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# "My Future": A Qualitative Examination of Hope in the Lives of Black Emerging Adults

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**Abstract**

The presence of hope significantly influences how youth interpret possibilities and commit to future-oriented action. This qualitative study investigates how fifteen Black emerging adults, ages eighteen to twenty-five, living in a major United States urban city on the East Coast, describe their aspirations, goal-setting strategies, and responses to personal and structural challenges. Participants were categorized as connected or disconnected based on their engagement in school, work, or training programs. Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis of interviews, the research identified key differences in agency, emotional orientation, and access to guidance between the two groups. Connected participants often described clear, structured goals supported by networks of mentorship and opportunity. Disconnected participants expressed meaningful hope, yet described fewer supports and greater uncertainty in achieving their goals. These findings highlight how consistent exposure to guidance and structured environments strengthens future orientation and internal motivation. These results deepen our understanding of how young people experience hope across diverse contexts and show that mentorship, intentional goal setting, and greater access to opportunity play a vital role in sustaining hopeful thinking during the transition to adulthood.

**Keywords:** emerging adulthood; hope theory; Black youth; goal setting; mentorship; urban education

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## 1. Introduction

Emerging adulthood marks a meaningful and often challenging passage between adolescence and full adulthood, a season in which young people begin to shape their identities, explore professional possibilities, and establish greater independence (Arnett 2014). This period, typically spanning the ages of eighteen to twenty-five, carries promise and vulnerability (Arnett 2014; Booker and Johnson 2024; Juvonen 2014; Schwartz et al. 2013). Emerging adults (EAs) must navigate personal agency, access to resources, and varying levels of support from external systems (Mulvihill et al. 2021). While some benefit from structured opportunities that offer clarity and direction, others face complex social and economic barriers that limit their ability to set and reach meaningful long-term goals (Berzin and Marco 2009; Booker et al. 2022).

Urban communities often amplify these contrasts, as opportunity and hardship frequently operate in close proximity. While cities provide access to educational programs, career development, and social support, systems and policies often fail to distribute that

access evenly. For example, private schools, public charter networks, and workforce development initiatives can offer accelerated academic tracks, internship opportunities, and industry-recognized credentials that help some EAs build momentum early. At the same time, others encounter under-resourced schools, limited transportation, long waitlists for training programs, or housing insecurity, restricting their ability to access or persist in those same systems (Fike and Mattis 2023; McCoy and Bowen 2014). Understanding how young people in these environments cultivate hope, set meaningful goals, and build resilience is essential for designing more inclusive and supportive pathways into adulthood.

Connections to school, job training, or employment often mark a turning point in a young person's journey. These environments offer more than access; they cultivate confidence, sharpen skills, and introduce relationships that guide long-term planning (Boeder et al. 2021). Black EAs, especially those striving for stability in urban settings, often rely on these connections to stay focused and motivated. Disconnection brings a different reality. Without consistent support, many face daily unpredictability, isolation, and limited access to opportunity (Palmer and Connolly 2023). These sharply different realities help explain how some young people sustain belief in their future while others struggle to envision one.

This study defines connection as either enrollment in education or current employment. These markers, drawn from national youth research, serve as practical signals of institutional engagement (Andersen 2017; Bennett 2016; Bloom et al. 2010). Yet these labels cannot capture the whole story. For example, students attending classes may feel disconnected if they never feel seen or valued. A young person with a job may feel isolated without purpose or guidance. Others, not enrolled or employed, may feel grounded through family, faith, or cultural communities. The qualitative strand of this study listened for those experiences to understand where young people find meaning, safety, and strength, though these insights did not guide the decision to center the analysis around the dual elements of connection and disconnection.

This inquiry centers the lived experiences of Black EAs whose paths reflect the enduring impact of systemic inequity and historical exclusion. In one US East Coast city, stark disparities in education, employment, and neighborhood investment actively shape how youth pursue opportunity and envision their futures (Goodwill and Hope 2024). Persistence and resilience, fueled by cultural identity, inner drive, and community support, are common responses to these barriers (Booker and Johnson 2024). In neighborhoods where resources remain scarce, balancing long-term aspirations with daily demands becomes a constant challenge (McCoy and Bowen 2014).

This research explores connection and disconnection as key forces that shape whether young people can sustain hope and move toward their goals. To enable group comparisons and align with national datasets, the study uses a binary definition of connection based on enrollment in education or employment. However, this binary oversimplifies the diverse realities that define young people's lives. A person with a stable job and strong mentorship likely experiences connection differently from someone juggling part-time work without guidance. For this reason, "connected" and "disconnected" serve only as temporary indicators of institutional engagement, rather than fixed reflections of identity. These categories intersect with culture, history, and the environments where young people feel most recognized. To explore how these dynamics influence action and belief, the next section introduces a framework rooted in motivation and future orientation.

### *1.1. Theoretical Framework*

Hope Theory, developed by C. R. Snyder, provides the central framework for this study. It offers a clear, actionable model for understanding how people think about their goals, build strategies to reach them, and sustain the energy to follow through. The theory

identifies three essential components: goal thinking, which reflects the ability to identify meaningful objectives; pathway thinking, which refers to mapping out possible routes to those objectives; and agency thinking, which involves the motivation and self-belief needed to act (Snyder 2002; Snyder et al. 1991). These elements help explain how people move forward in complex, often uncertain environments. For Black EAs navigating the tension between survival and aspiration, Hope Theory captures their determination and imaginative capacity to pursue a better future.

Other theoretical frameworks may seem applicable to this population and context, and at first glance, they offer points of comparison. Yet, this study centers on Hope Theory because it provides a rare blend of mindset and method. It does more than name external factors or broad motivational themes; it maps how people set goals, plan pathways, and stay motivated through uncertainty. Hope Theory does not stop at description. It offers tools for tracing action under pressure. Alternative theories contribute useful insights, but none offer the same explanatory precision or developmental fit for understanding how Black EAs plan, adapt, and persevere in the face of systemic challenges.

