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THE YES PROJECT
YOUNG. EMPLOYED. SUCCESSFUL.

Finding a Way Forward

Young People's Experiences
Navigating the World of Work
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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THE YES PROJECT

YOUNG. EMPLOYED. SUCCESSFUL.

A YOUTH EMPLOYMENT RESEARCH AGENDA

The YES Project—Young, Employed, Successful—engages America's Promise Alliance and its partners in unifying the nation to reach a major collective goal: *every young person seeking a job can find a job*. While the COVID-19 pandemic may slow progress toward achieving this goal, the [Ready, Connected, Supported framework](#)—a collectively-developed vision that pinpoints what young people need to succeed in the workplace—remains a guide for the YES Project's research agenda and coalition-building efforts.

The Center for Promise, the applied research institute of America's Promise Alliance, pursues studies that ground the discourse about youth employment and workforce development in young people's experiences, elevate their voices in a national conversation about work, and explore the role of relationships in facilitating positive workforce outcomes for youth. *Finding a Way Forward* is the latest example. The report offers insights about why youth workforce development matters; what eases or thwarts young people's journeys along their career pathways; and how communities can contribute to a ready, connected, and supported workforce for the future.



What was your first job? Who helped you get it, and how did you learn what you needed to succeed? What experiences and relationships have shaped your career journey?

Finding a Way Forward: Young People's Experiences Navigating the World of Work presents findings from a new qualitative study that explores specific questions about work and careers from the perspectives of 65 young adult participants in five career pathways programs across the country. This qualitative report provides a glimpse into their perceptions of their career journeys amidst today's changing employment landscape.

The young people whose voices shaped this report are from groups often excluded from policy conversations— young people of color, those whose families have immigrated to the United States in search of new opportunities, and those from economically disadvantaged and working-class backgrounds.

Although data collection for this study was completed just before COVID-related stay-at-home orders swept across the country, *Finding a Way Forward* is being released at a time when young people have been and continue to be deeply affected. COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on the nation's economy and has decimated an already fragile youth employment landscape. During the first quarter of 2020, nearly half of young adults who were employed had jobs in service-sector industries, which have been among those hit the hardest by the pandemic.¹ This bleak picture is magnified for youth from marginalized racial and ethnic groups—in July 2020, 16.7% of white youth were unemployed, compared to 25.4% of Black and Asian youth and 21.7% of Latinx youth.²

The youth unemployment crisis and social disparities in employment outcomes, although exacerbated by the pandemic, are not unique to the current moment. Year after year, youth unemployment within the U.S. remains consistently high—more than double the national average for the overall population.³ This matters because high levels of unemployment and disconnection levy steep financial burdens for young people as well as society. Especially during this time of high unemployment, it is necessary to connect young people to jobs that can offer sustainable career pathways, long-term stability, and opportunities to make the kinds of contributions to their communities that the participants in this study clearly crave.

By elevating young people’s descriptions of their employment journeys, this report aims to expand understanding of the most important components of young people’s career development in ways that can inform youth-centered research, policy, and practice. Despite traditional efforts to compartmentalize work and life issues across those domains, the study participants indicated that what happens in life influences work and what happens at work influences life. Ultimately, young people want the world of work to recognize their inherent worth as human beings; and crave opportunities to contribute to society, their communities, and their families through decent, meaningful, and impactful work experiences. Brock and Jason,^A two of the study participants, illuminated some of these themes in their dialogue below.

“ We want to be treated as individuals who have value. We want to be supported, we want to feel connected to the company and the work we’re doing, we want to feel connected to our communities, and just making a difference through small things, and I guess just treated like a person. I feel like there’s so much de-humanizing that goes on in the workplace. And I’m sure you’ve all seen “the millennials are killing the ‘blank’ industry” articles where it’s so much blame is being foisted upon the millennial generation, because “we’re doing these things, we’re ruining industries, we’re taking down capitalism, we’re doing all these awful things,” when it really just boils down to, we want to be treated like human beings who have value.

BROCK, 24, WHITE, MALE

Trying to work off that point, like you said, we’ve seen our parents, just the past generations offering their work. And so we’ve seen how you can just kind of slip in and be a cog in the machine and just work in one spot, go live for 40 years, go hard, go deep, and then just retire and do whatever you want. But now...it’s not really possible for us as individuals in the workplace. So whenever we have that security and whenever we can know our work is purposeful, our work is meaningful, but most importantly, our work can be expanded...if we have that security, we have that knowledge with us, then at that point the sky’s the limit.

JASON, 23, AFRICAN AMERICAN, MALE

What the young people like Jason and Brock who contributed to this research show is that they are hard-working, thoughtful, intelligent, strategic, compassionate, resilient, values-driven, and motivated—positive attributes that the discourse on youth employment often leaves out. *Finding a Way Forward* invites a new conversation that is informed by what young people say about what is present and what is missing in their journeys through today’s world of work.

