

Employment-Focused Strategies to Support Youth's Economic Mobility

What We Know and What We Need to Know

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This summary of WorkRise's new landscape research report on youth economic mobility reviews the evidence of programs and practices that already work to help workers succeed and advance in the labor market.¹ It explores where further research could inform the implementation of even more effective programs, approaches, and policies to improve employment prospects for young people now, over the next several years, and in the coming decades.

Currently, researchers, policymakers, and businesses across the United States have a significant opportunity to consider evidence-based strategies that can better support positive employment, career outcomes, and more dynamic economic mobility for young people. The impending retirement of the baby boomer generation will likely intensify demand for workers. At the same time, youth may still be experiencing the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their education and employment and may need support for their workforce success. This is a timely moment to build the pipeline for our nation's future workforce, tap into the talents of the next generation, and promote young people's economic security and mobility.

What Research Tells Us

- **Making jobs and workplaces better for youth**—Changing employer and employment practices and designing work with younger workers' needs in mind can advance worker power, voice, and representation. Research specifically focused on young workers is limited. However, promising or effective programs and strategies exist for the population at large, and they could be refined to meet the needs of young people, while continuing to build evidence of what works. For example, the data points to the association between job quality and union membership for better youth outcomes. However, there are questions about what other forms of worker power and voice might support improved employment outcomes for young people. Evidence shows that apprenticeship is linked to advancement in quality jobs, but there is a need to design pre-apprenticeship and youth apprenticeship opportunities to realize desired outcomes.

- **Adopting career pathway models to support advancement**—Most programs for young people prepare them for entry-level jobs. These jobs can be of low quality, with inadequate wages, benefits, protections, or potential for advancement. A recent review of career pathway studies pointed to the need to target good first jobs and support workers over the long term.²
- **Supporting alternative pathways to careers**—Emerging evidence suggests that college might not always be the best pathway to a young person’s first job on a career ladder. Registered apprenticeships offer promise because they allow youth to earn an income while gaining skills in the workplace. Still, more evidence is needed about how to promote access (including through pre-apprenticeship) and expand youth apprenticeship opportunities.
- **Adapting effective models to meet the needs of youth who face significant barriers**— Further research is critical to understanding how to adapt effective models to serve the young people who are facing the most barriers—among them youth of color and low-income youth. Programs need to be designed with the specific needs of participating youth in mind—for example, by providing access to child care for parenting youth or helping young people navigate the criminal legal system for those with criminal records.

Summary of Our Findings

Today’s tight US labor market has waves of older workers heading into retirement, opening employment opportunities for younger workers. With the disproportionate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people’s education and employment, the time is ripe to focus on evidence-based solutions to support their economic mobility, power, and dignity in the workplace. Figure 1 describes a framework for understanding the evidence base and identifying areas of opportunity for improving youth employment outcomes and mobility.

FIGURE 1

Framework for Improving Youth Employment Outcomes and Mobility



Source: Authors’ representation.

Below, we catalog the state of young people in the workplace today and the array of actions to take to help them enter the workforce and contribute meaningfully to our economy and society.

The education and workforce system needs revamping to meet the diversity of young people and the US labor market.

In evaluating the evidence, it is critical to consider the demographic profile of today's young people, the labor market context in which they will begin their career trajectories and the social and other factors that shape access to opportunity and outcomes for youth:

- **Young people today are diverse.** Roughly 47 percent of Americans between the ages of 16 to 24 years are people of color. About a third of youth in this age group are immigrants or come from immigrant families. These dimensions of identity, along with gender and sexual orientation, shape the experiences, assets, and challenges they face in the US labor market.
- **The pandemic's disruptions to the labor market and economy had large impacts on young people, who already faced challenges accessing educational opportunities to advance in the workforce.** Before the COVID-19 pandemic, many young people struggled to enter and remain in the workforce because of automation and globalization. Employers also added the pressure of wanting workers with a college education. Since the pandemic, the labor market has tightened, fewer people are attending college, and worker power seems to have increased, though challenges for young workers persist.
- **Programs and policies supporting the youth workforce must consider the social determinants of work and structural barriers that many young people face.** Research shows 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 structure and caregiving responsibilities can have on outcomes.³

There are opportunities for government actors to consider how the education and workforce systems can be redesigned to better meet the needs of young people, for educators to rethink how to provide career-focused education to young people today, for employers to consider changes to job design to better support the workforce of the future, and for philanthropy to fund what is needed to advance the transformation of systems that support young people.