Some scholars use Self Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci 2000) to understand motivation. This theory emphasizes the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as drivers of behavior. While relevant, it lacks the direct focus on goal construction and execution that Hope Theory provides. Hope Theory connects thoughts to actions. It allows us to examine whether a person feels autonomous and how they chart a course and keep going. In this study, where participants navigate systemic barriers and limited support, Hope Theory speaks more directly to the mechanics of planning and persistence.

Social Capital Theory adds valuable insight into the role of networks and relationships. Neves et al. (2018) describe social capital as the access to resources, information, and support embedded within an individual's social network. These resources can influence educational outcomes, employment opportunities, and overall well-being. While social capital is critical for understanding the structural and relational assets that support youth development, it does not offer a clear framework for how individuals internally generate and sustain goal-directed behavior. Hope Theory fills this gap by detailing how people translate support and opportunity into planned, purposeful action.

Resilience Theory, as described by Masten (2018), centers on a person's ability to recover and adapt under stress. Scholars such as Thomas et al. (2022) have shown that resilience stems from a combination of internal strengths, cultural grounding, and supportive relationships. This concept helps frame how some participants maintain hope in the face of ongoing adversity. However, Resilience Theory describes outcomes compared to Hope Theory, which explains the process. It clarifies how individuals generate momentum, set direction, revise plans, and activate internal belief systems.

John Henryism, a pattern of high-effort coping under chronic stress, also speaks to the experience of many disconnected youth. Volpe et al. (2021) observed that this mindset often drives individuals to push forward without rest or support. The determination is admirable, but the costs can be high. Prolonged self-reliance wears down emotional reserves. Hope Theory acknowledges that internal drive matters but does not romanticize struggle. It calls attention to the need for both internal motivation and sustainable pathways. For this study, Hope Theory offers the most complete picture. It frames hope as both a mindset and a method, making it an ideal anchor for examining how Black EAs navigate disconnection and seek purposeful lives.

### *1.2. Study Rationale*

Researchers have studied Hope Theory extensively (Snyder 2002; Snyder et al. 1991), yet few have examined how school, employment, and other formal systems shape hope

among Black EAs. Most investigations overlook how different levels of engagement influence a young person's ability to set goals and take deliberate action (Boeder et al. 2021; Booker et al. 2022). Even fewer address how inconsistent or insufficient support undermines belief in the future, especially in under-resourced urban communities where access to opportunity remains deeply unequal (McCoy and Bowen 2014; Sulimani-Aidan and Melkman 2022).

This study directly addresses those gaps by examining the lived experiences of connected and disconnected Black EAs. It focuses on how their engagement with educational, training, and work environments, or lack thereof, shapes their beliefs about the future and their ability to form clear, meaningful goals. These insights bring greater depth to current discussions about opportunity, motivation, and long-term achievement. By grounding the analysis in what participants shared, the study shows how connection or disconnection either supports or limits the growth and resilience of hope.

Two central questions guided this research:

- How do Black EAs in an urban US East Coast city describe their hopes for the future based on their connection status?
- What specific challenges or obstacles most impact their sense of hope and self-determination?

Exploring how Black EAs experience hope contributes valuable insight to theoretical frameworks and practical applications. The findings deepen our understanding of how context shapes hope and highlight the importance of culturally grounded, equity-centered strategies that support young people as they navigate the complex transition into adulthood.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The researchers applied Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke 2006) to examine how young Black adults living in a major United States urban East Coast city describe their futures. Through in-depth interviews, participants shared their experiences in their own words, while a consistent structure ensured comparability across responses. The RTA approach guided the coding, categorization, and theme development process by focusing on researcher reflexivity and iterative meaning-making. The research team engaged closely with participant narratives to construct themes that reflected meaningful differences between connected and disconnected EAs. This process revealed distinct patterns in how hope, self-determination, and structural context influence how participants envision their futures (Booker et al. 2022; Napier et al. 2024).

### *2.1. Participants*

Fifteen emerging adults (EAs), all identifying as African American/Black and residing in a major US East Coast city, participated in the study. Ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-five. The sample included eight connected participants (three women and five men) and seven disconnected participants (four women and three men). While the research team recorded gender identity, the analysis focused on connection status to better understand how access to structured environments, particularly schools, workplaces, and training programs, influences personal agency, opportunity awareness, and developmental outcomes (Boeder et al. 2021).

The sample size of fifteen reflects accepted guidelines for qualitative research using a phenomenological approach such as RTA. Braun and Clarke (2006) and Braun et al. (2020) recommend small, purposeful samples, typically between six and twenty participants, when the goal is to produce rich, contextualized insights into lived experience. Participants in this study offered detailed and reflective narratives, allowing the research team to identify recurring patterns, reach thematic saturation, and explore distinctions between connected and disconnected groups with conceptual clarity.

### 2.2. Definitions

The research team categorized participants as connected or disconnected based on responses to two screening questions asked during intake:

- Are you currently enrolled in school or a training program? (yes or no)
- Are you currently employed? (yes or no)

Participants who answered yes to either question were classified as connected, reflecting active engagement in structured systems such as education, training, or employment. Those who answered no to both were classified as disconnected. The interviewer explained these criteria during intake and provided clarification when needed. Follow-up interview questions explored participants' educational background, work history, and short-term goals. Their responses aligned with their initial classification and added context to their level of engagement with formal systems of support.

These definitions align with widely recognized frameworks in youth development and workforce research. Disconnected youth are defined as individuals between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five who are not enrolled in school and not employed (Belfield and Levin 2013; Lewis 2022; Loprest et al. 2019). This framework ensured consistency in classification and supported meaningful comparisons across levels of structured engagement.