This executive summary gives a brief overview of the qualitative study; outlines the report’s key findings; and concludes with a set of implications for research, policy, and practice. For a detailed description of the study’s methodology, a discussion of the findings with illustrative quotes from interviews with young people, and recommended action steps aligned with the implications, please see the [full report](#).

A To protect young people’s privacy, their names have been replaced with aliases that they each chose during the group interviews. Program and place names have also been redacted to protect young people’s identities. Age, race, and gender identifiers are all self-reported and use the young person’s own descriptions (e.g. Black or African American).

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

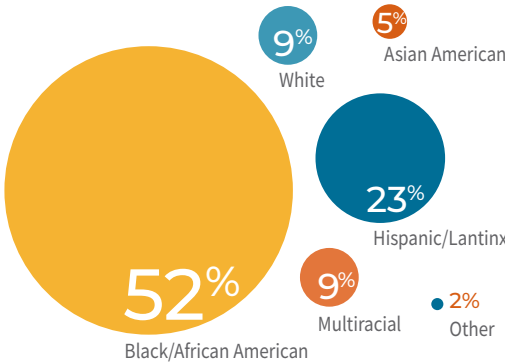
The qualitative study that shaped this report was structured around the YES Project's Ready, Connected, Supported framework: a collectively-developed vision that pinpoints what young people need to succeed in the workplace. Two research questions guided the study:

- How do young people describe what it means to become ready, connected, and supported to reach their goals?
- How do contextual factors, including the barriers young people encounter and conditions that help them cope, shape their views about work and what it means to become ready, connected, and supported to achieve their goals?

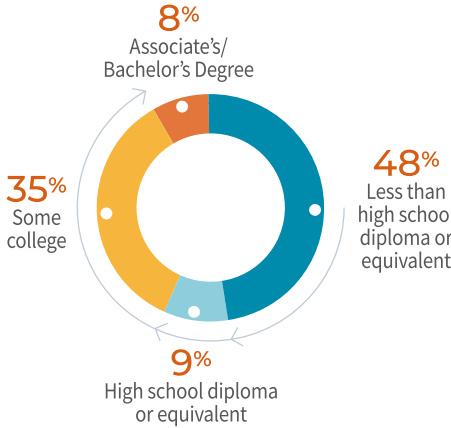
To answer these questions, the research team conducted 10 group interviews in five U.S. cities with a total of 65 young people between the ages of 16 and 28. Each young person was enrolled in, or had graduated from, a career pathways program at the time they participated in the study. Young people's responses were systematically analyzed to uncover common themes.

DEMOGRAPHICS OVERVIEW

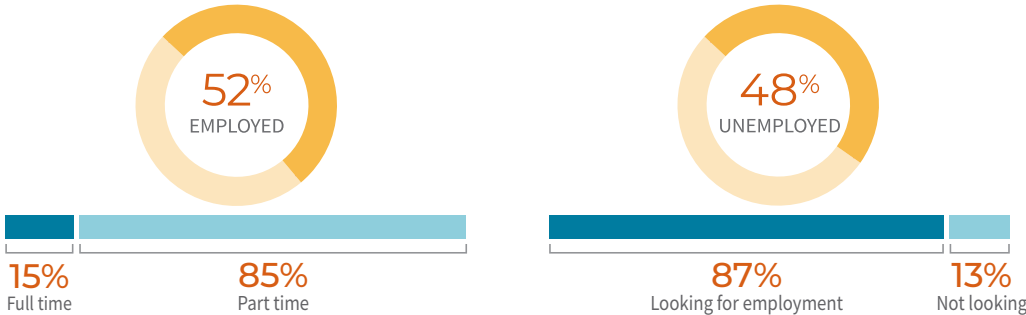
RACE/ETHNICITY



EDUCATION LEVEL



EMPLOYMENT STATUS



For more information about the protocol for data collection and analysis, as well as descriptions of each of the study sites, see the Appendices in the [full report](#).

FINDINGS

Young people's insights into readiness, connection, and support yielded three primary findings.



Young people have a holistic view of readiness that includes what they've learned, what they can do, knowing who they are, and adapting to change. Education and skills training are crucial, but they are not enough; participants in this study expressed that becoming ready is a complex, ongoing process that also includes identity development and adaptability.



Young people recognize the importance of connections and social capital for navigating their career journeys—but often struggle to build them. While young people benefit from relationships with close connections like family, friends, and teachers, many report a lack of access to a wider array of professional networks that can provide entry points to, footholds in, and engagement with the world of work.



