RESEARCH REPORT

Supporting Youth Economic Mobility through Employment-Focused Strategies

A Landscape Scan

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WorkRise connects workers, employers, researchers and advocates to generate ideas that can be turned into policies and practices that bring economic stability and upward mobility for all US workers—opening new opportunities for workers to thrive at work and in life.

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Executive Summary

Policymakers and practitioners have long been concerned about the challenges young people face in the labor market and have sought solutions to improve their economic mobility. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately affected youth employment, there is an urgent need to focus on evidence-based solutions to support the economic mobility, power, and dignity of young workers. This is critical not only to support better outcomes for young people but also to realize broader societal benefits by preparing and leveraging the talents of the youth workforce today and in the future. This report reviews the evidence on employment-focused strategies to understand how to promote a broad vision of youth economic mobility and inform efforts to improve outcomes for young people following the pandemic.

Considering the Evidence in Context

It is critical to consider the demographic profile of today's young people, the labor market, and systemic social determinants of work that shape access to opportunity and outcomes for young people. Key points include the following:

- **Young people today are a diverse group.** Roughly 47 percent of Americans between the ages of 16 to 24 are people of color.[1] About a third of young people in this age group are immigrants or come from an immigrant family. These dimensions of identity, along with gender and sexual orientation, shape the experiences, assets, and challenges that young people face in the labor market.
- **Young people are often employed in low-quality jobs in the service sector.** In July 2023, the largest share of employed youth worked in the leisure and hospitality industry, followed by the retail trade industry and education and health services.[2] A third of young people also report working in the "gig economy," which offers flexibility but lacks labor protections (Anderson et al. 2021). Although early work experience is vital, the nature of these jobs—part-time work, low wages,

unpredictable scheduling, and lack of training opportunities—may cause economic instability and, in some cases, disconnection from both employment and education.

- **The pandemic's disruptions to the labor market and economy had large impacts on young people, who already faced challenges with work.** In the decades leading up to the pandemic, young people faced challenges with unemployment stemming from automation and globalization, putting pressure on workers with less education and contributing to increases in college attendance (Loprest, Spaulding, and Nightingale 2019). Since the pandemic, the labor market has tightened and worker power seems to have increased, though challenges for young workers persist, such as the rising cost of postsecondary education.[3] College enrollment also declined following the pandemic but rebounded in fall 2023, especially for community colleges.[4]
- **Programs and policies aimed at supporting the youth workforce must consider the social determinants of work and structural barriers that many young people face.** These barriers include structural, institutional, and individual racism; poverty and trauma; challenges and inequities based on where young people live; and the role that household structures and caregiving responsibilities can have on outcomes.

Providing Skills and Supports to Help Young People Attain Good Jobs

Programs and policies aimed at uplifting this diverse population and helping them overcome barriers need to provide access to effective skills development strategies as well as supportive services. Supporting economic mobility means focusing on a young person's career trajectory and considering multiple pathways.

Supports and Skills

- **Providing key supports:** Research points to the importance of financial support in employment interventions for young people (Hossain and Bloom 2015), along with other supports such as transportation and mental health services. For certain subgroups—for example, young people with criminal records, young people aging out of foster care, and young parents—targeted programs designed to meet their unique needs show promise.

- **Ensuring programs reflect labor market demand:** A hallmark of effective skills preparation is using labor market data, engaging employers, and participating in industry or sector partnerships to ensure alignment between labor market demand and the skills required for jobs (Cleary and Van Noy 2014; Spaulding and Sirois 2022).
- **Building skills and connections to work through work-based learning:** Work-based learning encompasses a range of strategies that provide young people with opportunities for career preparation and training in a work setting (Gardner and Bartkus 2014; Giffin et al. 2018). Such experiences are more likely to improve employment outcomes when young people are paid, when they can apply concepts learned on the job in the classroom, and when they receive financial support (Hossain and Bloom 2015).
- **Providing supports to navigate careers and access jobs:** These supports can include efforts to promote career exploration and support job search. Mentors can have positive impacts on outcomes for young people, with growing research on career-focused support by "navigators," or specialized counselors who help participants take advantage of, maintain, and maximize available services and benefits (Di Biase and Mochel 2021).

Multiple Pathways to Careers

- **Adopting career pathway models:** This approach promotes advancement through a sequence of articulated steps that give workers opportunities to earn credentials, provide support services and flexibility for nontraditional students, and rely on employer connections and partnerships (Schwartz et al. 2022). A recent meta-analysis of career pathway programs found mixed results but highlighted the importance of securing a good first job and targeting occupations and industries that offer higher potential for wage growth (Peck et al. 2022).
- **Supporting young people in high school:** Opportunities for career exploration, robust advising, work-based learning, and the chance to take college credits are all strategies for improving career preparation in high school. A review of the evidence on participating in career academies—a model with many of these elements—found that this approach has a positive and sustained impact on post-high school

earnings eight years following completion but no impact on educational attainment (Mathematica Policy Research 2014).

- **Improving college completion:** Although college attendance has increased over the past few decades, low completion rates have prompted greater consideration of how colleges can better meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body facing barriers that traditional colleges were not designed to address. One promising model—the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, or ASAP, piloted by the City University of New York beginning in 2007—was shown to double graduation rates (Kolenovic, Linderman, and Mechur Karp 2013).
- **Allowing for alternative pathways:** Young people who face challenges in school and require additional support entering certain jobs and industries can pursue alternatives to the traditional college pathway. These include programs for young people who dropped out or are at risk of dropping out of high school, are not connected to jobs or school, or are interested in a career where the best path to a job is through a registered apprenticeship.

Additional research to help young people access good jobs and careers should aim to understand how to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged youth, how to apply lessons from effective interventions for adults to meet the needs of young people, and how to support young people in better navigating different pathways to careers.

Making Jobs and Workplaces Better for Young People

Since the pandemic, we have seen an increased focus on how to improve job quality and working conditions, but little of this research has explicitly centered on young people. Supporting young workers requires both examining and making efforts to change employer and employment practices and developing strategies to advance worker power, voice, and representation.

Employer Practices and Labor Policies

- **Reforming hiring practices to address bias in hiring:** Changes in hiring practices include dropping credential requirements, moving toward skills-based hiring, and

eliminating criminal background checks or credit checks. Such policy changes can help ensure that qualified young people do not get screened out of jobs, contributing toward equity in hiring.

- **Supporting skills development and advancement on the job:** By providing training on the job and visible career pathways, employers can support advancement for young workers. One way to do this is through incumbent worker training, where wages are subsidized to support training for early-career workers.
- **Examining wage policies and their effects on young workers:** Evidence shows that minimum wage increases are associated with job loss for young workers (CBO 2014; Doucouliagos and Stanley 2009), but for young people supporting families or contributing to family income, persistently low wages can cause instability and hardship for them and their families.
- **Enforcing labor protections for youth, especially those who are undocumented:** Recent legislation across several states has rolled back labor protections, allowing younger people to work in riskier environments. Unaccompanied, undocumented minors may be especially at risk for unsafe working conditions.[5]

Worker Power, Voice, and Representation

- **Engaging young people in unionization and alternative forms of collective organizing:** Research shows a positive relationship between worker organizing and higher wages, as well as the importance of power and autonomy for economic mobility (Howell 2021). Strategies for building youth worker power include supporting collective bargaining and designing alternative strategies to strengthen their voice in the workplace.
- **Supporting entrepreneurship as an avenue for building autonomy, worker power, and mobility:** There is evidence on the importance of entrepreneurship as a global strategy to reduce youth unemployment (Alam 2019). However, many young people find themselves hindered by a lack of financing, education and training, or awareness of governmental programs (Minola, Criaco, and Cassia 2014). New attitudes about work, combined with changes in technology and the economy, have

led to growing entrepreneurship programming and curricula and opportunities to understand their effectiveness.

Emerging research continues to inform what strategies, including changes to public policy and employer practices, are most effective in improving young people's well-being. In the wake of the COVID-19 recession and its disruptive effects on youth education and employment, it is critical to consider evidence-based strategies to improve outcomes and economic mobility for young people. Although there is substantial evidence supporting certain education and training strategies and approaches, further research is needed on how to scale effective models, meet the needs of the most disadvantaged young people, and improve jobs and workplaces for young workers. With large-scale retirement projected for the near future, it is imperative to put strategies in place that support youth economic mobility while also developing the future workforce.

Notes

1 "American Community Survey Demographic and Housing Estimates," US Census Bureau, 2022 ACS 1-year estimates, accessed November 15, 2023, https://data.census.gov/table?q=DP05.

2 "Employment and Unemployment Among Youth—Summer 2023," US Bureau of Labor Statistics, news release, August 16, 2023, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/youth.nr0.htm.

3 "Fast Facts: Tuition Costs of Colleges and Universities," National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), US Department of Education, accessed June 7, 2024, https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=76.

4 "Current Term Enrollment Estimates: Spring 2024," National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, accessed April 22, 2024, https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/.

5 Jacob Bogage and María Luisa Paúl, "The Conservative Campaign to Rewrite Child Labor Laws," *Washington Post*, April 23, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/04/23/child-labor-lobbying-fga/.

