



An Opportunity to Do Better: Youth Pathways to Thriving

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There are approximately 5 million young people between the ages of 16 and 24 in the United States who are not in school or working and are at risk of surviving rather than thriving.¹ These young people are sometimes referred to as *opportunity youth* because of the opportunity and potential they have to thrive and succeed as individuals, community members, and contributors to our society. But opportunity becomes an empty promise if we cannot provide access to equitable opportunities for learning and development, including opportunities to explore and develop career interests, build relationships and partner with adult mentors, and experience safe and supportive environments that offer ample tries and second chances.

The pathways to thriving are fraught with amplified disconnection. While communities have made progress in the last decade to reconnect youth to opportunities to thrive and build skills through school and employment, the COVID-19 pandemic threatens this progress. Increasing numbers of young people today are unemployed and not participating in school; as a result, they face a more uncertain future. This is the challenge, and now is the time to address this inequity through a learning agenda for opportunity youth.

In this brief, we:

- Explore the opportunity of adolescence and the promise of adolescents as a force for good,
- Describe opportunity youth,
- Review the evidence on programs intended to support opportunity youth in their transition to adulthood, and
- Identify a learning agenda to support opportunity youth on a path to thriving.

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Promise of Adolescence

A recent report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Promise of Adolescence*, underscores the period of adolescence as a time of opportunity and promise.² Similarly, the Center for the Developing Adolescent heralds adolescents as a force for good in society.³ Adolescence starts with the onset of puberty around age 10 and ends around age 25.⁴ The adolescent brain is rapidly changing to “uniquely fit to meet the needs of this stage of life, allowing young people to explore new environments and build new relationships with the world and people around them.”⁵ Adolescence is a time when young people are especially resilient, sensitive to rewards, more willing to take risks, and more aware of social status.⁶ Late adolescence is marked by the transition to adulthood, which includes opportunities for learning new knowledge, skills, and social strategies that will enable young people to succeed as adults.⁷

Adolescence marked by chronic trauma and historical trauma associated with racism affects the developing brain’s thinking and reasoning at a critical time.⁸ Opportunities for learning and development can bolster young people’s pathway to thriving and can mitigate the impacts of stress and trauma in their lives, but it takes time for these results to occur.⁹ At the same time, young people in the United States have inequitable access to meaningful opportunities for learning and development, including high-quality education and training, adult allies who can connect them to safe and supportive environments that expand their learning and career choices, and activities to explore interests and build skills. Even if young people have access to some combination of these supports in their lifetime, those supports hit a cliff when youth “age out,” or turn 18, which is not when development magically ends.¹⁰ All young people need support as they make the transition to adulthood. Young people who did not get a fair shot on their educational, employment, personal, or developmental path—and those with a limited social or safety net—need continued and coordinated supports as they transition to adulthood.¹¹ This is what recent evidence tell us is best for young people and for our society as a whole.¹²

A Lost Opportunity

Youth who are between the ages of 16 and 24 and are neither working nor in school are sometimes referred to as *opportunity youth* but are also sometimes labeled *disconnected youth* and *at-risk youth*. The different terms used to describe young people are a direct reflection of society’s changing views on youth and the promise they hold. The term *opportunity youth* conveys the optimism and promise that young people represent for thriving at multiple levels—individual, community, and economic.

Opportunity youth differ from their “connected” peers in several important ways. They are:

- Nearly twice as likely to live in poverty,
- More than three times as likely to have a disability,
- Nine times as likely to have discontinued high school, and
- More than 20 times as likely to be living in institutionalized group settings.¹³

Further, opportunity youth rates of disconnection vary by race and ethnicity. Asian youth have the lowest rate of disconnection (6.6%), followed by white (9.2%), Latino (13.7%), Black (17.2%), and Native American (25.8%) youth.¹⁵

The longer that a young person is not in school or not working, the more lasting the impacts are on their life. These include not only their future earnings but also their overall well-being.¹⁶ Youth disconnection affects a myriad of long- and short-term outcomes, including:

- mental health,¹⁷
- civic engagement and political participation,¹⁸
- health and life expectancy,¹⁹
- the stability and quality of personal and familiar relationships,²⁰ and
- the individual's overall resilience and ability to adjust to changes.²¹