Young people need skills and supports to get good jobs.

To help this diverse population overcome barriers and build on their assets, young people need access to effective skills-development strategies, including supportive services. Supporting economic mobility means focusing on young people's career trajectories and considering multiple pathways.

- **Provide key supports**—Research points to the importance of financial support in employment interventions for young people, along with other support such as 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. Funders, including government and philanthropy, can make sure that programs are adequately resourced to provide youth people with the supports they need.
- **Ensure programs reflect labor market demand**—Hallmarks of effective skills preparation are the alignment of programs with labor market demand and training that reflects the skills required for jobs. Strategies for labor market alignment include using labor market data, engaging employers, and participating in industry or sector partnerships. Workforce development boards can help to

spearhead industry partnerships in collaboration with leading employers and local education and training providers.

- **Build skills and connections to work through work-based learning**—Work-based learning is a range of strategies that provide youth with opportunities for career preparation and training in work settings. Such experiences are more likely to improve employment outcomes when young people are paid, can apply concepts learned on the job in the classroom, and receive financial support. Employers can learn more about the benefits of apprenticeships from their state or the federal Office of Apprenticeship and receive support from apprenticeship intermediaries.
- **Provide support to navigate careers and access jobs.** Research finds that mentors are key for positive employment and career outcomes for youth.⁴ Emerging research demonstrates community colleges and other postsecondary education institutions can align resources to support career-focused support through “navigators,” or specialized counselors, who help participants take advantage of, maintain, and maximize available services and benefits.

Young workers need better employer practices and labor policies.

Research is emerging around efforts to improve the quality of jobs, but little of it focuses explicitly on young people.

- **Reform hiring practices to address bias in hiring**—Changes in hiring practices include dropping credential requirements and moving toward skills-based hiring, as well as eliminating criminal background checks or credit checks. Evidence is still emerging on the outcomes of these laws, including unintended consequences. States can enact laws to help ensure qualified youth are not screened out of jobs—contributing toward equity in hiring and continuing to evaluate the outcomes of such changes.
- **Support skill development and advancement on the job**—By providing training on the job and visible career paths, employers can support career advancement for young people. One way to do this is through incumbent worker training, where wages are subsidized to support training for early-career workers, including through apprenticeship, where young people can earn a wage, gain skills, receive mentoring, and advance as they demonstrate competency.
- **Examine wage policies and their effects on young workers**—There is a large body of evidence showing that increases in the minimum wage are associated with the loss of jobs among young workers. Still, for young people supporting families or contributing to family income, persistently low wages can cause instability and hardship for them and their families. Policymakers should consider how wage laws might affect different groups of young workers in different ways and consider that, for some youth, a job is an important part of household income.
- **Enforce labor protections for young workers, especially those who are undocumented**—Recent legislation across several states has changed labor protections to allow for work at younger ages in riskier environments, while other states have improved protections for these younger workers. Unaccompanied minors who are undocumented when they come to this country may be especially at risk for working in unsafe environments. Policymakers need to acknowledge that the earned incomes of younger workers can play an important role in their families’ financial well-being, while also taking steps to protect youth from harmful labor practices.

Empower young workers in worker power, voice, and representation.

- **Engage young workers 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 more dynamic economic mobility.⁵ Young workers report

more positive views of unions, suggesting the need to consider strategies for inclusion and other forms of collective action, especially in the context of the expanding gig economy. Strategies for building youth worker power and voice include expanding access to union jobs, providing support through worker centers, informing young people about their rights at work, and supporting opportunities for them to contribute to decisionmaking in training programs on the job and in policy discussions.

- **Explore entrepreneurship as an avenue for building autonomy, worker power, and mobility**—Despite the risks of starting a new business and high rates of business failure, new attitudes among young people about work combined with changes in technology and the economy may point to new opportunities to consider support for youth entrepreneurship. There is evidence that entrepreneurial activities leveraging social media or independent work in the “gig economy” are on the rise for youth. Programs can help young people address the challenges of a lack of financing, education and training, and awareness of governmental programs, and helping them to translate their early work experiences into small business development or stable employment. New programming and curricula around youth entrepreneurship are continuing to emerge, as are studies of the effectiveness of entrepreneurship programs.