Introduction

Policymakers and practitioners have long been concerned about the challenges that young people face in the labor market and have sought solutions to improve their economic mobility over their lives. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need to focus on evidence-based solutions to support youth economic mobility, power, and dignity. This is important not only to support better outcomes for young people but also to realize broader societal benefits by preparing and leveraging the talents of the youth workforce today and in the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic had devastating effects on young people, especially young people of color and those with low incomes. People between the ages of 16 and 24 experienced disruptions in their development, education, and work connections, which may have negative effects over the long term. Industries that were common sources of early work experience—such as food service and retail—experienced mass layoffs, and summertime employment opportunities for youth were largely absent in 2020 (Gould and Kassa 2020). The sudden and sometimes extended transition to remote school created challenges for learning, as evidenced by recent data showing achievement gaps, especially for disadvantaged young people and young people of color (Cohodes et al. 2022). These disruptions, combined with the loss of life from the pandemic, contributed to a mental health crisis among young people that may further affect education and employment outcomes (Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth 2020).

Research has shown that early work experience is important for socioeconomic mobility over a lifetime, raising questions about how gaps in employment during the pandemic will affect young people moving forward (Kalenkoski 2016). Education is perhaps most critical factor in providing the foundation for success in the labor market and preparing people for good jobs and careers, with numerous studies documenting the link between educational attainment and economic mobility (Haskins 2008). But evidence indicates that college is not the best option for everyone and that existing programs are not designed for today's college students, who come from diverse backgrounds, often balance school with work and family responsibilities, and seek immediate economic returns on their postsecondary credentials. For some young people who face multiple barriers and challenges, unmet needs can lead to disconnection from school and work. When young

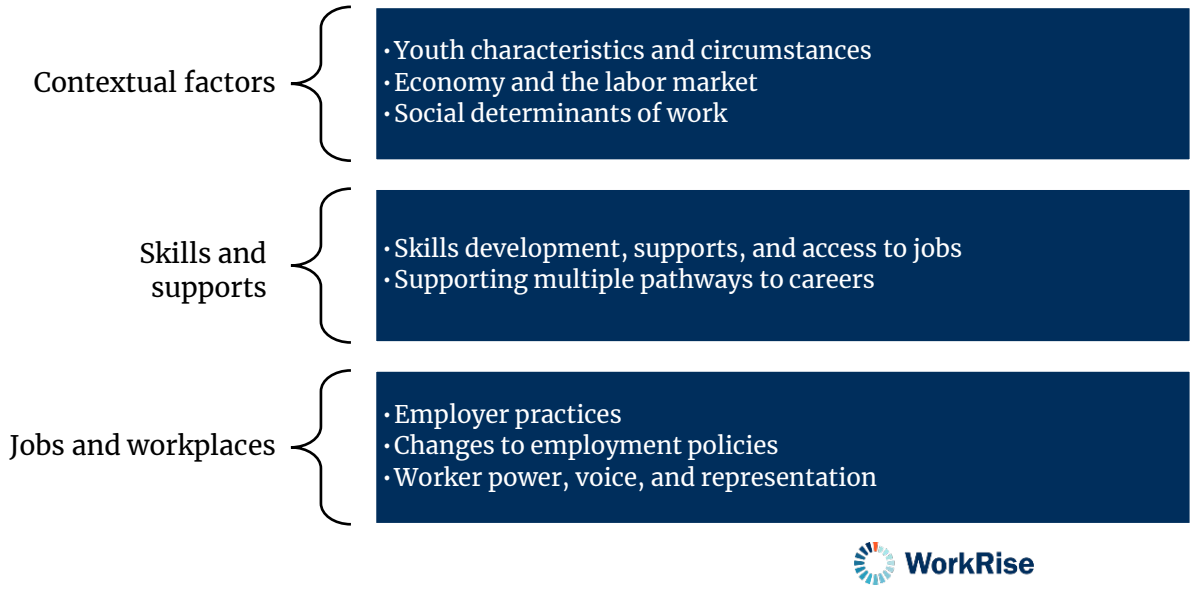
people are "disconnected," they are at a heightened risk for negative outcomes, including lower earnings, lower educational attainment, worse health, and higher rates of criminal involvement.

This report reviews the evidence base of employment-focused strategies to understand what works in promoting a broad vision of economic mobility for young people, from opportunities for advancement to voice and dignity in the workplace.[1] This report describes employment-focused strategies to advance youth economic mobility, with an emphasis on young people with low incomes and young people of color who face the greatest structural barriers to labor market success. Meeting the needs of these groups requires approaches built on evidence-based practices that acknowledge both economic and labor market contexts and the role of social determinants of work—factors that affect a worker's ability to succeed and achieve economic security and mobility. It also requires promoting preparation for and access to good jobs and ensuring that workplaces can support young people's well-being and economic opportunity, an area of emerging research. Understanding what works to improve labor market outcomes for disadvantaged youth, and identifying the research gaps, can help policymakers, funders, practitioners, and researchers support efforts to improve outcomes for this population.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the key topics we examine in this report and provides a framework for understanding strategies to improve youth employment outcomes and economic mobility.

FIGURE 1

Framework for Improving Youth Employment Outcomes and Mobility



Source: Authors' representation.

A key lens of our analysis is centering young people when examining the evidence and identifying solutions. This report focuses on the needs of people ages 16 to 24,[2] given that young workers differ from their older peers in various respects:

- **Young people face unique labor market challenges.** Young workers typically have both higher unemployment and underemployment rates than workers ages 25 and older. They are also heavily represented in industries like leisure, hospitality, and retail trade. In addition to paying low wages, jobs in these industries tend to rank low on other metrics of quality, including scheduling, benefits, and training opportunities (Conway and Dawson 2016). As the economy shifts toward more remote work, young people are the least likely to be able to telework. At the same time, there is evidence that youth are flocking to jobs in the "gig economy" due to the flexibility that these work arrangements provide. However, without the labor protections that come from traditional jobs, young workers may be at risk. Absent a robust policy response, recessions have had a disproportionately negative impact on young workers' labor market opportunities and outcomes. In general, youth unemployment rates and wages are highly sensitive to labor market conditions (Gould and Kassa 2020).

- **Young workers face unique challenges driven by the fact that they are developing as adults while starting their working lives.** Advocates who focus on this population stress the need to take a developmental approach, meaning strategies and policies need to be targeted to meet the developmental needs of young people rather than merely replicating employment-focused strategies that work for adults. Furthermore, scholars and practitioners suggest the need for "positive youth development," an approach based on a body of research suggesting that certain "protective factors" can help young people succeed and avoid risks that occur in this stage of life. According to this research, young people are more successful when they have a variety of opportunities to learn and participate at home, in school, and in the community, and when they have the benefits of support from family and caring adults, positive peer groups, and a strong sense of self and self-esteem.[3] Promoting youth agency and connecting them to supportive peers and adults in their community builds self-esteem, drive toward future goals, and resilience in the face of adversity.

- **Measures of success for strategies aimed at improving economic mobility for young workers may differ from measures of success for adults.** The need to balance work and school is critical, because too much of one or the other can interfere with opportunities for mobility (Carnevale and Smith 2018). For some young people, lower-paid or subsidized jobs may offer value because they provide the opportunity to build skills and experience or explore careers to find the "right" career path—and can thus contribute to longer-term economic mobility. At the same time, young people sometimes function as adults—for example, working full time to support children or family members—pointing to the need for policies and practices that acknowledge these varying circumstances.

We consider the unique challenges and opportunities facing young workers as we review and organize the evidence and identify questions that need to be answered to improve their labor market outcomes and economic mobility. In the next section, we discuss challenges that stem from economic and labor market contexts, along with the social determinants of work related to young people's identities, their families, where they live, and their experiences of racism and discrimination.

Economic and Social Contexts

To understand effective strategies for supporting young people in accessing good jobs, careers, and economic mobility, it is important to consider varying economic and social contexts, including the social determinants of work that can create challenges for young workers.

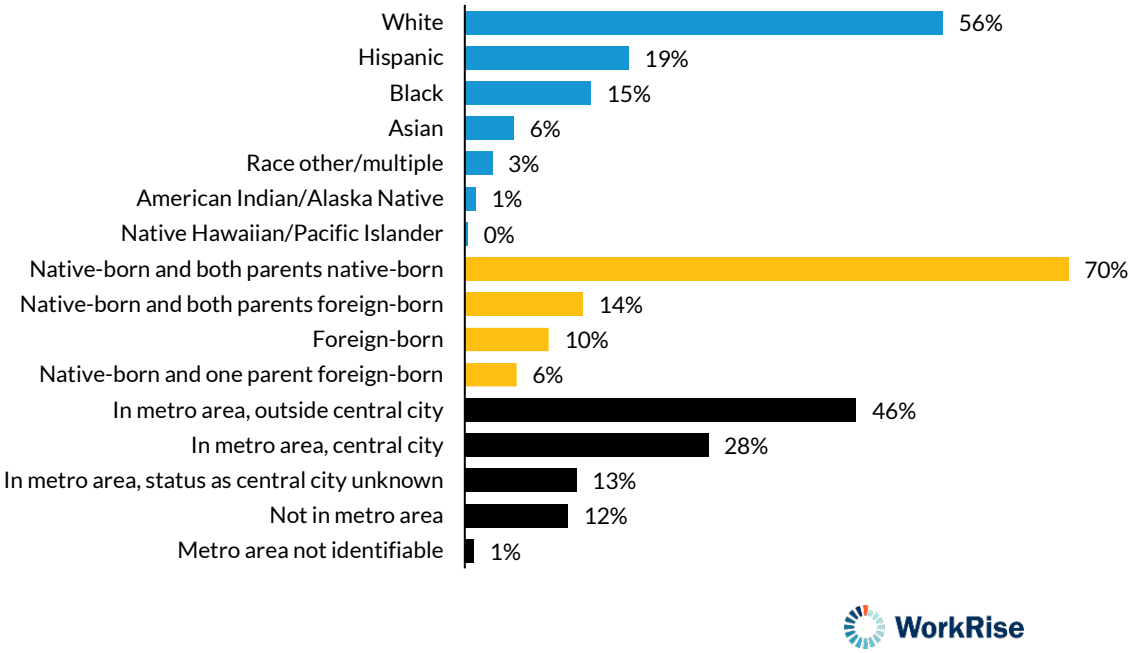
Youth Demographic Characteristics and Circumstances

Understanding the characteristics and circumstances of young people can inform effective strategies to support their economic mobility. Young people in the United States are a diverse group (figure 2). Although 53 percent of young people ages 16 to 24 are white, the remainder are people of color: 19 percent identify as Latinx,[1] 15 percent identify as Black, 6 percent identify as Asian, 1 percent identify as Native American, and 3 percent indicate they are another race or multiple races.[4] About a third of young people in this age group are immigrants or come from an immigrant family. These dimensions of identity, along with gender and sexual orientation, shape the experiences, assets, and challenges that young people face in the labor market. Additionally, the overwhelming majority of young people live in metropolitan areas (with about 28 percent living in central cities), suggesting the need to consider these contexts as they relate to access to resources.