### 2.3. Procedure

The recruitment team reached out through a brief online survey, peer referrals, and direct contact with schools, churches, community organizations, and employment programs. Word-of-mouth and trusted relationships proved more effective than institutional messaging, especially when engaging disconnected youth. Referrals from connected participants expanded the pool and strengthened trust with harder-to-reach peers (Booker et al. 2022; Lee et al. 2020).

The research team developed the online survey based on a prior quantitative study. That earlier phase collected and analyzed State Hope Scale responses from 124 EAs in the same city. For this phase, the form helped screen eligibility and offered an accessible way to express interest. The participants answered several open-ended questions about goals and their current involvement in school or work. The team did not code or analyze those responses during the qualitative phase. Instead, they used the information to coordinate scheduling. The study never reused data without consent.

This design respected participant time and avoided duplication. The brief intake survey served as a bridge, connecting the earlier study to a broader, more diverse pool. Most connected participants responded through the survey. Disconnected EAs typically joined through informal referrals. One research team member, a Black man raised in the same city and cultural context, conducted all interviews. His shared background supported comfort, trust, and candid conversation. Participants opened up, sharing their stories with directness and depth.

The interviewer followed a consistent protocol throughout (Braun et al. 2020; Conchas et al. 2014; Pender et al. 2022). He never revealed the study's emphasis on hope. That decision encouraged participants to speak openly about their futures. The team originally planned to conduct interviews in person. However, feedback from early outreach revealed that virtual sessions offered greater flexibility and access. The team adjusted and held all interviews online, maintaining a consistent protocol across every session. This shift removed logistical barriers and allowed participants to share from familiar spaces, often fostering deeper conversations (Lewis 2022).

The study received full IRB approval from the University of the District of Columbia. Before each interview began, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and what participants could expect and emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary. Each

individual gave verbal informed consent and received reminders that they could pause, skip questions, or end the interview at any time. The team recorded all consents and interviews digitally and used transcription software to ensure accuracy. To maintain confidentiality, the researchers replaced names and identifying details with case numbers and stored all materials on secure, password-protected systems. These measures upheld ethical standards and protected participant privacy while preserving the richness and integrity of the responses.

### *2.4. Reflexivity and Trustworthiness*

The research team moved through this work with deliberate self-awareness. From the outset, the team reflected on how their identities, backgrounds, and experiences shaped what they noticed, how they listened, and what they chose to amplify. The interviewer shared cultural ties and place-based familiarity with participants, which opened space for trust and mutual understanding.

Each member brought more than academic knowledge. The lead investigator has long-standing roots in the study's community and decades of experience supporting young adults navigating systems that often overlook them. The qualitative lead, a rehabilitation psychologist and licensed counselor, has spent years guiding individuals through complex transitions and mentoring students from historically excluded backgrounds. These shared commitments informed the research approach.

The team met regularly to challenge assumptions, refine roles, and stay grounded in the data. Memo writing captured moments of uncertainty, insight, and evolving interpretation. Through collaborative coding, the team tested the boundaries of themes and stayed accountable to the voices at the center of the study. This process ensured that the analysis remained coherent, responsive, and honest.

The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI, San Francisco, CA, USA; GPT-4, 2024 version) to support editing and language refinement while preparing this manuscript. The tool helped improve clarity, tone, readability, and paragraph organization. The team did not use it to alter, edit, or revise any of the participants' transcribed responses. The research team independently interpreted all data, framed the theoretical approach, and made all analytic decisions. The final manuscript represents original intellectual effort, with all factual content, data, and conclusions authored and confirmed by the listed contributors.

### *2.5. Data Analysis*

#### 2.5.1. Themes and Coding

The research team applied RTA to identify and interpret how Black EAs described their futures (Braun and Clarke 2006; Braun et al. 2020). This approach emphasized an iterative and collaborative process, allowing themes to emerge through repeated engagement with the data rather than through a pre-established coding frame. Analysts focused on meaning-making across interviews, attending closely to language, context, and recurring patterns of thought and emotion.

Eight core themes evolved through deep readings of the transcripts and ongoing team discussion. These themes reflected shared perspectives in at least three interviews and captured experiences relevant to connected and disconnected participants. The team aligned themes with specific interview prompts to explore how participants navigated questions about goals, challenges, support, and hope. Each response helped shape the themes, and the team included every transcript in the final analysis. The team identified data saturation when they no longer encountered new themes during the later stages of coding (Nowell et al. 2017; O'Connor and Joffe 2020). Table 1 summarizes the final themes.

**Table 1.** Theme names and coding.

| FUTURE VISION | HOPEFULNESS |
|---|---|
| Aspirational | Accomplished Past Goals |
| Career-minded | Articulates Confidence |
| Certainty | Articulates Doubt |
| Entrepreneurial | Articulates External Hope |
| Family-oriented | Articulates Internal Hope |
| Goals-oriented | Articulates Tenacity |
| Optimistic | Due to External Motivators |
| Uncertainty | General Positive Outlook |
| | Generally Hopeful |
| **EMOTIONAL RESPONSE** | Has Opportunities/Resources |
| Accomplished | Has Support |
| Anxiety | Spiritually Connected |
| Anxious | |
| Contrasting Emotions | **CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS** |
| Excited | Age-related |
| Fearful | Articulates Multiple Challenges |
| Optimism | Articulates No Perceived Challenges |
| Readiness | Childcare-related |
| Tenacious | Education/Training |
| Trepidation | Financial |
| Unreadiness | Lack of Needed Resources |
| | Lack of Social Capital/Connections |
| **FOCUS AREA** | Limited Support to Overcome |
| Children/Family | Mental Health/Well-being |
| Decision-making | No Plan to Overcome Challenges |
| Education/Training/Certification | Self-imposed/Mindset/Thinking |
| Employment/Career | Time-related |
| Finances/Income | Transportation-related |
| General Success | Understands How to Overcome Challenges |
| Goal Completion | |
| Happiness | **SUPPORT SYSTEM** |
| Long-term Thinking | Community Support |
| Mental Health | Family/Friend |
| Perceived Responsibilities | Mentorship Support |
| Short-term Thinking | Multiple Supports |
| Unsure | No or Limited Support |
| | Spiritually Identified Support |
| **GOAL SETTING** | Stable Support System |
| "I Have Goals" | Unstable Support System |
| Changed-mindset Goals | Wants/Needs Support System |
| Educational/Training Goals | |