The large numbers of opportunity youth and the limited availability of high-quality alternatives to college for skill building in the United States are important contributing factors to challenges in reconnecting opportunity youth to successful pathways. Completing at least some postsecondary education and/or earning a credential is increasingly important for opening up future employment opportunities and earning a living wage.²² For example, college graduates with a bachelor's degree typically earn 66% more than those with a high school diploma and are also less likely to face unemployment. Over their lifetimes, the average worker with a bachelor's degree will earn approximately \$1 million more than a worker without a postsecondary education and training.²³

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges for opportunity youth.²⁴ The pandemic has disrupted young people's access to education and opportunities for training, employment, and earning a disposable income.²⁵ Many schools across the country have closed in-person classes or moved to primarily online courses, further distancing youth from teacher and peer support systems. The pandemic has also taken a toll on young people's outlook for the future. Unlike in previous years, fewer young people are reporting that they feel clear about their goals and their future job or career, and that they know what they want to do and the steps they need to take to get there.²⁶

The ***Achieving Collective Impact for Opportunity Youth*** report advocates for the term *opportunity youth* “as a reflection of the optimism they have for finding a pathway to economic stability, and as a reminder that investing in their futures represents an immense opportunity for employers and the nation. By improving outcomes for this population, businesses and communities have the potential to increase savings for society, improve the quality of talent available to employers, and interrupt a multi-generational cycle of poverty for youth and their families.”¹⁴

Left unaddressed, the economic and social costs of youth disconnection are significant to individuals and to society.

The Opportunity to Do Better

Strategies to support young people should center around efforts to make schools more engaging and to create pathways to additional postsecondary education and training opportunities that will help young people build the skills necessary to transition successfully to adulthood and thrive.²⁷ But for opportunity youth, we have failed in our efforts to do this, and we need to do better—to create more equitable pathways to success.

Creating opportunities that optimally engage young people once they become disconnected is the focus of many publicly and privately funded programs across the United States. These programs generally focus on strategies to put opportunity youth back on a pathway to school or work. The American Institutes for Research (AIR) reviewed the published research evidence on nine rigorously studied programs that serve opportunity youth to help inform our self-funded, equity-focused investments. This evidence is summarized [here](#). These programs are organized into two size categories:

- Large, comprehensive programs that are national in scope (i.e., serve a large number of youth, have multiple sites across the United States, and offer a comprehensive set of services)—for example, **Job Corps, Youth Corps, YouthBuild, National Guard Youth Challenge, and Year Up**; and
- Smaller, more focused programs (i.e., ones that serve smaller numbers of youth and offer limited services and shorter program duration)—for example, **LaGuardia’s GED Bridge to Health and Business; Linking Innovation, Knowledge, and Employment (@LIKE); Young Adult Internship Program (YAIP); and Los Angeles Reconnections Center Academy (LARCA).**

Based on this evidence scan and a literature review, opportunity youth programs that show strong impacts tend to incorporate academic and vocational training linked with meaningful work experiences, provide job search and placement assistance, and integrate intensive wraparound supports (such as case management, childcare, and counseling). It is important to note, however, that all of these studies were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, during which young people are facing multiple crises (e.g., job loss, mental health crisis, lack of school engagement due to online schooling). **Thus, the applicability of these programs to serving opportunity youth may be limited in the current environment.**

In addition, education and training programs designed to assist opportunity youth on pathways to thriving may not result in the same outcomes for all who participate. For example, in the National Job Corps Study, earnings gains were found for most racial and ethnic groups, but researchers found no earnings gains for Hispanics.²⁸ Further, while the programs with the most comprehensive sets of services (including wraparound supports) designed to address the many barriers faced by opportunity youth produce short-term gains in re-engagement in school and work, the **benefits of these programs tend to fade over time**. Thus, it is critical to better understand these findings collectively and **the ways in which programs can provide longer term benefits for all opportunity youth.**

In contrast, the more focused programs showed positive results, but only for a limited set of outcomes. Unlike the comprehensive programs, many of the more targeted programs focus only on re-enrollment in school or on work or vocational training, and not both. The lack of comprehensive supports in the more focused programs means that they **struggle to retain youth**. In addition, most of the focused programs

have extensive entrance or eligibility requirements that include, for example, academic or physical or mental “fitness” assessments, written essays, and interviews. The selective nature of these programs **excludes the hardest-to-reach and the most vulnerable opportunity youth from programming options.**