Young people's work and life are not siloed from one another, but are deeply intertwined; they require a multi-dimensional, whole-person approach to support. Young people assert that the support they need is not limited to their work lives. They issue a call to action for communities and workplaces to support the whole person.

The stories that the 65 young people tell emphasize that readiness, connection, and support are mutually reinforcing rather than distinct, with each representing a critical and interdependent aspect of young people's journeys through the world of work. Themes related to adversity, work-life integration, and the importance of diverse and flexible career pathways cut across the three areas of the findings. These themes are central in the insights from study participants Nely and Tee below.

“ I think we all have obstacles that get in between our life that have made us, like, stop us from wanting to do something. And take us to a whole different road. And that's one thing that we all have connected: being young and having obstacles we don't know what to do with.

NELY, 23, HISPANIC, FEMALE

[W]e just want to do better. Whether it's just getting our high school diploma, we're still trying. Even though we're struggling, we're still trying. And I feel like we're aware of things that we've been through and it's shaped us to who we are.

TEE, 21, AFRICAN AMERICAN, FEMALE

Together, the findings and themes provide a rich picture of how young people conceptualize becoming ready, connected, and supported for the world of work, even in the face of significant adversity.



IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

The young people whose voices infuse this report make clear that becoming ready, connected, and supported is a journey that consists of relational and developmental processes that involve all aspects of a young person's life and identity. Creating empowering pathways for young people toward decent and sustainable work, therefore, requires comprehensive, youth-centered strategies.⁴

Overall, the findings in this study point toward five areas for the field's attention. Each of these has implications for research, policy, and practice.

- Adopt a whole-person approach to career and workforce development.
- Dismantle systemic barriers to workforce development and participation.
- Support diverse pathways to and through the world of work.
- Enable young people to leverage existing connections and develop new ones.
- Encourage lifelong learning as a career mindset.

The “take action” examples in the box on page 8 highlight how some organizations and systems are exemplifying aspects of these recommendations. The [full report](#) offers additional examples as well as questions for reflection.

Adopt a whole-person approach to career and workforce development.

Adopting a whole-person approach to career and workforce development entails diversifying the tools used to identify and evaluate candidates; valuing a broader profile of life experiences and identities; and ultimately shifting cultural norms about which skills, educational credentials, and professional opportunities are valued in the market. This is even more urgent now, given that the disparate impacts of COVID-19 risk exacerbating inequitable professional opportunities and outcomes, particularly for young people of color and those from economically disadvantaged and working-class backgrounds who are un- or under-employed.

Dismantle systemic barriers to workforce development and participation.

Participants in this study named some of the structural barriers young people face along their journeys, such as racism in educational settings or the workplace; segregation of their communities from resources and opportunities; and a dearth of supportive structures such as child care or transportation that enable consistent commitments to work. Creating a different professional reality for young people facing these adversities, particularly during a global pandemic, requires engagement across social systems.

Decision makers interested in youth employment need to address these institutional and community-level factors in addition to supporting individual-level actions to increase youth employment. Workplace and education policies that promote equity, address systemic barriers, and honor people's work-life intersections—such as paid internships, flexible working formats, robust family leave, and tailored supports or benefits that extend beyond traditional offerings—can create more equitable work environments and outcomes (e.g., reducing hiring and income disparities). Moreover, young people themselves should be looked to as leaders in conversations about racial inequity in the world of work.

Support diverse pathways to and through the world of work.

The young people in this report make clear that they deeply value postsecondary education, that the traditional four-year college pathway is not the right path for all careers, and that even their efforts to access other forms of education (e.g., community college, apprenticeships) are rife with barriers. Young people need more avenues to access the right pathways for them with more and better linkages among these pathways so that they can make adjustments along the way. Communities can provide diverse pathways, school-to-work pipelines, and workforce development systems that afford multiple “on-ramps and off-ramps”; are responsive to young people's developing needs; and accommodate each young person's unique process of becoming ready, connected, and supported.

Enable young people to leverage existing connections and develop new ones.

The young people in this study demonstrate that one's career journey is fundamentally shaped by the people to whom one is connected and the places where those connections are forged. Their narratives offer detailed descriptions of the quality of their connections with both peers and adults, the social capital that these individuals and groups offer them, and the related support that this capital provides.

Young people may already have many of these supports—including family members, teachers, coaches, social workers, peers, colleagues, managers, and others across the contexts of their lives—and each of these relationships plays a role in their wellbeing and their career advancement. While the young people in this study recognize the cultural and social capital that is available close to home, they also emphasize the difficulties of building professional networks that can bridge them to new opportunities within and beyond their home communities, explicitly naming race and poverty as barriers to opportunity.⁶

Young people’s career prospects are stronger when they have access to sustained relationships and supports—especially those that help them nurture existing connections and forge new ones.