[1] This report uses "Latinx" to describe people of Latin American origin or descent of any gender. The authors acknowledge this may not be the preferred identifier, and we remain committed to using inclusive language whenever possible.

FIGURE 2

Race and Ethnicity, Location, and Country of Origin for Young People Ages 16–24



Source: US Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey 1-year estimates.
Note: "Hispanic" is used here to reflect its use in the available data.

Young people also face various challenges and have different needs based on their age. In table 1, we show the characteristics of younger youth (ages 16 to 19) and older youth (ages 20 to 24).[5] For the most part, the two groups are similar, but they diverge around family, education, and work. Older youth are more likely to have children of their own: 10 percent have at least one child, compared with about 1 percent of younger youth. Older youth are more likely to have a high school credential or higher levels of education (94 percent compared with 31 percent of younger youth), which is not surprising given that many younger youth are still in high school or have not had the time typically required to earn a degree. Although the two groups have similar poverty rates, older youth are more likely to work full or part time: 62 percent are employed, compared with 31 percent for younger youth.

TABLE 1

Characteristics of Young People Ages 16–19 and 20–24, 2021 (percent)

Category	Ages 16–19	Ages 20–24
Education		
No high school diploma	69	6
High school diploma	30	77
Bachelor's degree	0	16
Postgraduate degree	0	1
Number of children		
0	99	90
1 or more	1	10
Income		
Above 200% of federal poverty level	86	84
At or below 200% of federal poverty level	14	16
Employment		
Working full time	8	40
Working part time	23	22
Unemployed	4	5
Not working/not in labor force	66	33

Source: US Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey 1-year estimates.

The Economy and Labor Market

Whether young people can access good jobs with pathways to economic mobility depends on what is happening in the labor market and the economy. Box 1 summarizes the key economic and labor market trends affecting young people.

BOX 1

Key Economic and Labor Market Trends Affecting Young People

- COVID-19 labor market effects and resulting youth unemployment
- Tightening and slackening of the labor market over time
- Occupational segregation and crowding based on race, ethnicity, and gender
- Automation and globalization
- Increases in contractual, independent, and "gig" work
- Increasing wage premium for college degrees and wage stagnation in hourly wage jobs
- Rising cost of living, inflation
- Demographic trends (increasing diversity, aging population, etc.)

In the early days of the pandemic, unemployment went from 3.5 percent in February 2020 to 4.4 percent in March 2020, with its peak in April 2020 at 14.7 percent.[6] At the height of the COVID-19 recession, 24.4 percent of young workers were unemployed, compared with 11.3 percent of older workers (Gould and Kassa 2020). Young Black, Latinx, and Asian American/Pacific Islander workers were hit harder than their white counterparts, with unemployment rates around 30 percent in spring 2020 for each of these subgroups (Abbott and Reilly 2019).

Prior research shows that workers who enter the labor market during an economic downturn are scarred for many years. In other words, being out of work early in one's career can have long-lasting effects on one's labor market outcomes, such as being more likely to experience lower earnings, underemployment, and more frequent unemployment spells in the long term than young workers who enter stronger labor markets (Gould and Kassa 2020; Rothstein 2020). Research also suggests that macroeconomic conditions during one's youth shape job preferences for life. For instance, people who grew up during recessionary periods cite income as a priority, whereas those who grew up in economic booms care more about the meaning of their work (Cotofan et al. 2020).

Young workers have faced challenges in the labor market for decades. From the 1970s up until the COVID-19 pandemic, wages largely declined or remained stagnant, hitting less-educated men the hardest. During this period, the nation saw increases in the college wage premium and lower demand for less-educated workers (Loprest, Spaulding, and Nightingale 2019). Decreased labor market participation has corresponded with increasing rates of high school persistence and graduation and increased college attendance, with different patterns by race, ethnicity, and gender. However, these trends started to shift in the years leading up to the pandemic, with decreases in enrollment, especially among students in public two-year institutions.[7]

Since unemployment peaked in the second quarter of 2020, we have seen a return to the tight labor market that predated the COVID-19 recession.[8] The increased demand for labor across industry sectors has created wage growth not seen in decades, with concentration in low-wage sectors, particularly hospitality, food service, and retail.[9] However, this wage growth has occurred amid high inflation, leading to questions about whether workers will feel the impacts of wage growth (Jordà et al. 2022).

For young people, the postpandemic economy has meant an improvement in labor market outcomes. In July 2023, the youth employment rate stood at 55.0 percent, up from 46.7 percent in July 2020.[10] Young people also may benefit from the recovery in ways beyond whether or not they can get a job. Not only do youth wages tend to rise more quickly in recovery periods, but tight labor markets have been shown to narrow racial employment gaps, a phenomenon that has repeated itself in the postpandemic recovery.[11] Although we can draw from past experience and evidence to chart a path forward, the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 recession leaves many questions about what young people need in this transformed labor market and economy.

Social Determinants of Work

It is essential to look beyond economic and labor market contexts and take a holistic view of how young workers' unique experiences shape their access to opportunity and their needs for supports. This section focuses on the social and structural contexts of youth and young adulthood that influence socioeconomic status and potential for mobility, as summarized in box 2.

BOX 2

Social Determinants of Work that Create Challenges

- Structural, institutional, and individual racism and discrimination
- Poverty and trauma, and their effects on youth outcomes
- Disparities in outcomes based on where young people live, including
    - educational disparities by race, ethnicity, and income
    - over-policing of communities of color
    - differential access to resources, networks, and jobs
    - household structure and caregiving responsibilities

Structural, Institutional, and Individual Racism and Discrimination

Historically, policies and systems were designed to privilege white men and exclude other groups; this pattern continues to influence outcomes for people of color and women, and for young people of color and young women, today (Spievack et al. 2020). Despite

increasing education levels, disparities persist due to the racial and gender wealth gap, which affords young people different access to safe neighborhoods, high-quality schools, and good jobs (Loprest, Spaulding, and Nightingale 2019).

In addition to these structural and systemic factors, individual discrimination based on race, gender, and other aspects of identity persists in the labor market. For example, a 2017 meta-analysis of résumé audit studies conducted since 1989 found that white job applicants received, on average, 36 percent more callbacks than Black applicants and 24 percent more than Latinx applicants (Quillian et al. 2017). Another résumé audit study comparing Black- and white-sounding names study found that a white-sounding name "yields as many more callbacks as an additional eight years of experience on a résumé" (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2003, 3). Young job applicants may also be subject to age discrimination. However, employees younger than 40 are not protected by age discrimination laws enforced by the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Discrimination against job applicants due to their young age has received less attention than age-based discrimination for older workers.

Poverty and Trauma

Growing up poor can affect outcomes throughout a lifetime. Children who are persistently poor tend to experience poverty very early in life and have a harder time escaping poverty as they move into adulthood. Black children are more likely than white children to be persistently poor. Exposure to poverty early on can result in chronic stress and have negative effects on childhood development and on education outcomes, which in turn can affect employment and economic prospects (Ratcliffe and Kalish 2017).

Poverty is associated with the likelihood of having adverse childhood experiences, which are potentially traumatic events that occur from birth to age 17.[12] Individuals who have a high number of these experiences have worse educational and economic outcomes. One study shows that people with three adverse childhood experiences are about 1.5 times more likely not to graduate high school and almost 2.5 times more likely to be unemployed (Choitz and Wagner 2021).