**Table 1.** *Cont.*

| Employment/Career Goals | **HOPE LEVEL INFLUENCES** |
|---|---|
| Family-oriented Goals | Friend Influence |
| Generally Unspecific Goals | Mentor Influence |
| Geographic-relocation Goals | Multiple Influences |
| Housing-attainment Goals | No or Limited Influence |
| Income/Finances/Savings Goals | Other Family-member Influences |
| Independent-living Goals | Parental Influence |
| Positivity/Happiness Goals | Self-initiated Influences |
| Specifically Articulated Goals | Singular Influence |
| Stability Goals | |
| Transportation Goals | |
| Unidentifiable Goals | |

Two researchers independently coded the interviews during the first round. At that stage, neither coder knew whether participants were connected or disconnected. Each began by generating open codes from the transcript text, noting key concepts and patterns. In a second round, the coders revisited their initial interpretations, consolidating related codes and grouping them into higher-level themes. Throughout the process, the team met regularly to refine definitions, challenge assumptions, and reach consensus on interpretive decisions (Braun et al. 2020; Terry et al. 2017).

The research team used QDA Miner 2024.0.7 to organize the transcripts, manage the coding system, and store memos that captured analytic insights. They calculated Cohen's kappa to assess coder agreement, which exceeded 0.75, a substantial level according to established benchmarks (Cohen 1960; Landis and Koch 1977). When differences arose, the coders reviewed transcript excerpts together, clarified interpretive perspectives, and adjusted theme definitions accordingly. This process supported analytic consistency and ensured that thematic development remained grounded in the data while reflecting the complexity of participant narratives.

#### 2.5.2. Team Training

The coding team began with a series of calibration sessions to develop a shared sense of how to read and interpret the transcripts. These early conversations helped clarify how coders identified meaning and applied codes, laying the groundwork for meaningful theme development. As the analysis progressed, each coder kept reflexive memos to capture reactions, emerging thoughts, and interpretation shifts along the way. These notes made the process more transparent and helped the team understand how their perspectives might shape the work (Braun and Clarke 2006; Braun et al. 2020). Throughout the process, the team met regularly to revisit their early thinking and wrestle with uncertainty in the data. They challenged one another's interpretations, asked difficult questions, and acknowledged how personal experience could influence what stood out. The team read each transcript multiple times. They revised, challenged, and occasionally reframed ideas to remain grounded in what participants actually shared (Nowell et al. 2017; Terry et al. 2017).

The team used Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to shape the themes. This approach allowed for flexibility and ongoing reflection as the analysis deepened (Braun et al. 2020). No pre-set categories or rigid templates were applied. Instead, coders listened to how participants described their goals, emotions, uncertainties, and support systems. Over time,

eight themes took shape. Each reflected not just what participants said, but how they made sense of their future in their own words.

Future Vision drew from participants' responses when asked to describe their futures in a sentence or two. Some answered with clarity and intention. Others responded more tentatively, unsure of what might come next. Emotional Response captured how participants felt when thinking about their futures. Confidence, anxiety, and hope surfaced repeatedly, showing how emotionally prepared they felt to move forward.

Focus Areas reflected the domains participants prioritized and what mattered most when they thought about the road ahead. Education, income, and housing came up often, but so did personal growth, healing, and caring for others. Goal Setting revealed how specifically participants mapped out their aims. Some offered detailed next steps. Others spoke in broader terms, expressing desire without clear direction.

Hopefulness centered on participants' belief in their ability to make progress. Some leaned on inner strength or faith. Others drew hope from people in their lives who encouraged them. In contrast, the Challenges and Barriers theme surfaced the structural and personal obstacles participants named: inconsistent mental health care, gaps in education, economic strain, or lack of access to trustworthy guidance.

Support System and Hope Influences explored the sources of encouragement that shaped how participants stayed motivated. Some described steady relationships with mentors, parents, or friends. Others shared more inconsistent forms of support. In every case, participants pointed to someone or something that shaped whether they felt hope was realistic or distant.

Together, these eight themes offer a textured picture of how emerging Black adults understand what lies ahead. Hope did not appear in isolation. Participants shape it through conversations about experience, environment, and relationships. Whether hope persisted, strengthened, or began to waver depended on personal willpower and the systems and people that either opened or closed the path forward (Booker et al. 2022; McCoy and Bowen 2014; Pender et al. 2022).

## 3. Results

Eight central themes emerged through RTA, offering insight into how participants described their goals, challenges, and sense of direction. The research team developed these themes through multiple rounds of coding, critical discussion, and reflective memoing. Rather than relying on fixed categories, the team allowed each theme to take shape through participants' language and meaning, ensuring each reflected lived experience rather than researcher assumptions. In developing these themes, the team considered frequency, clarity, and emotional weight. This approach helped distinguish between deeply rooted patterns and more casual observations. The process emphasized interpretation over quantification, focusing on narrative tone, context, and intent.

Researchers selected theme names to capture how participants spoke about their futures. These labels preserved nuance across connected and disconnected EAs, allowing for a more accurate portrayal of how young people envision possibility, interpret adversity, and locate support. The themes often overlapped, forming a network of meaning rather than a set of isolated categories. This interconnected structure reflected how participants worked on their goals, emotions, and relationships when imagining what lay ahead.

