



Opening Pathways for Young Americans in Need of New Educational and Career Options

Mary Kay Dugan, American Institutes for Research

Jill Young, American Institutes for Research

Deborah Moroney, American Institutes for Research

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**. These young people are sometimes referred to as “opportunity youth” because of the 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 pathways for learning and development, including chances to explore and develop career interests, build relationships and partner with adult mentors, including ample tries and second chances.

Although many communities have made progress over the last decade in efforts to connect 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 an agenda to expand learning opportunities for youth.

Promise of Adolescence

Promise of Adolescence, a **recent report** by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, underscores the promise of the adolescent years. **Adolescence is a time** when young people are especially resilient, sensitive to rewards, willing to take risks, and aware of social status. Late adolescence is a time when young people on the verge of adulthood are looking for ways to learn new information and skills that can enable future success. Unfortunately, U.S. young people currently face very unequal opportunities for such learning; many lack access to high-quality education and training and to adults who can connect them to safe and supportive environments to explore interests and build skills.

Young people who did not get earlier fair shots need continued and coordinated supports as they transition to adulthood. The large numbers of such young people and the limited availability of high-quality alternatives to college for skill building in the United States are important impediments that must be overcome if pathways are to be opened for all youth.

Opportunity to Do Better

Creating opportunities that engage young people once they become disconnected is the focus of many publicly and privately funded programs across the United States. 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. 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 U.S. sites, 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).

Larger programs with the most comprehensive sets of services are designed to address young people’s many barriers by arranging immediate re-engagement with school and work. However, the benefits of these programs tend to fade over time, so it is critical to consider how programs might provide sustained, longer-term benefits. More focused programs studied showed positive results, but only for a limited set of outcomes. Unlike comprehensive programs, many targeted programs focus either on re-enrollment in school or on work or vocational training, but not both. Also, most of the focused programs have extensive entrance requirements, including things like academic or physical or mental “fitness” assessments and interviews. These programs’ selective nature excludes the hardest-to-reach and most vulnerable young people from programming options.

Learning Agenda

Our review is a first step in formulating a learning agenda that aims to improve our understanding of programs that would work better. We identified three priorities:

- Partner with youth to learn with and from them how to best support them on a path to opportunity and thriving. Practitioners should incorporate youth perspectives into engagement efforts and tailor programming using the science of learning and development.
- Determine how best to cost-effectively scale up the most effective programs for opportunity youth. Scaling successful programs to meet the needs of all opportunity youth requires that we understand more about program delivery models and cross-sector collaboration in order to make the best use of available resources.
- 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. Researcher/ practitioner partnerships should explore innovative models and practices and generate evidence that the field can quickly integrate into program design.

Commitment to Opportunity Youth

Expanding opportunities for adolescents on the verge of adulthood offers 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. Such goals require accelerated efforts to re-engage youth; funding, coordination and scaling of programs designed to support the increasing numbers of in need of new options; and collection of new evidence on better and more effective ways to support youths’ transition to

adulthood. Policymakers should invest in programs and services that support opportunity youth as well as research initiatives that expand the evidence base about what works. The American Institutes for Research is committed to working with our partners to develop cost-effective and evidence-based programs that successfully reach young people in need of new opportunities—especially those who are underserved by current programs.