Disparities in Outcomes Based on Where Young People Live

Residential segregation is also a powerful factor in youth mobility, or lack thereof. Black households are more likely to live in areas with fewer economic opportunities than are white households, even when income is held constant (Andrews et al. 2017; Chetty et al. 2014). This can affect economic mobility on multiple fronts:

- **Access to high-quality education:** Given the inequality of resources and outcomes between US public schools, both within and between districts, many families are priced out of a quality education, which can affect educational options and economic outcomes (Goldstein and Hastings 2019). Additionally, Black male students are disproportionately disciplined in schools, a practice that affects academic performance and completion as well as criminal legal system involvement (Spievack et al. 2020).
- **Access to social capital and networking:** Economic connectedness—the share of high-income friends among low-income people—is among the strongest predictors of upward income mobility (Chetty et al. 2022). Thus, growing up in a lower-income neighborhood may hinder upward economic mobility by reducing interactions with people of higher socioeconomic status.
- **Exposure to the criminal justice system:** Young men of color, especially young Black men, face greater surveillance and force at the hands of the police. As a result, they are disproportionately represented across the juvenile and criminal legal systems (Liberman and Fontaine 2015). Early involvement with the criminal legal system poses a significant obstacle to future employment, given the prevalence of hiring discrimination against the formerly incarcerated (Couloute and Kopf 2018).
- **Access to services that support mobility:** Many important services are stratified by neighborhood, including education, housing, mental health, nutritional food, health care, and child care. Lack of access to these services can be destabilizing, increasing the likelihood of disconnection from school and work (Hahn, Coffey, and Adams 2021). Where people live, along with their gender, race, ethnicity, and income, can affect access to mental health supports—a particularly salient issue given the mental health challenges young people have faced during and following the pandemic (Chavira, Ponting, and Ramos 2022).

- **Ability to travel to jobs and services:** Many young workers do not have access to a personal vehicle, and public transportation costs create a significant barrier to pursuing skills development and maintaining employment. Brandtner, Lunn, and Young (2017, 18) found that "an increase in the public transit density by one standard deviation is associated with a two-percentage point reduction in the youth unemployment rate." The strength of this relationship decreases for cities with a higher reliance on cars.

Households, Families, and Caregiving

Understanding the composition of youth households and potential sources of support or stress is critical to meeting young people's needs. Young people can live in multigenerational, multifamily households, live in small households, or live independently; each of these dimensions has different implications for their stability and economic security.

For example, young people who must work to support their families or contribute to household income are often forced to choose between schooling or employment. Since income instability has negative effects on the future employment and earnings of both parents and children, the opportunity costs of such decisions are immense (Sick, Spaulding, and Park 2018). Child care responsibilities take time and money, meaning that young parents are less likely to be in school than their peers without children (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2018). Without some postsecondary education, many young people are unable to secure well-paying jobs with stable schedules. All these issues were exacerbated by the pandemic, which resulted in precarious working conditions and limited access to child care (Crouse, Ghertner, and Chien 2023).

Implications for Research on Jobs and Mobility

Each of these areas presents questions about what structural factors, alone or in combination, matter most for economic mobility. There are also many open questions about how the pandemic has shifted the nature of jobs, perceptions of work, and work-related values. And it is unclear what these challenges will mean for workers over the long term. As policymakers and practitioners design solutions, it is also critical to consider how

these interventions will affect the most disadvantaged young people. Answering these key questions can inform efforts to design policies and programs that meet the needs of America's diverse youth population.

Skills and Supports to Attain Good Jobs

In this section, we discuss strategies for youth skills development, including the supportive services needed as part of job preparation and access and how to facilitate pathways to careers. Developing the skills needed for good jobs and careers is critical for young workers' success in the labor market. Skills development occurs across multiple contexts and stages of a young person's life—in high school, college, and through alternative pathways. First, we discuss the key elements of effective skills development. Then, we discuss various pathways young people can take to begin their careers.

Encouraging Skills Development, Supports, and Access to Jobs

Box 3 summarizes strategies that have been found important for skills development based on evidence of their effectiveness or documentation of promising practices.

BOX 3

Key Elements of Effective Skills Development

- Providing supportive services to meet the needs of young people and overcome structural barriers
- Ensuring programs reflect labor market demand and are connected to employers
- Building skills and connections through work-based learning
- Providing supports to navigate careers and access jobs

Providing Supportive Services as Part of Skills Development

To meet the unique needs of young people and address challenges around the social and economic contexts they face, skills development strategies must be specific and targeted. Programs can offer support that respond to youth employment barriers, which often arise from structural factors that intersect with race and poverty.

For example, the lack of access to reliable transportation can be a significant barrier to education, training, and jobs. Programs can include money to pay for public

transportation, arrange transportation for participants, or create emergency funds to help address emergency car repairs so young people can regularly participate in training or a job. In research, it can be difficult to disaggregate the effects of support services like transportation because they are often offered alongside other supports. However, research shows that financial support, whether for transportation or other needs, is associated with positive outcomes for young people. A literature review on employment interventions for young people over the past 30 years found that successful programs tend to offer financial incentives and opportunities for paid work (Hossain and Bloom 2015). Financial assistance—such as monthly stipends during training, a readjustment stipend after graduation, or stipends for meals and clothes—can help fill the unmet needs of disadvantaged youth, allowing them to participate more fully in skills development programs. When tied to performance standards, such as attendance or assignment completion, it can encourage positive behavior.

Programs can provide mental health supports directly or refer participants to this assistance. Staff members can be trained to identify the need for more intensive mental health services so young people get the help they need. Although research is limited on how employment programs can better serve people with mental health needs, a recent study examined the adaption of individual placement support[13]—an approach used for adults with mental illness—to serve young people with mental health conditions (Bond, Drake, and Becker 2023; Drake, Bond, and Becker 2012). A meta-analysis of seven randomized controlled trials (RCTs) found substantially better employment outcomes for young people receiving individual placement support than for those who had not received this intervention.

In addition to providing supports to meet specific needs, programs can focus on particular subgroups and design services tailored to respond to multiple intersecting challenges (box 4). There are numerous other areas to provide targeted support, including access to medical care, nutrition assistance, and housing and homelessness supports. The literature also points to the important role of caring adults, who can help young people access supports and navigate the challenges of transitioning into adulthood (Sacks et al. 2020; Sieving et al. 2016; Sterrett et al. 2011). Navigation and mentoring are two potential strategies for connecting youth to caring adults and are discussed later in this report.

BOX 4

Supporting Young People Facing Specific Barriers

- **Young people returning from incarceration:** Programs serving this population can include education, job training, transitional employment, behavioral health services, transitional and permanent supportive housing, and family-based programs. It is a best practice for services to begin during involvement with the criminal legal system and extend through transition to the community. One promising example is the Philadelphia Intensive Aftercare Probation Program, which provides intensive services and individualized case management to young people incarcerated for serious offenses.[a] During the study's nine-month follow-up period, the treatment group had a statistically significantly lower number of rearrests than the comparison group (Sontheimer and Goodstein 1993). Giving youth the opportunity to earn a wage through subsidized employment is a key feature of many programs serving young people who have been involved in the criminal legal system; a challenge, however, is that impacts on earnings have often been shown to shrink over time.
- **Young people aging out of foster care:** The Works Wonders model is a youth employment program originally developed with input from young people with involvement in the child welfare system. The program, run by an organization called Foster Forward, uses customized learning plans and local companies to help connect older youth with foster care experience to education and employment opportunities. Each cohort begins with a weeklong, paid job-readiness training, with a focus on communication, self-advocacy, and career exploration. Each young person works one on one with an employment specialist for 12 weeks to continue learning and identifying their goals. Trainees are placed with an employer partner or education opportunity, during which they maintain contact with their specialist and have access to funds that can be used to address barriers such as transportation or other needs (Lansing et al. 2022).
- **Young parents:** The Performance Partnership Pilot was an effort to enhance Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Out-of-School Youth services for parents ages 17 to 24 (including expecting parents) in New York City. Participants included 50 young fathers and mothers who did not have a high school credential, had basic skills needs, had low incomes, and lived in New York City when they entered the program. A child care navigator provided support services, including identifying child care options and delivering parenting workshops. An Urban Institute implementation and outcomes evaluation study found promising results: more than half of the participants found a job, enrolled in a training program, or enrolled in a postsecondary educational program at some point in the four follow-up quarters (Anderson et al. 2019).

[a] "Program Profile: Philadelphia (Penn.) Intensive Aftercare Probation Program," National Institute of Justice Crime Solutions, September 5, 2017, https://crimesolutions.ojp.gov/ratedprograms/566#programcost.

Reflecting Labor Market Demand

To be effective, youth training programs must be aligned with the labor market. At the core of workforce-aligned programs is effective employer engagement to understand employer needs, get feedback on the design of programs, and promote access to good jobs for job seekers (Spaulding and Sirois 2022). Other strategies for alignment include competency-based education, enhanced academic and career advising, and sector-based strategies (Cleary and Van Noy 2014; Spaulding and Sirois 2022). Box 5 has additional information on these strategies.

BOX 5

Strategies for Labor Market Alignment

- **Competency-based education** allows learners to apply a set of related knowledge, skills, and abilities to successfully perform functions or tasks in a defined work setting (Gervais 2016).
- **Enhanced advising** often refers to mandatory, extended meetings with one assigned adviser to address students' academic and nonacademic challenges (Kolenovic, Linderman, and Mechur Karp 2013).
- **Employer engagement** aligns programs with employer needs so participants can secure jobs (Barnow and Spaulding 2015; Maguire et al. 2010).
- **Sector-based strategies** are employer led and demand driven, involving partnerships and collaborations of industry, education and training, workforce and economic development, and community-based service providers to meet the needs of workers and the industry in a particular sector or occupation (Woolsey and Groves 2013).

Youth programs designed around sector-based strategies have yielded promising results. Evidence from small-scale RCTs of several sector-based youth employment programs shows persistent positive earnings impacts among young people in the treatment group compared with those in the comparison group (Maguire et al. 2010; Roder and Elliott 2020). Similarly, research indicates some sector-based employment programs that are effective for adults have also yielded impacts for youth (Maguire et al. 2010), but more research is needed to understand strategies targeted at young people, especially heavily disadvantaged young people.

