and immigration authorities.

Mental Health Access and Trust

"The ability of immigrant individuals and families to obtain culturally responsive mental health services and feel confident seeking support, despite fears of stigma, immigration consequences, discrimination, or institutional mistrust."

Survey participants ranked mental health support and safe spaces as the second highest community priority, receiving a score of 4.7 out of 5.0. Eighty-four percent identified this need as critically important.

Assembly participants expressed concerns regarding confidentiality, stigma, and mistrust of existing counseling systems. They specifically requested culturally responsive bilingual mental health services delivered through trusted community settings.

Economic Pressures and Opportunity Gaps

"The financial hardships and limited opportunities immigrant families face due to unstable employment, immigration status, discrimination, and restricted access to education, healthcare, housing, and economic mobility."

Housing costs, food insecurity, healthcare expenses, and future employment concerns emerged throughout both studies.

Sixty-six percent of survey respondents identified housing costs as a major stressor, while 43% expressed concerns regarding future employment opportunities and work authorization constraints.

Assembly participants emphasized the importance of scholarships, apprenticeships, paid internships, workforce pathways, and financial support systems to create meaningful opportunities for immigrant youth.

Youth Leadership and Civic Engagement

"The active participation of young people in community leadership, advocacy, decision-making, and civic activities to address social issues, influence policy, support their communities, and promote positive social change."

Although youth reported significant challenges, both reports reveal remarkable resilience.

Survey findings showed that 42% of participants became more civically engaged because of immigration-related threats.

Similarly, Assembly participants rejected narratives portraying immigrant youth solely as victims and demanded substantive opportunities to participate in policymaking, community advocacy, and institutional decision-making.

Section 5. Top Ten Key Findings

Note: the order of the findings are not in priority order, all have equal importance.

Key Finding	Evidence from Youth Survey	Evidence from Community Assembly Dialogue
1. Chronic fear and anxiety shape daily life	83% reported severe or moderate impacts from immigration enforcement.	Youth described constant fear of deportation, detention, and family separation.

2. Family separation is a central concern	68% of families reported emergency-preparedness vulnerability.	Family separation was repeatedly identified as a source of trauma.
3. Social isolation affects family well-being	71% reduced community participation and mobility.	Families reported restricting recreational and public activities.
4. Youth assume adult responsibilities prematurely	Older respondents reported acting as translators and legal navigators.	Young people described caring for family administrative and legal needs.
5. Education is negatively affected by stress	61% reported difficulty concentrating and learning.	Students linked fear and stress to diminished academic success.
6. Youth seek safer and more supportive schools	81% supported ICE-Free School policies.	Students criticized punitive security measures and demanded supportive environments.
7. Mental health support is urgently needed	Mental health ranked 4.7/5 as a community priority.	Youth requested culturally competent, trusted counseling resources.
8. Legal assistance is the highest priority	Legal support ranked 4.8/5, with 88% assigning highest importance.	Participants demanded Know Your Rights education and legal services.
9. Economic uncertainty threatens future mobility	51% uncertain about college plans and 43% feared employment limitations.	Youth called for scholarships, career pathways, and workforce development.

10. Youth are firm and want leadership roles	42% reported increased civic engagement.	Participants advocated for youth advisory councils and formal decision-making roles.

Section 6. Action Priorities and Legislative Recommendations

The combined evidence points toward a coordinated agenda for action involving schools, municipalities, nonprofit organizations, state agencies, and federal policymakers.

Programmatic Recommendations

- The Youth Community Assembly and accompanying survey findings revealed that immigrant youth in Montgomery County are navigating a complex landscape of emotional stress, educational uncertainty, economic insecurity, family vulnerability, and widespread misinformation. Participants consistently emphasized that effective responses must move beyond crisis intervention and invest in long-term systems that promote healing, opportunity, leadership, and community resilience. Based on the priorities identified during facilitated discussions and supported by survey data, five programmatic recommendations emerged as critical areas for future investment and collaboration.