A Learning Agenda for Opportunity Youth

Our review of the program evidence for opportunity youth is a first step in formulating a learning agenda that aims to improve our understanding of what works for opportunity youth—particularly those who are the hardest to reach—and to engage them. To better support opportunity youth, we identified three important priorities for evidence building, which we will explore in depth in future briefs:

First and foremost, we need to partner with youth to learn with and from them about how to best support them on a path to opportunity and thriving. Opportunity youth have diverse experiences, assets, and needs. They require access to multiple supports and may experience multiple barriers in their efforts to access and benefit from programs and services.²⁹ Understanding why youth become disconnected is the first step in developing effective programs. Effective programs for opportunity youth may necessitate intensive, focused outreach efforts and sustained interventions to achieve the desired, long-term results of supporting youth on a pathway to thriving. Effective programs also incorporate youth voices and decision making into engagement efforts, and they engage families and the community as a whole.³⁰ For example, the Community Center for Education Results and United Way of South King County, Washington, employ young people as peer connectors and outreach workers to share information with other opportunity youth about re-engagement options and accessing programs and services.³¹ “Light touch” programs and interventions are unlikely to engage or retain youth sufficiently to yield the desired long-term benefits. Further, significant attrition rates for many programs we reviewed suggest the need for stronger, more differentiated supports to help more youth remain engaged.³²



Second, we need to better understand how to cost-effectively scale up and provide more program options and services for opportunity youth. Initiatives launched by the National Urban League, such as **Project Ready**, have provided more than 15,000 young people across the country with academic support, life skills, and exposure to college access programs to prepare them for life after high school.³³ However, there are simply not enough resources or promising programs like Project Ready to serve all opportunity youth who could benefit from them. Program providers and communities are seeking solutions during the pandemic to serve youth and to scale up those services to support the growing numbers that will need to be served. Some have lauded online programs as a way of serving more youth with limited resources. However, the evidence on whether online programs are an effective way to scale and serve youth and produce positive, long-term outcomes is not yet clear. Further, it is important to recognize that some

opportunity youth remain underserved. Many of the programs that AIR has reviewed do not serve those who are the most vulnerable, leaving many youth out of programming options altogether. Scaling successful programs requires that we understand more about both program delivery and cross-sector collaboration in order to use resources efficiently.

Finally, we need to expand the evidence base to study real-world settings and programs, and to apply more innovative research methods to use this information for rapid improvement. Many of the rigorous studies that AIR examined for this brief are now dated, given the rapid changes that today's youth are facing and the ways in which programs are being designed and delivered (e.g., in some cases during the pandemic, content and access to training and education has been entirely online), which limits the degree to which past evaluations can shed light on how these programs should be delivered today. In 2019, members of the opportunity youth Evaluations and Studies project noted that the current approach to evaluation of opportunity youth is selective and leaves out groups of opportunity youth. Project members also suggested that opportunity youth interventions might be a good fit for rapid evaluation methods.³⁴ More research is needed to explore alternative models and to generate evidence that practitioners can quickly translate into their programs.

AIR's Commitment to Opportunity Youth

Opportunity youth offer considerable potential as a force for good. Public agencies, funders, and local stakeholders are banding together to ensure that young people have pathways to which they can connect and thrive. Examples of this collaboration are exemplified in the work of organizations like the Casey Foundation's Thrive by 25³⁵ and JPMorgan Chase's global employment youth initiatives.³⁶ Further, we know that the evidence on thriving is growing,³⁷ and there are several networks (such as the Opportunity Youth Network³⁸) and toolkits designed to bolster engagement and to make good on the potential of opportunity youth.³⁹

What do we need to know to ensure a brighter future for all young people? Successful efforts to put opportunity youth on a pathway to thriving will require focused and accelerated efforts to re-engage youth, coordination and scaling of programs designed to support the increasing numbers of opportunity youth, and research to find new evidence on better and more effective ways to support youth in their transition to adulthood. AIR is committed to working with our partners to support youth and develop scalable, cost-effective, and evidence-based programs that successfully engage opportunity youth and put them back on a path to thriving—especially opportunity youth who are underserved by current programs. Our subsequent briefs will explore specific ways to achieve this goal.

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