Providing Opportunities for Work-Based Learning

Work-based learning refers to career preparation and training in a work setting that involves supervision or mentoring connected to classroom or academic experience (Gardner and Bartkus 2014; Giffin et al. 2018). The goal is to give young people opportunities to explore potential careers by building skills, gaining experience, and connecting with employers. Work-based learning programs can be subsidized with government or philanthropic funding to offset the cost to employers—whether public, nonprofit, or for-profit—who in turn provide jobs to eligible workers (Dutta-Gupta et al. 2016).

Research indicates that work-based learning experiences are more likely to improve employment outcomes for out-of-school youth when they are paid or receive financial support and when they are given opportunities to apply concepts learned on the job in the classroom (Hossain and Bloom 2015). Paid, work-based learning can involve a range of approaches with varying levels of effectiveness. For example, summer youth employment programs often connect a city's local workforce agency with youth-serving organizations to address declining labor force participation rates among young people ages 16 to 24 (Briggs, Spievack, and Blount 2019). Evidence shows positive impacts (e.g., reduced crime) from participation in summer youth employment programs but limited effects on employment.[14] Paid internships also provide an opportunity for young people to train on site with an employer and participate in on-the-job training. More intensive, longer-term paid internship programs have more evidence of success as a bridge to stable employment for young people (O'Higgins and Pinedo 2018). Many college programs include work-based learning requirements, but little is known about the impacts of these experiences on completion or employment outcomes (Spaulding and Sirois 2022). Apprenticeships, another paid work-based learning opportunity, are described in more detail in the next section of this report.

Providing Supports to Navigate Careers and Access Jobs

As young workers complete education or training programs and receive relevant credentials, programs can provide support around career exploration, decisionmaking, and job search. This is about helping young people discover a career path that is a match for them and supporting their efforts to find and obtain employment.

Career exploration can take many forms, including through specific courses and tools designed for young people to investigate options for future work opportunities. A first step in career exploration is self-assessments, which may be part of a career exploration course or used separately to guide their own job search. Knowledge from these assessments can help students connect the unique skills and goals they will bring to the workplace to a career and academic path (Karp 2013). Self-assessments and skills inventories can also help give young people a larger picture of the opportunities available in the labor market, given that their career outlooks can be heavily influenced by advice from their relatives (Stringer and Kerpelman 2014).

Internships, pre-apprenticeships, and other on-the-job experiences can also provide opportunities for career exploration and expansion of networks. An issue is that low-income and first-generation college students are less likely to hold internships and participate in activities that could build social capital.[15] In response to these equity gaps, some colleges are creating paid exploratory career opportunities specifically for low-income, first-generation college students and students of color. The University of Chicago's Stand Together program and Johns Hopkins University's Diversity Equity and Inclusion Collective, for example, both place underserved students in internships. Another benefit of these programs is the opportunity for colleges to engage local employers in hiring program graduates (Fischer 2022).

Just as young people benefit from more structure in their academic planning and career exploration activities, they also benefit from structured job search support. Although this can take many forms, structured job search involves supporting young people as they complete activities that help match their skills and goals with specific jobs and careers that will be fulfilling to them. Scaffolding career experience and concrete activities related to job search, such as writing résumés and cover letters, can help students feel supported throughout the process of achieving their career goals (Davidson et al. 2019). Young people can also benefit from other kinds of individualized support and guidance described in box 6.

BOX 6

Strategies for Individualized Support

- **Navigators:** The most disadvantaged young people need support navigating the education system, which is often fragmented with competing requirements and goals. Some programs assign students to "navigators," or specialized counselors, to help them take advantage of, maintain, and maximize available services and benefits in pursuit of developing the skills needed to access good jobs. A recent literature review prepared for the US Department of Labor's Chief Evaluation Office (Di Biase and Mochel 2021) highlighted the need for additional research to understand the key elements of navigator models and for rigorous evaluations to compare the effectiveness of this approach with other models in meeting the needs of different populations of workers. There is more to be learned about the role of navigators in supporting career outcomes for high school and college students, as well as other young people participating in employment-focused programs.
- **Mentors:** Positive mentoring relationships can also help young people explore careers, develop technical and soft skills, and network for future jobs. Ross and colleagues (2018) analyzed data from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and found that the relationships developed with adults during cooperative education, internships and apprenticeships, and mentoring programs were at least partially responsible for the higher-quality jobs held by young people even 10 years later. Abbott and Reilly (2019, 4) note that "mentor–mentee relationships are of particular importance for youth who are socially isolated. Social skills are an important component of how an individual interacts in the labor market and have been associated with increased employment and higher wages." Little is known about the impact of mentoring on employment outcomes, given that most studies measure teens' academic outcomes or engagement in risky behaviors. However, evidence shows that positive effects tend to diminish quickly, and there can be detrimental effects in some cases. More research is needed to understand why this is the case (Rodríguez-Planas 2014). Other research has noted the importance of "capital" in mentoring relationships, whereby mentors with social capital can be a bridge to opportunity in a labor market where who you know matters as much as what you know (Abbott and Reilly 2019).

Supporting Multiple Pathways to Careers

Preparing young people for employment is not just about providing them with skills and supports to access jobs in the immediate term but also involves considering their larger

career trajectory. There are multiple potential pathways to careers depending on young people's support needs, their career interests, and labor market demand, as summarized in box 7.

BOX 7

Strategies for Supporting Multiple Pathways to Careers

- Career pathway strategies that promote earnings advancement
- Earlier preparation for young people's career trajectories, including supporting them in high school
- Evidence-based approaches to improving college completion
- Alternative skills development pathways, especially for disadvantaged youth

Career Pathway Strategies

Career pathway strategies promote earnings advancement for less-educated workers through a sequence of articulated steps that give workers opportunities to earn credentials, provide support services and flexibility for nontraditional students, and rely on employer connections and partnerships (Schwartz et al. 2022). Career pathway strategies can be incorporated as part of traditional pathways that emphasize completion of secondary and postsecondary education or through alternative pathways and programs that serve young people who have become disconnected from school but are seeking to reenter training programs or earn their GED or high school equivalency instead of their high school diploma (Hossain and Bloom 2015). Career pathway programs often embed "stackable" certificates or credentials aligned with industry certifications as young people (or older adults) complete core courses in the career pathway (CORD and SPRA 2018).

An evidence review conducted by the Institute of Education Sciences examined career pathways in the community college context and found moderate evidence for recommendations focused on improving youth employment outcomes, including the intentional design and structure of career pathways to enable students to advance in employment and the development and leveraging of partnerships to prepare students and advance their labor market success (Cotner et al. 2021). However, a 2022 meta-analysis of career pathways research found mixed results. In their review of 46 postsecondary career

pathway evaluations, Peck and colleagues (2022) found that programs increased educational progress, employment, and short-term earnings but did not significantly increase medium- or long-term earnings. The authors pointed to the importance of a good first job and targeting occupations and industries that offer higher potential for wage growth. With some career pathway programs showing positive impacts, the authors noted the importance of identifying, evaluating, and understanding the most important components of effective programs and models that drive impact.

Supporting Young People in High School

One approach gaining increased attention is beginning career preparation earlier in a young person's learning trajectory. Opportunities for career exploration, robust advising, work-based learning, and the chance to take college credits in high school are all strategies for improving career preparation in high school. Many of these elements are incorporated in career academies, a model that has been tested through RCTs. These academies help young people develop skills connected to jobs at the high school level; align with and involve industries; provide the opportunity to engage in work-based learning as well as earn college credit; and make use of peer support through learning communities. A review of the effects of participation in career academies found that this approach has a positive and sustained increase on post-high school earnings eight years following completion but no impacts on educational attainment (Mathematica Policy Research 2014).

High school-age youth also benefit from early exposure to career options and colleges. Engagement between K-12 schools and community colleges is crucial for expanding high-quality pipelines to good careers for low-income students and students of color. For example, dual enrollment and early college programs allow high school students to get a head start on planning and credit attainment, allowing young people, once enrolled in postsecondary education, to earn degrees faster. Community colleges can also supply career advisers to local high schools, provide training labs for experiential learning, and host career academies that offer career exploration opportunities for youth (Davidson et al. 2019). These strategies help students recognize new pathways to opportunity and gain clarity around their goals to support informed job search activities.

Improving College Completion and Other Outcomes

Although college attendance has increased over the past few decades, low completion rates have led many to consider how colleges could be redesigned to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body facing barriers that traditional colleges were not designed to address. Successful models have adopted many of the strategies outlined above, including creating better alignment with the labor market, revamping student supports, and changing policies that support completion and advancement. One model with the strongest evidence of effectiveness is the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, or ASAP, which was piloted by the City University of New York beginning in 2007. An evaluation using an RCT showed that the program doubled graduation rates, leading to expansion across the institution (including into four-year programs) and to other institutions across the country (Kolenovic, Linderman, and Mechur Karp 2013).

Providing guided pathways is another widely adopted approach to improving college outcomes. The guided pathways model was spearheaded by researchers at the Community College Research Center, who put forth a model for a wholesale restructuring of community colleges based on decades of research on community college reforms and grounded in organizational, behavioral, and cognitive science (Bailey, Jenkins, and Smith Jaggars 2015). Most evidence to date is observational, but the researchers are evaluating the implementation of the model in STEM occupations in Tennessee, Washington, and Ohio, using a quasi-experimental design to assess impacts. Because the model is a whole-systems approach, assessment of causal outcomes through an RCT is difficult. However, researchers note that many elements of the guided pathways approach have been tested through an RCT study design, such as through the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs.