Provide young people with multiple pathways to careers.

- **Adopt career pathway models**—This approach promotes advancement through articulated steps that give workers opportunities to earn credentials, provide support services and flexibility for nontraditional students, and rely on employer connections and partnerships. A recent meta-analysis of career pathway programs finds mixed results.⁶ Still, it points to the importance of a good first job and targeting occupations and industries that offer higher potential for wage growth.
- **Support youth in high school**—Opportunities for career exploration, robust advising, and work-based learning are all strategies for improving career preparation in high school, alongside providing opportunities to earn college credits. In a review of the evidence on participating in career academies, this approach has a positive and sustained impact on post-high school earnings eight years following completion but no impact on educational attainment.⁷
- **Improve college completion**—As college attendance increased over the past several decades, low completion rates led many to consider how colleges and support services need to be redesigned to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body facing barriers that traditional colleges were not designed to address. One model with the strongest evidence of effectiveness shows double the graduation rates.
- **Allow for alternative pathways**—To meet the needs of young people who face challenges in school and require additional support in entering certain jobs and industries, consider the alternatives available to the traditional college pathway. Include programs for young people who did not complete school or are at risk of not graduating, who are not connected to jobs or school, and who are interested in careers where the best path to jobs is through registered apprenticeships.
- **Additional research to help young people access good jobs and careers**—This requires understanding how to meet young people’s needs, including applying lessons from effective interventions for adults to support young people and help them to better navigate different pathways to careers.

Conclusion

This summary of our research report *Supporting Economic Mobility for Youth through Employment-Focused Strategies* highlights the evidence base of what works in promoting a broad vision of economic mobility for youth. Meeting the needs of youth requires approaches built on evidence-based practices and acknowledging both the economic and labor market context and the role of social determinants of work—factors that affect workers’ abilities to succeed and achieve economic security and mobility.

Supporting our youth also requires promoting their preparation for and access to good jobs. Generating evidence about how workplaces can support the well-being of and economic opportunity for young workers is an emerging research area. 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 the outcomes for this population.

Notes

- ¹ Shayne Spaulding, Madeleine Sirois, and Amanda Briggs, *Supporting Economic Mobility for Youth through Employment-Focused Strategies: A Landscape Scan* (Washington, DC: WorkRise, 2024).
- ² Laura R. Peck, Deena Schwartz, Julie Strawn, Christopher C. Weiss, Randall Juras, Siobhan Mills de la Rosa, Nathan Greenstein, Tori Morris, Gabriel Durham, and Charlotte Lloyd, *A Meta-Analysis of 46 Career Pathways Impact Evaluations*. Report prepared for the US Department of Labor, Chief Evaluation Office (Rockville, MD: Abt Associates, 2022).
- ³ Ron Haskins, Julie B. Isaacs, and Isabel V. Sawhill, *Getting Ahead or Losing Ground: Economic Mobility in America* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2008), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/getting-ahead-or-losing-ground-economic-mobility-in-america/>.
- ⁴ “Navigators in Social Service Delivery Settings: A Review of the Literature with Relevance to Workforce Development Programs,” Employment and Training Administration, US Department of Labor, 2022, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasp/evaluation/completed-reports/navigators-in-social-service-delivery-settings>.
- ⁵ David Howell, “Low Pay in Rich Countries: Institutions, Bargaining Power, and Earnings Inequality in the US, UK, Canada, Australia and France,” Washington Center for Equitable Growth, September 3, 2021, <https://equitablegrowth.org/working-papers/low-pay-in-rich-countries-institutions-bargaining-power-and-earnings-inequality-in-the-u-s-u-k-canada-australia-and-france/>.
- ⁶ Laura R. Peck, Deena Schwartz, Julie Strawn, Christopher C. Weiss, Randall Juras, Siobhan Mills de la Rosa, Nathan Greenstein, Tori Morris, Gabriel Durham, and Charlotte Lloyd, *A Meta-Analysis of 46 Career Pathways Impact Evaluations*.
- ⁷ US Department of Labor, US Department of Commerce, US Department of Education, and US Department of Health and Human Services, *What Works in Job Training: A Synthesis of the Evidence* (Washington, DC: DOL, Commerce, ED, and HHS, 2024).

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