1. Expand Bilingual, Trauma-Informed Mental Health Services

Youth repeatedly identified mental health support as one of the most urgent community needs. Participants described experiencing chronic anxiety, fear of family separation, emotional distress, social isolation, and difficulty concentrating in school due to immigration-related stressors. Many expressed reluctance to seek support through existing school-based systems because of concerns regarding confidentiality, trust, and cultural understanding. As a result, youth called for expanded access to bilingual, culturally responsive, and

trauma-informed mental health professionals who operate in community-based settings where young people and families feel safe and respected. Investments should prioritize counseling services, emotional wellness programs, family support interventions, and multigenerational healing approaches that recognize the collective impact of immigration-related trauma on entire households.

2. Create Community Healing Spaces, Arts Programs, and Peer-Support Initiatives

Young people emphasized that healing cannot occur solely through clinical services. Participants highlighted the importance of community spaces where youth can gather, express themselves creatively, build supportive relationships, and strengthen their sense of belonging. Arts, music, storytelling, sports, cultural programming, healing circles, and peer-support groups were repeatedly identified as important mechanisms for reducing isolation and fostering resilience. Youth recommended investing in safe community hubs that provide opportunities for personal expression, cultural affirmation, and collective healing. Programs modeled after community-based organizations such as CCATE were viewed as especially valuable because they create trusted environments where youth can connect with peers facing similar challenges while developing confidence, creativity, and community leadership skills.

3. Develop Youth Leadership Academies and Civic Engagement Programs

A powerful theme throughout the Assembly was the rejection of narratives that portray immigrant youth solely as victims. Participants expressed a strong desire to contribute to their communities, influence public decisions, and participate in civic life. Many called for structured opportunities to develop leadership skills, learn about public institutions, engage with elected officials, and participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives. Youth leadership academies, civic engagement initiatives, youth advisory councils, participatory research projects, and public policy training programs can help cultivate the next generation of community leaders. Importantly, participants stressed that youth involvement must move beyond symbolic consultation and include meaningful

opportunities to shape agendas, influence policies, and co-design community solutions alongside institutional stakeholders.

4. Expand Scholarship Funds, Paid Internships, Apprenticeships, and Workforce Development Opportunities

Educational and economic opportunity emerged as a central concern for many participants. Survey findings showed significant uncertainty regarding higher education, future employment, and long-term career planning. Youth expressed concerns about financial barriers, limited access to scholarships, and restrictions that may affect employment opportunities for students from immigrant families. To address these challenges, participants recommended expanding scholarship programs, workforce development initiatives, paid internships, apprenticeships, mentorship programs, and vocational training opportunities that are accessible regardless of immigration status. Such investments would not only help young people pursue their educational and professional aspirations but would also strengthen the local workforce and contribute to long-term economic mobility for immigrant communities.

5. Establish a Youth Verification Ambassador Network to Combat Misinformation

One of the most innovative recommendations emerging from both the Assembly and survey findings was the creation of a **Youth Verification Ambassador Network**. Participants described how misinformation related to immigration enforcement often spreads rapidly through social media and community messaging platforms, generating fear, school absenteeism, missed medical appointments, and economic disruption. Because many young people already serve as translators, information navigators, and digital fact-checkers within their families, they are uniquely positioned to help strengthen community communication systems. **A Youth Verification Ambassador** program would train and compensate youth leaders in information verification, digital literacy, rumor assessment, bilingual communications, and community outreach. Ambassadors could work alongside schools, community organizations, and local governments to disseminate accurate information, counter harmful rumors, and

promote trusted resources through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and community media networks. This initiative would simultaneously strengthen youth leadership, improve community preparedness, and build a more resilient local information ecosystem.

Together, these recommendations reflect a broader vision articulated by youth throughout the Assembly: a community that invests not only in protection and crisis response, but also in healing, opportunity, leadership, and collective empowerment. By prioritizing mental health, trusted community spaces, youth leadership, educational access, economic mobility, and reliable communication systems, Montgomery County can create the conditions for immigrant youth to thrive and actively contribute to the future of the region.