Each theme introduced in the following section is defined and supported by participant quotations. Definitions and naming rationale appear in Table 2, which outlines the conceptual boundaries of each theme and the reasoning behind its label. Together, these themes offer a framework for understanding how these participants construct a sense of hope, navigate uncertainty, and pursue meaningful goals.

**Table 2.** Theme definitions and naming rationale.

| Theme Name | Definition/Conceptual Boundaries | Reason for Label |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Future Vision | How participants see their futures over the next five years, including clarity, direction, and ambition. | Highlights a forward-thinking and planning mindset. |
| Emotional Response | Emotional outlook on the future, including confidence, anxiety, and readiness. | Emphasizes how emotions shape future orientation. |
| Focus Areas | Main priorities when thinking about the future (career, finances, family, education). | Reflects key life domains guiding attention and decision making. |
| Goal Setting | Specificity and structure in setting and pursuing goals. | Captures differences between strategic goals and broad aspirations. |
| Hopefulness | Sources and stability of hope, both internal and external. | Reflects underlying psychological and relational motivators. |
| Challenges and Barriers | Internal and external obstacles to progress. | Highlights the layered nature of adversity that participants described. |
| Support Systems | Availability and consistency of relationships that offer guidance and encouragement. | Reflects the strength and reach of support networks. |
| Hope Influences | People or experiences that shape one's sense of hope and motivation. | Distinguishes the social and contextual roots of hope. |

### *3.1. Future Vision: Clarity, Ambition, and Opportunity*

Participant reflections on the future revealed clear differences in how participants described their path ahead. Everyone expressed a desire for growth and success, but their ability to articulate a plan varied. Those actively involved in school or work named specific goals and tied them to real steps. Their responses showed ambition shaped by experience, structure, and guidance.

> *Exemplar quote (connected): "I plan to own a business, specifically a food business. I already have the concept and plan to attend a training program next year."*

Disconnected participants also expressed ambition, but their responses felt more uncertain. Many shared broad hopes, like success or stability, without outlining how they might get there.

> *Exemplar quote (disconnected): "I just want to be successful, whatever that looks like."*

These contrasts reflected more than planning. They revealed differences in access, encouragement, and how grounded each participant felt in their vision.

### *3.2. Emotional Response: Confidence, Uncertainty, and Planning*

Participants expressed a range of emotions when speaking about their futures. Those involved in school, work, or training often sounded sure of themselves. They described a sense of readiness, shaped by routines, past effort, and access to supportive environments.

> *Exemplar quote (connected): "I feel ready for my future because I've already taken steps to make it happen. I have a plan, and I'm confident I can follow through."*

Others expressed a different tone. Disconnected participants still shared hope, but their words carried more hesitation. Some described feeling unsure. Others admitted they simply did not know what to expect.

*Exemplar quote (disconnected): "Thinking about my future makes me nervous because I don't know what's going to happen."*

Emotional tone often followed structure. Confidence seemed to grow when there was support. Where support was thin, uncertainty filled the gap. The presence or absence of opportunity shaped participants' feelings about what came next.

### 3.3. Focus Areas: Structured Planning and Ambiguous Ambitions

Participants shared what they hoped to prioritize in the years ahead. Many spoke about careers, family responsibilities, education, or financial stability. Connected participants often organized these ideas into a clear sequence. They described specific goals and tied them to timelines, programs, or relationships that gave their plans traction.

*Exemplar quote (connected): "In the next five years, I see myself somewhat well established in my career. . .more stable than I am now."*

Disconnected participants expressed ambition, too, but often in less defined terms. Their goals leaned more on intention than plan, grounded in desire but not always accompanied by concrete steps.

*Exemplar quote (disconnected): "I see myself as successful or starting to be successful."*

The way participants talked about priorities revealed how structure, or the absence of it, shaped their ability to move from idea to action. Clarity often grew out of context, not just mindset.

### 3.4. Goal Setting: Specific Plans vs. General Ambitions

Participants described their goals in ways that revealed distinct differences in structure and planning. Those currently engaged in school, work, or career training often spoke with precision. They named immediate and future objectives and explained how they intended to reach them. Their plans were shaped by access to resources and guided by systems that supported steady progress.

*Exemplar quote (connected): "My short-term goal is to complete my certification, and my long-term goal is to own my own business. I have steps in place for both."*

Others shared hopes that felt more open-ended. These participants often spoke emotionally, pointing to a desire for stability or purpose without clear steps or direction. Their goals, while genuine, reflected the impact of uncertainty, financial pressure, or limited access to guidance.

*Exemplar quote (disconnected): "I just want to be stable. I want to be doing something good with my life."*

These reflections underscore how access to structured environments and consistent guidance can help transform broad aspirations into actionable plans. Without support, participants often held meaningful goals but faced greater difficulty outlining how to achieve them.

### 3.5. Hopefulness: Self-Driven Determination vs. External Validation

Participants described hope as both a mindset and a method for forward movement. Their reflections revealed two distinct orientations: one grounded in self-determination and internal agency, and the other shaped more by relational support and external affirmation.

Connected participants most often framed hope as an inner resource. Their narratives emphasized personal efficacy, self-trust, and a belief that previous accomplishments signaled future potential. They described this form of hope not simply as optimism, but as confidence grounded in experience, structure, and preparation.

*Exemplar quote (connected): "I feel hopeful because I know I can achieve what I set out to do. I've already made progress, and I trust myself to keep going."*

In contrast, disconnected participants more frequently grounded their hope in external relationships. Family, peers, and supportive figures served as vital sources of encouragement. Rather than drawing hope from past success or inner drive, many relied on the belief others held in them as the foundation of their forward movement.

*Exemplar quote (disconnected): "I feel hopeful because I have people who believe in me."*

Participants made sense of hope through two primary lenses. Connected individuals often described a self-sustaining belief rooted in personal direction and past achievement, while disconnected individuals drew strength from relationships that affirmed their potential. These differing expressions show how access to support and affirmation helps shape the ways young people envision and sustain hope.