Alternative Skills Development Strategies

Some of the most successful efforts to improve youth employment and career outcomes have occurred in the context of programs that provide alternative pathways. These can be targeted to the most disadvantaged young people, such as those who have dropped out of school, are disconnected from work and school, or for whom college presents a financial barrier. Box 8 provides five examples of alternative pathway strategies and available evidence for these approaches.

BOX 8

Evidence of Effectiveness in Alternative Pathway Programs

- **Helping young people who did not complete high school:** The **National Youth Guard Challenge Program** focuses on providing intensive support to young people ages 16 to 18 who dropped out or are at risk of dropping out of high school. The 18-month program includes a residential component, mentoring, and a training stipend. Research has documented positive impacts on employment and earnings three years after program completion (Mathematica Policy Research 2014). **Job Corps** is another federally funded program that provides residential support targeting similar high-need populations, but studies have generally not shown positive impacts on outcomes (Schochet et al. 2008).
- **Helping "opportunity youth" access college and careers:** The **Back on Track program** aims to help young people ages 16 to 24 who are not in school or meaningfully employed access postsecondary and career pathways. Through enriched preparation, postsecondary programs and career bridging, and first-year support, the model improved rates of postsecondary enrollment and employment (Anderson et al. 2019).
- **Creating pathways to careers through the workforce system:** The **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act** provides job preparation and job search navigation support through a network of locally administered services delivered through partnerships with community-based organizations, community colleges, employers, and other partners. Although this system is open access, certain groups are prioritized for services, including disadvantaged youth. Research has found positive impacts from the counseling services provided through the workforce system, but the evaluation did not include youth programs (Fortson et al. 2017).
- **Providing noncollege pathways for young people with high school credentials: Year Up**—a full-time, one-year program—is aimed at students with high school credentials who are disconnected from work and school or at risk of disconnection. Students receive work readiness and technical skills training to prepare for occupations in one of several sectors (e.g., IT, quality assurance, financial operations, project management, and customer service), supportive services, and strong connections to employment, including a six-month internship and intensive postemployment services. A 2022 study found large positive impacts on earnings through the seven-year follow-up period (Fein and Dastrup 2022).
- **Pre-apprenticeship:** Pre-apprenticeship can help address various access barriers to registered apprenticeship programs for young people, women, and people of color. Successful pre-apprenticeship programs offer wraparound supports, prepare trainees for apprenticeship entrance exams, and provide a paid opportunity to explore a career before committing to further training (Parton 2024; Tieszen et al. 2020).

- **Youth apprenticeship:** An apprenticeship is a work-based learning approach where an employer or education or training institution sponsors young people who work and train under a contract or written training agreement and are paid as employees while they are in training. Opportunities for increased wages and advancement are mapped out and linked to the achievement of defined competencies. Youth apprenticeships provide high schoolers the chance to apply their classroom learning, earn money, and receive the benefits of mentorship (Monthey 2019). There is evidence of positive outcomes on earnings for youth apprentices (Hollenbeck and Huang 2006; Parton 2017; Reed et al. 2012).

Areas of Further Research

In this section, we have examined elements of effective programs that can help young people prepare for and access jobs. Research points to the importance of providing supports and programs tailored to people's needs, aligning programs with the labor market, and helping young people navigate career pathways. Opportunities exist to improve career preparation starting in high school, throughout college, and through alternative pathways. Although there is a rich body of research in this area, there are key research gaps about what works when it comes to supporting the development of skills, provision of supports, and access to jobs for young people. These questions include the following:

Adapting Effective Models to Serve Young People

- What are the most effective strategies for expanding access and providing supports and career exposure to young people who face the most challenges, including discrimination or other barriers in the labor market, due to factors such as structural racism?
- What skills and training approaches effective for adults are also effective for youth, and how can these models be adapted to better serve young people?
- How can we adapt proven, effective approaches to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged and chronically disconnected youth?

- How can effective programs be scaled through the public education or workforce system to serve more young people?

Key Elements of Effective Strategies

- Which supports are most important and why, and what are the most effective strategies for providing those supports?
- What models exist for navigators to support young people in career-focused programs, at the high school level and for the most disadvantaged?
- What strategies are needed to support success along different pathways?
- How can colleges better support career outcomes and guide students toward good jobs?

Postpandemic Approaches

- What new questions did the pandemic raise about the support young people need—for example, mental health support or strategies to support digital inclusion?
- Are there steps training programs can take to guard against potential scarring from COVID-19 unemployment, such as expanded work-based learning?

Jobs and Workplaces

The pandemic put a spotlight on economic and racial inequality, giving rise to new questions about work and the quality of jobs. Research is emerging around efforts to improve job quality, but there has been little focus explicitly on young people. Supporting this population requires both changing employer and employment practices and developing strategies to advance worker power, voice, and representation. Box 9 outlines two areas of focus for improving working conditions and job quality for young people.

BOX 9

Strategies for Improving Jobs and Workplaces

Change employer practices and labor policies:

- reform hiring practices to address bias in hiring
- support skills development and advancement on the job
- examine wage policies and their effect on youth
- examine workplace protections for youth, especially those who are undocumented

Support worker power, voice, and representation:

- engage youth in unionization and alternative forms of collective organizing
- support entrepreneurship as an avenue for building autonomy, worker power, and mobility

Changing Employer Practices

Job quality is often defined by fair wages and earning potential growth with increasing job responsibilities, access to benefits, worker protections, and fair labor standards (Congdon et al. 2020). There are multiple ways to shift employer practices to better support youth so they can access good jobs and careers and achieve economic mobility.

Hiring Practices

Young people face many challenges when it comes to hiring, including discrimination, lack of experience, and the need to balance initial work experiences with the pursuit of education. Recruitment and hiring practices can perpetuate exclusion of certain populations of young people, and reforms to these processes can help to advance equity.

For example, young people who do not have two- or four-year college degrees are typically filtered out in algorithmic hiring methods, which attempt to reproduce past decisions, possibly leading the algorithms to reflect the "very sorts of human biases they are intended to replace" (Raghavan and Barocas 2019, 3). One practice that can emphasize the skills and lived experiences of young people in the hiring process—rather than deferring to technology to screen for college credentials, which may impose a higher education level needed than the skills required to complete tasks on the job—is using a competency-based, rather than credentials-based, hiring approach (Scott et al. 2020). This can be an important strategy to reduce employer bias toward familiar academic and career experiences by reacting to the unique and personalized skills of a young worker rather than a hiring manager's perception of what a typical education or career résumé should look like.[16]

Similarly, "ban the box" initiatives—which prevent employers from asking about applicants' criminal records—have shown mixed results, with some evidence that limiting background checks led hiring managers to draw their own conclusions about criminal history (based on their own biases) and led to increased discrimination against young Black men (Doleac 2018). Certificates of rehabilitation, which are granted by judges to people with criminal records, have so far shown more promising results. One study found that people who applied for a job with a felony conviction and a rehabilitation certificate were just as likely to receive a callback as those with no record (Leasure and Andersen 2016). This example combines a policy change with a change in employer practice that could affect outcomes for young people involved in the criminal legal system.

Young people may also not have had the opportunity to build credit by the time they are applying for jobs or can be denied a job because of financial hardships that are no fault of their own. As of 2017, as many as 10 percent of youth households ages 15 to 24 were unbanked (FDIC 2017), leaving them with no credit score. Research on the effects of using credit checks in hiring indicates that a bad credit report in an applicant's file can reduce the

likelihood of hiring female (versus male) applicants and reduces the recommended starting salary offered to Black (versus white) applicants (O'Brien and Kiviat 2018). In response to these challenges, there have been calls to reduce credit checks in the hiring process and federal legislative support for these efforts, such as a House Committee bill in 2019 to ban employment credit checks.[17]

Retention and Advancement Practices

Inclusive hiring and representation in company leadership can support retention among young and older workers, who may see themselves or their lived experiences represented and valued in organizational leaders who bring diverse backgrounds and perspectives to their roles (Dixon-Fyle et al. 2020). Employers can also offer opportunities that help young workers stay engaged as they learn more about their industry and seek to advance within their jobs.

Companies can improve retention of young workers by better preparing supervisors to manage and support them in effective and respectful ways. For example, staff training can address "adultism," how to maintain open dialogue, and cultural awareness (Scott, Sirois, and Spaulding 2023).

Employers can also facilitate youth retention and advancement by providing other types of support including mentorship; navigation; access to employee assistance programs, such as mental health counseling and confidential advising; or referrals to child care, transportation, therapy, and other services. A review of the evidence of employee assistance programs found evidence of a positive relationship to "presenteeism" and functioning on the job (Joseph, Walker, and Fuller-Tyszkiewicz 2017). An issue with such programs is the extent to which workers—including young workers—take advantage of this type of support (Carchietta 2015). Affinity groups—also known as employee resource groups—are another strategy for promoting inclusion, a sense of belonging, and retention among young workers, where employees with common roles, racial or gender identities, or other shared characteristics or experiences provide peer support within a work context.[18] There is evidence of expansion of affinity groups following the COVID-19 pandemic, along with an increased focus on racial and gender disparities in the workplace. Research points to benefits for workers, but the evidence is limited (Cenkci, Zimmerman, and Bircan 2019).