Institutional and Community Actions

- Establish regular Community Assemblies and public listening sessions.
- Develop cross-sector partnerships among schools, healthcare providers, local government, and community organizations.
- Improve school communication systems through multilingual and culturally responsive outreach.
- Create formal youth advisory councils within schools and municipalities.
- Expand after-school programs and safe gathering spaces.

Policy Priorities

- Adopt and strengthen ICE-Free School policies.
- Improve institutional protocols protecting student information.
- Expand access to legal services and family preparedness planning.
- Increase investment in affordable mental health and educational supports.
- Promote transparent communication between government agencies and immigrant communities.

Legislative Recommendations

Local Level

- Establish municipal scholarship funds regardless of immigration status.
- Create youth advisory boards linked to municipal governments.
- Fund community legal clinics and family preparedness initiatives.
- Develop rapid-response multilingual communication systems.

State Level

- Increase funding for school-based and community-based bilingual/multilingual mental health services.
- Expand access to higher education aid and workforce programs for immigrant youth.
- Strengthen protections for student and family data privacy.
- Support restorative school climate initiatives rather than punitive security models.

Federal Level

- Expand access to immigration legal representation.
- Protect due process rights and family unity.
- Reduce enforcement practices that create barriers to educational attainment and community participation.
- Promote humane immigration policies centered on child well-being and family stability.

Conclusion

The integration of the youth survey data and the Youth Community Assembly findings reveals a consistent and compelling picture of the realities facing immigrant youth in Montgomery County. While the quantitative findings document widespread concerns related to family separation, educational disruption, mental health challenges, economic uncertainty, and legal vulnerability, the Assembly provided a space for young people to give voice to the lived experiences behind those numbers. Together, these findings demonstrate that immigrant youth are navigating complex structural challenges while also exhibiting remarkable resilience, leadership, and hope for their futures.

One of the greatest strengths of the Youth Community Assembly was its ability to bring together participants from diverse age groups, backgrounds, professions, and institutions. Youth were joined by educators, legal advocates, mental health professionals, community organizers, public officials, public service / law enforcement representatives, researchers, and higher education leaders in a shared space of dialogue and learning. This diversity created opportunities for meaningful exchange, allowing adults to hear directly from young people about the challenges they face, while youth gained a deeper understanding of the institutions, resources, and decision-makers that shape their communities. The Assembly demonstrated that

community solutions are strongest when they are built through authentic intergenerational and cross-sector collaboration.

Equally important, the Assembly showed the transformative power of listening. Rather than speaking about youth, community leaders and institutional representatives listened to youth. Participants shared personal stories of fear, responsibility, resilience, educational aspirations, and community engagement, creating opportunities for understanding that cannot be achieved through statistics alone. These conversations helped bridge generational divides, challenge assumptions, and humanize the impact of immigration policies and public discourse on young people and their families.

The impact of these conversations extends beyond a single event. The relationships, knowledge, and commitments generated through the Assembly have the potential to influence families, institutions, and communities for years to come as the effects of these times are transcending the generations. When young people are invited to share their experiences and adults actively engage with those experiences, communities create pathways for greater trust, stronger civic participation, and more responsive policies. The exchange of lived experience between youth and adults becomes a form of collective learning that can shape future generations and strengthen the social fabric of Montgomery County.

Most importantly, both the survey and the Assembly affirm that immigrant youth should not be viewed solely as recipients of services or subjects of policy debates. They are leaders, knowledge holders, and essential partners in developing solutions to the challenges facing their communities. Their recommendations for expanding mental health supports, educational opportunities, legal resources, economic mobility, trusted communication systems, and youth leadership structures offer a practical roadmap for action. By continuing to invest in youth voice, intergenerational dialogue, and meaningful participation in decision-making, Montgomery County can build a more inclusive, resilient, and equitable future for all residents.



Photo by
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"La historia es nuestra y la hacen los pueblos"
"History is ours and its made by the people"
Salvador Allende

Montgomery County Pennsylvania, 2026

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https://healthspark.org