### *3.6. Challenges and Barriers: Access, Mindset, and Support*

Both groups identified obstacles, but their framing of those barriers differed. Connected participants typically saw challenges as surmountable. They described a balance between personal persistence and available support systems.

*Exemplar quote (connected): "Most of the areas I want to work in, you have to attend school. . .So, I just take it day by day. If there's a will, there's a way."*

Disconnected participants often described compounded challenges, including limited guidance, financial pressure, and caregiving responsibilities. Their narratives illustrated the emotional weight of pursuing goals without consistent support.

*Exemplar quote (disconnected): "Childcare. Since I do have a child and I am only 19, I see a lot of things not happening because I do have a child. And I don't have a lot of help."*

Participants revealed distinct ways of navigating adversity shaped by their lived experiences. Connected individuals leaned on persistence and available supports to manage obstacles, while disconnected individuals emphasized how unmet needs and structural barriers limited their ability to move forward with confidence.

### *3.7. Support Systems: Stability and Scope of Influence*

The reliability and diversity of support networks emerged as a powerful influence. Connected participants described multiple sources of encouragement (e.g., mentors, family, church, or school) who offered emotional and instrumental aid.

*Exemplar quote (connected): "I have an amazing support system. My mentors, family, and friends push me to stay on track."*

Disconnected participants often relied on a single individual or lacked consistent support altogether. Their reflections indicated how isolation or narrow support systems made future planning more difficult.

*Exemplar quote (disconnected): "I don't really have people to turn to when I need advice."*

Support systems, whether strong or fragile, played a defining role in shaping participants' confidence and clarity. Those who described broad, dependable networks shared a greater sense of direction, while others navigating limited or inconsistent support expressed more uncertainty about their futures. These differences underscore how steady encouragement strengthens one's ability to pursue goals with purpose and hope.

### 3.8. Hope Influences: Agency and External Drivers

Participants credited a range of individuals and circumstances for shaping their hope. Connected participants most often described mentors, personal growth, and formative experiences that helped them maintain confidence and momentum.

> *Exemplar quote (connected): "My mom taught me that no matter what the situation may be or what is handed to me, if it is something I want, I've got to go for it and always have confidence in myself."*

Disconnected participants, by contrast, named role models or friends as aspirational figures but often lacked sustained mentorship or consistent guidance.

> *Exemplar quote (disconnected): "My friend J**a. . . seeing her makes me want to win, too."*

These differences revealed how hope developed through either internal drive or the influence of meaningful relationships. Participants drew strength from within or looked to the success of others as inspiration for their own progress.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Key Findings

The study examined how connected and disconnected Black EAs in this major U.S. East Coast city expressed their hopes, goals, and sources of support. Participants' connection status significantly shaped how they envisioned their futures, formulated goals, and accessed support to sustain motivation. Connected EAs described clear pathways forward, often grounded in consistent guidance from schools, job training programs, or employment. They referenced mentors who affirmed their direction and programs that structured their opportunities. In contrast, disconnected EAs relied heavily on emotional encouragement from close personal relationships. They often described hope as a feeling rather than a strategy, lacking structured supports to transform belief into action.

City life layered these narratives with additional complexity. Participants engaged in formal learning or employment emphasized the value of steady support and access to developmental resources. Their experiences aligned closely with Snyder's Hope Theory, which links future-oriented thinking to goal setting, motivation, and perceived pathways (Booker et al. 2022; Snyder 2002). These participants highlighted concrete achievements and ongoing reinforcement from their environments. By contrast, disconnected youth described navigating communities marked by disinvestment and minimal institutional presence. They drew hope from determination, but also acknowledged the emotional toll of sustaining it without reliable support.

Participants did not lack hope but revealed a divergence in how hope operated in their lives. Disconnected EAs voiced aspirations with less clarity and more uncertainty, reflecting a deficit in structured reinforcement rather than motivation. Their narratives illustrate how social and structural conditions influence one's ability to act on desire and sustain progress. While both groups aimed for advancement, connected EAs accessed support systems that bolstered their efforts. Disconnected youth often struggled to construct a viable vision for the future in the absence of such tools.

The study's findings reveal that connection is vital in equipping EAs with the tools necessary for long-term planning. Those with access to guidance and encouragement more frequently expressed confidence in their ability to move forward, drawing on past successes and external affirmation to sustain motivation (Pender et al. 2022). Disconnected participants, though equally hopeful in spirit, more frequently described uncertainty, highlighting the challenges of transforming hopefulness into action when mentorship and structured guidance are lacking. Their perspectives affirm that hope alone is not always

sufficient; it must be paired with access to support, concrete goal setting, and sustained encouragement to facilitate meaningful progress (Schwartz et al. 2013).

Connection proved a practical asset. Participants with stable guidance developed long-term strategies and confidence, often building upon prior accomplishments and feedback from mentors and educators (Boeder et al. 2021; Pender et al. 2022). These individuals linked their future outlooks to measurable goals, reinforcing their sense of direction. Although equally driven, disconnected EAs reported difficulty translating motivation into sustained action. They cited gaps in mentorship, sporadic institutional contact, and unstable life circumstances as recurring obstacles. For them, hope demanded both courage and scaffolding.

When available, opportunities and affirmation strengthened resolve. Participants who received consistent encouragement described a greater capacity to set structured goals and pursue enduring progress. Several credited personal resilience, while others emphasized the influence of people and programs that provided stability and affirmation. Some admitted that, without steady support, staying on course became a persistent challenge. These contrasting accounts underscore the need for responsive community structures and institutional resources that offer guidance, reinforcement, and hope (Conchas et al. 2014; Greco and Kraimer 2020).