Incumbent worker training is a term used to describe training that is developed to meet the needs of a specific employer (or a group of employers) and allows individuals to develop their skills and advance within their company or industry. In exchange for the employee pursuing the additional training to upgrade their skills, employers pay a significant portion of the cost of training (Holzer and Martinson 2005). Incumbent worker training programs may be especially beneficial for young people who are at the early stages of their career and can help employers retain talented young workers over time. Another important aspect related to job quality for young people is the ability to get promoted within a current job or identify a clear pathway to advance within a career or industry (Eyster 2018). Employer responsiveness to promotion and providing professional development that allows for career advancement is a promising practice for the retention of all workers, including young workers.

Wage Policies

Multiple wage policies affect young people. Following the 1996 amendments to the Fair Labor Standards Act, employers are allowed to pay a minimum wage of $4.25 an hour for employees under the age of 20 during the first 90 days of employment (sometimes known as the youth minimum wage or the training wage).[19] In addition, exceptions to the minimum wage are allowed for full-time students under the Full Time Student Program in certain industries for certified employers, for student learners in high school vocational programs, and for workers with disabilities. Finally, the tipped minimum wage allows workers to be paid a minimum wage of $2.13 an hour as long as their tips bring the total wages to the federal minimum wage for all hours worked. Although these wages reflect federal requirements, minimum wage levels and subminimum wage levels vary by state. With the youth minimum wage and student minimum wage exceptions, the idea is that young people may be paid less initially but gain opportunities for increased wages and advancement with further experience.

As states and localities have implemented increases in the minimum wage, research has considered potential negative effects on employment. Although studies vary in whether there are impacts, how big those impacts are, and whether they are statistically significant, there is some evidence to support the possibility of negative impacts on youth. Studies have shown variation in the effects of minimum wage increases by population, with teenagers and those working in the restaurant industry potentially at greater risk for

negative effects. Studies have shown that raising the minimum wage can cause the unemployment rate to rise for teenage workers (CBO 2014; Doucouliagos and Stanley 2009). Research has also examined the effects on employer-provided training, finding evidence that minimum wages substantially reduce training received by young workers (CBO 2014; Neumark and Wascher 1998).

At the same time, young people who contribute to household incomes or support families of their own can benefit from increased wages. Thus, while there may be risks to some young people, others benefit from the opportunity to earn more.

Other Labor Protections for Young People

In the midst of a tight labor market following the COVID-19 pandemic, as of early 2024, 28 states have proposed and 12 states have enacted changes to labor laws that lower the age at which children can work or at which they can work in certain industries and occupations involving greater safety risks. However, the same analysis showed that 14 states introduced bills strengthening labor protections.[20] Data from the US Department of Labor show an increase of 69 percent in minors employed in violation of federal law. A review of changes in state policies and several recent news stories have highlighted the heightened risks for "unaccompanied minors"—immigrant children who are undocumented and came to the US without a parent or guardian—because they can fall victim to human trafficking.[21]

Worker Power, Voice, and Representation

The US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty considers power and autonomy an essential component of mobility. In this case, power is defined as one's "ability to influence their environment, other people, and their own outcomes," and autonomy is the "ability to act according to their own decisions, rather than according to other's decisions" (Acs et al. 2018, 3). These concepts of power, voice, representation, and belonging are especially important to young workers as they develop skills, advocate for their needs, and plan for their future. Empowerment, then, is key to economic opportunity. And since young workers know their needs better than anyone else, it is exactly this self-determination that is necessary for the creation and implementation of solutions (Spievack et al. 2020).

In a recent Gallup survey of what young people want from the workplace,[22] young millennials and Gen Z respondents indicated that their top priority is an organization that cares about employees' well-being, followed by ethical leadership and an organization that is diverse and inclusive of all people. The Shift Project Study, which examines working conditions for early-career workers in the service sector, found that early-career workers prioritize not just pay but predictability in their work schedules. The same study also found that working conditions are strongly related to worker well-being outcomes, and early-career workers with precarious working conditions report more volatile incomes, more material hardship, and more difficulty paying bills than their counterparts (Harknett, Schneider, and Storer 2021).

Unionization and Alternative Forms of Collective Organizing and Engagement

Worker power is a mechanism for workers to increase their pay above the level that would prevail in the absence of such bargaining power through methods such as unionization and efficiency wages. Research has demonstrated that declines in worker power are associated with changes in labor shares, unemployment, and measures of corporate profitability (Stansbury and Summers 2020). There is also evidence of a positive relationship between worker power (as evidenced by policies that protect bargaining power) and higher wages (Howell 2021).

Given the importance of worker power in combating low wage levels, increasing avenues for young people to organize and build further worker power may be a nascent but promising strategy. The Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing describes youth organizing as "an innovative youth development and social justice strategy that trains youth in community organizing and advocacy, and assists them in employing these skills to alter power relations and create meaningful institutional change in their communities." (Edwards, Johnson, and McGillicuddy 2009, 9).[23]

Collective bargaining can be a specific avenue for young people to have a voice and shape their working conditions. A 2020 Gallup poll found that American approval of labor unions is at 65 percent, its highest level in 16 years.[24] Importantly, young people between the ages of 18 and 34 support unions at an even higher level than the national average (71 percent). Growing alongside this support for unionization are new forms of worker solidarity that include gig workers and those in alternative work arrangements, such as

independent contractors and temp workers. This is of particular importance for young people, who are more likely to work within the gig economy and have this work be their primary source of income (Edison Research 2018).

In practice, youth organizing can take several different forms, including participating in adult-led organizing groups, forming intergenerational partnerships with adults to build and lead campaigns, or running organizations themselves (Sullivan et al. 2003). Common elements of youth organizing include relationship development, popular education, social action, and participatory research and evaluation (Christens and Kirshner 2011). Recent investments in youth organizing in the philanthropic sector have included the Youth Power Fund, a youth organizing collaborative initiative funded by the Northern California Grantmakers that recently named their 2022 grants.[25] These investments focus on assisting organizations that are organizing young people of color—particularly Black-led and Black-membership groups—in responding to and recovering from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic downturn. Rigorous research on these types of initiatives is still emerging, and this is an area to explore in more detail in further research.

Employers can support youth worker voice outside of collective bargaining. This might take the form of one-on-one check-ins, small focus groups, or feedback surveys. Best practice is to only ask for what there is capacity to receive and use, to be transparent about how the feedback is used, allow anonymous answers for surveys that require sensitive information, and compensate workers for their time and insights (Scott, Sirois, and Spaulding 2023).

Entrepreneurship

A mounting body of evidence demonstrates the importance of youth entrepreneurship as a global strategy to reduce youth unemployment (especially in developing countries) and to reconnect young people to the workforce as part of a career pathways approach (Alam 2019). Another reason to support youth entrepreneurship is to strengthen their self-efficacy. Research behind the role model effect suggests that representation in leadership positions is important for bolstering self-determination among young people (Spievack et al. 2020) and that for some, the highest-quality path is one they make for themselves.

Yet business ownership comes with high risks, given the data on rates of failure for start-ups and research showing that most entrepreneurs launch their businesses mid-

career (Azoulay et al. 2020). Additional data show that most entrepreneurs start businesses in midlife (at an average age of 45)—not when they are young. Even with a good idea and the drive to make it happen, many young people find themselves blocked by a lack of financing, education and training, and awareness of governmental support programs for new businesses (Minola, Criaco, and Cassia 2014).

However, new attitudes about work combined with changes in technology and the economy may mean there are new opportunities to support entrepreneurship for young people. A recent survey commissioned by Junior Achievement USA found that 60 percent of teens would prefer to start their own business.[26] Social media is an example of how new technologies can be leveraged for youth entrepreneurship, such as through YouTube content creation. Technology-based businesses may also offer lower capital costs. However, such entrepreneurial activities also require high levels of digital skills (Hanna 2015).

"Gig work" can be considered another type of entrepreneurship and is on the rise among young people in the United States. International surveys show that young people are attracted to the flexibility of gig work and the opportunity to earn more income.[27] In 2021, about 16 percent of Americans reported that they had previously earned money through an online gig platform, with 30 percent of those ages 18 to 29 engaging in such entrepreneurial activity (Anderson et al. 2021).

New programming and curricula are continuing to emerge around youth entrepreneurship, as are studies on the effectiveness of entrepreneurship programs (box 10). Those designing new programming should consider how to help young people—particularly those who have previously engaged in gig work or used social media to generate income—translate or develop those skills into small businesses or stable employment.

BOX 10

Youth Entrepreneurship Programs and Evidence

- **Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE)** provides financial incentives to certified instructors for continuous professional development programs throughout their time teaching entrepreneurship programming. In addition to NFTE–certified instructors, mentors come to class a few times throughout the year to guide their mentees and help students create their business plans, and a handful of guest lectures are delivered during the year by volunteer local business leaders. A meta-analysis from Nakkula and colleagues in a 2004 quasi-experimental evaluation of NFTE found that among 158 students in Boston high schools where at least half the student body is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, entrepreneurial behavior increased 7.5 percent for NFTE students compared with the control group, and NFTE students expressed stronger interest in occupations requiring advanced training or postsecondary education (Lackéus 2015).
- **The Youth Entrepreneurship Fund,** started by the Aspen Institute in 2017, "seeks to promote racial and economic equity by ensuring that youth experiencing barriers to participation in the economy…are provided with a full range of opportunities to develop an entrepreneurial mindset and skills that can help them thrive in today's economy, as well as access to tools and resources needed by aspiring entrepreneurs."[28] The fund has supported the development of entrepreneurship pathways in Del Norte County and Adjacent Tribal Lands in California; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and San Francisco, California. Initial feedback from participants validates the assumption that entrepreneurship pathways provide value by engaging opportunity youth and developing noncognitive skills and that entrepreneurship training must be adapted to the circumstances and needs of opportunity youth (Klein and Nomoy 2019).
- **The Arrowhead Business Group Youth Entrepreneurship Model:** A strengths-based youth entrepreneurship intervention developed by the White Mountain Apache Tribe in collaboration with Johns Hopkins University's Center for American Indian Health. Results demonstrate how the intervention, focused on developing assets and resources for young people ages 13 to 16, may be an innovative approach to dually address health and economic disparities endured in Native American communities. Although this intervention focused on younger youth, a 2:1 randomized controlled trial evaluated the impact of the Arrowhead Business Group entrepreneurship education program on entrepreneurship knowledge, economic empowerment, and social well-being among 394 Native American youth. The evaluation found that young people who received the intervention had gains in personal finance and business planning entrepreneurship knowledge that were significantly greater than gains made in the control group, and these gains persisted through 24 months of follow-up (Tingey et al. 2020).