Encourage lifelong learning as a career mindset.

Young people recognize that in an ever-changing world of work, the traditional labor market structures and dynamics that once supported relatively predictable pathways to mobility for previous generations have eroded—leaving instead an uncertain, unclear, and unsteady path forward for present and future workers.⁷

The non-linear work lives and career paths imposed by an inequitable and changing labor landscape require that young people rely increasingly on an integrated identity and strong sense of adaptability to manage the many transitions they will surely encounter.⁸ Continued adaptation means that young people’s work lives must be grounded in a commitment to lifelong learning—an “apprenticeship” mindset, as one participant described it.

A lifelong learning approach can position workers to maintain and grow their competitive value, keep pace with shifting market demands, and capitalize on new opportunities.

CONCLUSION

What the young people in this research make clear is that, in addition to lifelong learning, young people and communities must engage in a lifelong approach to cultivating and sustaining relationships that foster the connections and support needed to navigate an ever-changing world of work.

“ Even though you might feel like you’re failing or your life is hard, there’s always the sunshine. The horizon is always there.

JASK, 25, HISPANIC, MALE

Jask’s comment encapsulates the hopeful spirit of the 65 young people whose striving, struggles, and successes are highlighted in *Finding a Way Forward*. Young people want their worth to be recognized, their growth to be supported, and their contributions to make a difference for their families and communities. The world of work will be better with them in it.

take action

Whole-Person Program Approaches

- ✓ The American Job Centers reauthorized under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 provide a range of tools, resources, and services to personalize support for unemployed workers.
- ✓ The programs in the present study—*Jobs for America's Graduates*, *Per Scholas*, *Urban Alliance*, *Year Up*, and *Youth Build*—each provide intensive workforce development approaches that extend beyond skills, embrace the unique individual and community context, and provide an array of tailored wrap-around support services.

Racial Justice

- ✓ *Race Forward* has multiple resources for organizations and employers interested in addressing racial injustice, including a readiness assessment.
- ✓ The National Skills Coalition published *Roadmap for Racial Equity*, explicitly focused on workforce development and citing equity-focused policy and practice examples.

Diverse Pathways

- ✓ The *Integrated Career Pathways Model* developed through a partnership among the U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services; the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014; and the resulting guidance and *toolkits* for programs and communities offer examples of these lessons being enacted at the federal and state level.
- ✓ Organizations like JFF, *YouthBuild USA*, *Year Up*, and many others have published frameworks and case studies for organizations, educational leaders, and policy makers interested in supporting alternative pathways and applying a youth-centered understanding of readiness to both policy and practice.

Enduring Relationships

- ✓ Previous Center for Promise *publications* highlight exemplar programs such as Homeboy Industries, Cafe Momentum, and several programs from the present study, describing how they embed multiple forms and sources of support throughout their programs.
- ✓ Organizations like MENTOR, as well as research and practice models like Search Institute's *Developmental Relationships*, provide a range of additional tools, resources, and tips for helping young people build enduring relationships.

Apprenticeship Models

- ✓ JFF's *framework* for high quality apprenticeship models provides guidance for cultivating effective apprenticeship programs.
- ✓ Organizations such as *CareerWiseColorado*, *Achieving the Dream*, *Gateway to College*, *Urban Alliance*, and early college and innovative high school models such as *P-TECH* and *Big Picture Learning* are notable examples of local, state, and national efforts to raise the profile and possibility of embedding apprenticeship opportunities along young people's career pathways.

ENDNOTES

1. Fry & Barroso, 2020
2. BLS, 2020a
3. BLS, 2020b, 2020c
4. E.g., Spencer, 2006
5. Gee & Ford, 2011
6. Benson, Scales, & Syvertesen, 2001; Beyene, Sanchez, & Ballou, 2002; Blustein et al., 1991; Eller, Lev, & Feurer, 2014; Goldner & Mayselless, 2009; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000; Shelmerdine & Louw, 2010; Yosso, 2005; Zand et al., 2009
7. Blustein, 2019
8. Blustein, 2006; Briscoe & Hall, 2006, p. 4; Hall, 1996; Savickas, 2012



About America's Promise Alliance

America's Promise Alliance is the driving force behind a nationwide movement to improve the lives and futures of America's children and youth. Bringing together national nonprofits, businesses, community and civic leaders, educators, citizens, and young people with a shared vision, America's Promise leads research, campaigns, and initiatives that spark collective action to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of young people's success. Its research division, the Center for Promise, conducts rigorous mixed-methods research that centers youth voice. Through these collective leadership efforts, the Alliance does what no single organization alone can do: catalyze change on a scale that reaches millions of young people.

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