### *4.2. Theoretical Implications*

The observed differences in future planning reflect deeper self-belief disparities, access to structured opportunities, and exposure to environments that support long-term thinking. Participants more engaged in formal settings, such as school, training programs, or employment, showed stronger alignment with Hope Theory's core elements, including agency and the ability to identify clear pathways. Practical experiences with goal setting, steady progress, and measurable achievement shaped their confidence. In contrast, disconnected participants, while similarly aspirational, often lacked access to environments that could help them develop the skills and confidence needed to plan ahead. They described motivation but found it difficult to articulate how to turn intentions into action. These findings highlight the importance of interventions that foster inner resolve and provide consistent external support systems that guide and reinforce the pursuit of meaningful goals (Napier et al. 2024).

### *4.3. Snyder's Hope Theory Integration*

Snyder's Hope Theory remains highly relevant when examining the lives of connected EAs. These participants consistently demonstrated both core components of the model-directed agency and clearly defined pathways. Their ability to make steady progress toward career, educational, or financial milestones reflects strong internal motivation and effective planning. Many described access to mentorship, guidance, and resources that helped transform aspirations into actionable steps, reinforcing the synergy between belief and opportunity.

Disconnected participants, however, brought important nuance to the model. While many expressed a clear sense of agency, their pathways often relied on relationships, informal encouragement, or general aspirations rather than structured support. Several spoke of role models or inspiring moments that sparked belief in the possibility of success, yet few described systems that sustained that hope over time. These insights suggest the need to broaden Hope Theory to account for context-specific sources of motivation and adaptive strategies that youth develop without consistent guidance (Booker et al. 2022; Scioli and Biller 2010). Expanding the framework in this way can offer a more inclusive understanding of how hope functions in environments marked by inequality and uncertainty.

### 4.4. Avoiding Circular Reasoning

Rather than concluding that hopeful individuals simply expressed hope, the findings show how specific personal experiences, such as mentorship, career planning, and emotional readiness, actively shape how hope takes form in everyday life. Participants described hope not as a vague personality trait or automatic reaction to adversity, but as something they built through action, access, and affirmation. Connected participants developed self-trust through consistent achievement and reliable support systems. Disconnected participants described a more emotionally demanding process, often drawing hope from singular relationships or brief moments of encouragement. Their reflections highlight how the strength of hope depends on steady reinforcement and opportunities to translate belief into forward movement.

### 4.5. Limitations of the Study

This qualitative study provides meaningful insight into how Black EAs envision their futures and engage with hope in settings such as schools, workplaces, and training programs. When considering the scope and relevance of these findings, it is important to acknowledge several limitations. The study drew from a sample of fifteen participants living in a single city. While this urban setting yielded rich and deeply contextualized narratives, the perspectives shared may not fully capture the experiences of EAs in other regions or within different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Future research that includes a more diverse participant base will strengthen the field's understanding of how hope operates across a wider spectrum of environments and lived experiences.

Second, although the study included both male and female voices, the analysis did not explore in depth how gender shaped participants' experiences. The analysis may have overlooked critical gender-based differences in access to opportunity, mentoring relationships, emotional expression, and coping strategies by focusing primarily on connection status. Prior research suggests that gender can significantly influence how young adults navigate social and economic systems, often shaping their sense of agency and approach to long-term planning (Correll 2017). Future research should explore how gender intersects with connection status and other dimensions of identity to influence the development and sustainability of hope. Doing so will enrich our understanding of the unique pathways and pressures experienced across the gender spectrum.

Third, although the peer referral strategy successfully engaged several disconnected participants, it likely excluded those remaining most isolated. Individuals with no links to school, employment, or informal support networks likely did not participate, leaving critical perspectives underrepresented. Researchers could adopt more proactive outreach strategies to reach these voices, including direct partnerships with community organizations and on-the-ground engagement efforts that intentionally connect with young people furthest removed from structured care and support systems (Wimberly 2016).

Another important limitation stems from the self-reported nature of the data. Participants offered thoughtful and reflective narratives, but their accounts may have reflected memory lapses, personal bias, or a desire to present themselves positively. The research team maintained confidentiality protocols and practiced ongoing reflexivity throughout the process; however, these safeguards could not fully eliminate the influence of perception and social context on participant storytelling. Future studies can enhance credibility by incorporating mixed methods or longitudinal designs that triangulate interview narratives with observable behaviors, patterns of program engagement, or follow-up interviews over time (Booker and Johnson 2024).

RTA provided a rigorous and adaptable framework for capturing meaning across participant responses. The research team promoted trustworthiness by calibrating coders,

writing reflective memos, and holding regular peer debriefings to examine assumptions and align interpretations. These strategies supported consistency and reduced bias, yet subjectivity remains inherent in qualitative analysis. Future research could increase analytic rigor by inviting participants to respond to emerging themes and include additional coders to independently review transcripts (Nowell et al. 2017).

Although the interview protocol included a question about hope, the interviewer did not disclose that hope served as the central focus of the study. This approach helped minimize response bias and encouraged authentic dialogue (McCoy and Bowen 2014). Because the interviewer did not ask participants to frame their answers through a theoretical lens, they grounded their reflections more in personal experience than abstract constructs. Researchers can build on this approach by combining open-ended interviews with validated instruments like the State Hope Scale (Snyder et al. 1991). This mixed strategy would support a richer understanding of how individuals describe hope in their own words and how those expressions align with psychological models (Booker et al. 2022; Snyder 2002).

Scholars must examine how definitions of connection shape the interpretation of findings. Defining participants as either connected or disconnected aligned the analysis with national datasets and allowed for consistent comparisons. Yet that binary approach oversimplifies lived experience. Many young people fall between categories. Some hold jobs but lack mentorship. Others find strong relational and cultural support outside of school or work. Classifying *connection* requires more than simply designating institutional status. Emotional safety, community affirmation, and trusted relationships influence how young adults assess their ability to pursue meaningful goals. Several participants described hope, regardless of connection status. What influenced their ability to act on that hope stemmed less from enrollment or employment and more from the presence or absence of consistent, affirming support. Structural access matters. So does context. Future research should frame connection as a multidimensional spectrum and explore how overlapping sources of support help Black EAs build agency and direction (Dixson and Gentzis 2021; Juvonen 2014).