Areas of Further Research

There is a dearth of research on how to support young people in the labor market and the workplace. As more evidence emerges on good jobs and evolving employer practices, there is an opportunity to examine the implications of these trends for youth employment and mobility. Key questions include the following:

- What strategies for changing employer practices can improve well-being and outcomes for young people?
- What are additional ways to consider young people's experiences in the recruitment and hiring process without perpetuating bias or deferring to degrees or credentials earned?
- What measures of job quality are most salient for young people at the start of their careers?
- How can organizations that provide young people with skills development and access to jobs work with employers to change practices that might adversely affect mobility? What are policy options for improving jobs and workplaces to support youth economic mobility?
- How can policymakers create incentives that further support positive employer practices, including offering competitive wages and opportunities for advancement?
- What are strategies for expanding youth worker voice and power?
- How do strategies for strengthening youth worker voice and power differ from those for adults, and what roles do workforce development organizations play in supporting young people's voice and power?
- What supports are needed to support youth entrepreneurship, such as funding streams for young people without credit or a borrowing history?

Conclusion

In the wake of the COVID-19 recession and its disruptive effects on youth education and employment, there is an opportunity to consider evidence-based strategies to better support positive outcomes and economic mobility for young people. The purpose of this report has been to provide a high-level overview of the evidence and point to opportunities for further research that could inform the implementation of effective programs, approaches, and policies to improve employment prospects for young people in both the short and long term.

Substantial evidence supports the effectiveness of workforce development strategies that align training with labor market needs, establish long-term career pathways, incorporate opportunities for work-based learning, provide targeted supports to address barriers, and offer assistance with career navigation and job placement. Further research is needed to understand how to adapt effective models to serve the young people who are facing the most barriers, as well as how to scale approaches that have demonstrated impact to reach larger populations of young people. There are also opportunities to more effectively embed career-focused strategies in high schools and colleges while providing alternative pathways to careers. Future research could examine how to improve jobs and workplaces—whether through collaboration with employers or through public policies and programs—to align with the needs of young people and the goal of economic mobility.

The impending retirement of the baby boomer generation will likely intensify employer demand for workers. This creates a timely opportunity to build the pipeline for the future workforce, tap into the talents of the next generation, and promote young people's economic security and mobility. Targeted research can help guide efforts to meet these goals and shape a workforce equipped for tomorrow's jobs.

Notes

[1] For this report, we use the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty's definition of mobility, which encompasses economic success, being valued in community, and having power and autonomy. See Acs et al. (2018).

[2] Although we examine the policies and programs affecting youth ages 16 to 24, we focus on education only when it involves job- and career-related policies and strategies, not K-12 education generally.

[3] "Positive Youth Development," Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, accessed October 25, 2023, https://youth.gov/youth-topics/positive-youth-development.

[4] "American Community Survey Demographic and Housing Estimates," US Census Bureau, 2022 1-year estimates, accessed November 15, 2023, https://data.census.gov/table?q=DP05.

[5] US Census Bureau 2022 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year estimates.

[6] "Employment and Unemployment among Youth—Summer 2023," Bureau of Labor Statistics, press release USDL-23-1792, August 16, 2023, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/youth.pdf.

[7] "Stay Informed with the Latest Enrollment Information," National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, accessed August 30, 2023, https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/.

[8] US Census Bureau 2022 ACS 1-year estimates.

[9] Harry J. Holzer, "Tight Labor Markets and Wage Growth in the Current Economy," Brookings Institution, April 13, 2022, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/tight-labor-markets-and-wage-growth-in-the-current-economy/.

[10] "Employment and Unemployment among Youth Summary," Bureau of Labor Statistics, USDL-23-1792, August 16, 2023, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/youth.nr0.htm; "46.7 percent of 16- to 24-year-olds employed in July 2020, down 9.5 percentage points from July 2019," *The Economics Daily*, US Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 24, 2020, https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2020/46-7-percent-of-16-to-24-year-olds-employed-in-july-2020-down-9-5-percentage-points-from-july-2019.htm.

[11] Ruchi Avtar, Rajashri Chakrabarti, and Maxim Pinkovsky, "How Equitable Has the COVID Labor Market Recovery Been?" *Liberty Street Economics* (blog), New York Federal Reserve, June 30, 2022, https://libertystreeteconomics.newyorkfed.org/2022/06/how-equitable-has-the-covid-labor-market-recovery-been/; Gould and Kassa (2020).

[12] Adverse childhood experiences include experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home or community; and having a family member attempt or commit suicide. Additional factors that can create traumatic stress include growing up in a household with substance abuse problems, mental health problems, or instability due to parental separation or a household member being in jail. See Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Fast Facts: Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences," https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html.

[13] Individual placement support involves support for employment for people with severe mental illness and involves job development, supported services, and competitive employment, among

other key elements. To learn more, visit the Individual Placement Support Employment Center at https://ipsworks.org/index.php/what-is-ips/.

[14] For more information about the evidence of effectiveness of summer youth employment programs, see Gelber, Isen, and Kessler (2016); Heller (2014); Leos-Urbel (2014); and Modestino (2017).

[15] Elaine W. Leigh, "Understanding Undergraduates' Career Preparation Experiences," Strada Education Network, December 8, 2021, https://cci.stradaeducation.org/pv-release-dec-8-2021/.

[16] "Creating Paths to Employment for Opportunity Youth," Jobs for the Future, accessed August 31, 2023, https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/report/creating-paths-to-employment-for-opportunity-youth/.

[17] Roy Maurer, "House Committee Passes Bill to Ban Employment Credit Checks," SHRM, July 11, 2019, https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/pages/house-maxine-waters-passes-bill-ban-employment-credit-checks.aspx.

[18] "Employee Resources Groups: A Strategic Business Resource for Today's Workplace," Boston College Center for Work & Family, Executive Briefing Series, accessed April 23, 2024, https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/cwf/research/publications3/executivebriefingseries-2/ExecutiveBriefing_EmployeeResourceGroups.pdf.

[19] "Fact Sheet #32: Youth Minimum Wage–Fair Labor Standards Act," US Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division, accessed March 23, 2023, https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fact-sheets/32-minimum-wage-youth.

[20] Nina Mast, "Child Labor Remains a Key State Legislative Issue in 2024: State Lawmakers Must Seize Opportunities to Strengthen Standards, Resist Ongoing Attacks on Child Labor Laws," *Working Economics Blog*, Economic Policy Institute, February 7, 2024, https://www.epi.org/blog/child-labor-remains-a-key-state-legislative-issue-in-2024-state-lawmakers-must-seize-opportunities-to-strengthen-standards-resist-ongoing-attacks-on-child-labor-laws/.

[21] Jacob Bogage and María Luisa Paúl, "The Conservative Campaign to Rewrite Child Labor Laws," *Washington Post*, April 23, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/04/23/child-labor-lobbying-fga/.

[22] Ed O'Boyle, "4 Things Gen Z and Millennials Expect From Their Workplace," Gallup Workplace, March 30, 2021, https://www.gallup.com/workplace/336275/things-gen-millennials-expect-workplace.aspx.

[23] Community organizing involving youth can also affect policy and resource decisions that are tied to equity and capacity building. Participation in community organizing efforts increases civic engagement, with one study showing that young people's involvement in organizing to achieve school and community impacts increased their motivation to succeed in school (Mediratta et al. 2008). Success in school can lead to future economic benefits for youth.

[24] Megan Brenan, "At 65%, Approval of Labor Unions in U.S. Remains High," Gallup, September 3, 2020, https://news.gallup.com/poll/318980/approval-labor-unions-remains-high.aspx.

[25] To learn more about the Northern California Grantmakers Youth Power Fund, go to https://ncg.org/youth-power-fund.

[26] "Survey: 60% of teens would prefer to start a business over having a traditional job," Junior Achievement, news release, February 23, 2022, https://jausa.ja.org/news/press-releases/survey-60-of-teens-would-prefer-to-start-a-business-over-having-a-traditional-job.

[27] "Online Gig Work: A Potential Opportunity to Address Youth Unemployment?" Shor Notes Series #1, The World Bank, September 2023, https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/8382990de15ad6be7f43682b895a8132-0460012023/original/Short-Note-Series-Online-Gig-Work-and-Youth-Employment-Opportunities-Final-Version.pdf.

[28] "Sector Strategies," Aspen Institute Workforce Strategy Initiative, accessed November 8, 2023, https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/workforce-strategies-initiative/sector-strategies/.

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