These limitations offer important considerations for future study design, yet they do not diminish the contributions of this research. The findings provide valuable insight into how Black EAs experience, express, and sustain hope in urban environments. They highlight the power of internal drive, the role of relational and structural support, and the importance of expanding opportunity frameworks. This study helps advance theoretical conversations and practical strategies to strengthen future orientation and long-term success.

### *4.6. Implications and Future Directions*

This study offers practical and theoretical insights for supporting Black EAs as they build meaningful lives in the face of urban structural challenges. Findings underscore the importance of creating environments that cultivate hope through consistent guidance, community connection, and expanded access to opportunity (Booker et al. 2022; Scioli and Biller 2010; Snyder 2002). The findings of this study lead to three actionable recommendations, each rooted in the lived experiences of participants and the structural conditions that shaped their ability to move forward.

First, youth-serving programs should design layered mentorship networks rather than relying on a single point of support. Many disconnected participants pointed to one trusted individual who sustained their belief in the future. While powerful, these single-source supports often lack stability. Programs embedded in schools, neighborhood hubs, and workforce initiatives should establish multi-person systems that provide relational depth and continuity (Pender et al. 2022; Schwartz et al. 2013).

Second, existing educational and workforce initiatives can amplify their effectiveness by embedding hope-building into everyday practice. When instructors and mentors lead young people through goal clarification, pathway planning, and reflection on agency, they help develop future orientation as a skill. These approaches give participants the tools to persist through uncertainty and easily navigate setbacks (Booker and Johnson 2024; Ryan and Deci 2000).

Third, progress depends on removing structural barriers that restrict access to growth. Participants described how under-resourced schools, limited transportation, unaffordable childcare, and unmet mental health needs blocked their momentum. Policymakers must invest in the infrastructure that supports young people's advancement, especially those furthest from opportunity (Belfield and Levin 2013; Bloom et al. 2010; Brown 2019; Conchas et al. 2014).

At the policy level, Hope Theory should inform program design and evaluation. Practitioners can adapt their framework to reflect the realities of young people navigating disconnection. In this study, hope emerged as an individual mindset and a product of relationships, context, and access. Participants described how their sense of possibility rose or fell based on the systems around them. This understanding reinforces the need for programs that combine personal development with community-level support (Sulimani-Aidan and Melkman 2022; Sulimani-Aidan et al. 2019; Napier et al. 2024).

Future research should examine how hope develops over time and through targeted interventions. Longitudinal studies can track the relationship between hopeful thinking, goal pursuit, and broader life outcomes. Evaluations of programs rooted in Hope Theory will help determine what practices support lasting impact in real-world settings. Researchers should also investigate how sustained access to mentorship, structured guidance, and affirming relationships contributes to durable changes in motivation and future orientation (Booker and Johnson 2024).

Geographic context also warrants closer study. Youth in rural and suburban areas may face unique challenges and draw on different forms of support than those in urban communities. Comparative research can clarify how opportunity, values, and access shape hope development across diverse environments. Understanding these regional differences can inform place-based strategies that address local barriers and build on community strengths (Greco and Kraimer 2020; Neves et al. 2018).

As the field advances, scholars must build and test models of hope that reflect Black youth's cultural and historical realities. Research must confront the effects of structural racism, generational trauma, and systemic neglect that shape how young adults interpret their potential. When hope frameworks account for these dynamics, they become more than theoretical; they serve as tools for justice, belonging, and possibility (Dixson and Gentzis 2021; Thomas et al. 2022). Taken together, these implications call for action. Hope thrives when communities provide structure and affirmation, align aspiration with access, and recognize, support, and equip young people to shape the future they deserve.

## 5. Conclusions

This study examined how Black EAs in an urban East Coast setting described their sense of hope, future goals, and access to support systems. It explored how connection to school, work, and structured programs influenced their ability to maintain direction and sustain motivation. Through interviews with connected and disconnected participants, the study sought to understand how social environments, institutional access, and personal drive intersect to shape one's ability to envision and pursue a meaningful future.

The EAs in this study shared meaningful reflections about holding onto hope while trying to move forward. Their perspectives revealed a wide range of experiences. Some

described strong support systems that helped guide their steps, while others navigated uncertainty without clear direction. Participants who received steady guidance spoke confidently about their futures. They credited mentors, relatives, and professional connections with helping them stay focused and motivated. Many pointed to routines and meaningful benchmarks that created a sense of direction. Others shared more uncertain paths. They continued to hope without reliable support, though their outlook often felt less grounded and more uncertain. Their goals shifted frequently, driven by personal determination and a willingness to keep going, even when the way ahead felt unclear.

Hope, for these young adults, represented more than a feeling. They actively built and protected it. Those with access to guidance set goals and pursued them with greater clarity. Those without leaned on internal drive while acknowledging the added difficulty of staying focused alone. Their stories emphasize the value of environments that provide direction, encouragement, and opportunity. When young people receive support and affirmation, they can more easily turn their aspirations into actionable plans.

The findings urge a broader understanding of how hope forms and what helps it grow. Programs that approach hope as a skill to develop, not as a trait to assume, offer stronger support to youth facing complex barriers. Real progress takes place when young people bring the desire to succeed and gain access to the tools that make success possible. Practitioners and leaders can close the gap between ambition and opportunity by creating conditions that help more young adults shape the futures they imagine with confidence and purpose.

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## Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

| | |
|---|---|
| EAs | Emerging Adults |
| RTA | Reflexive Thematic Analysis |
| QDA | Qualitative Data Analysis |

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