



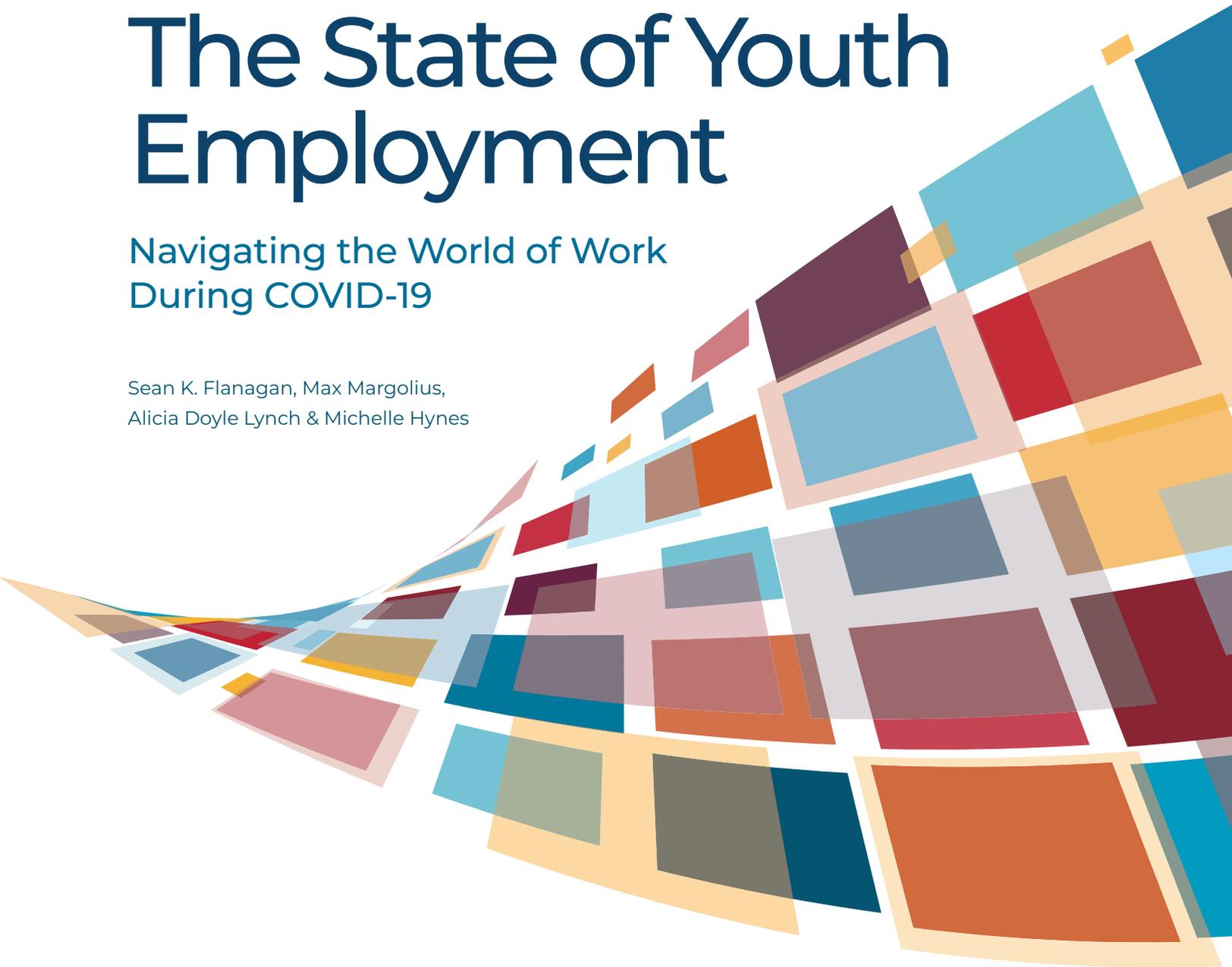
THE **YES** PROJECT  
YOUNG. EMPLOYED. SUCCESSFUL.

SPRING 2021

# The State of Youth Employment

Navigating the World of Work  
During COVID-19

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# THE YES PROJECT

YOUNG. EMPLOYED. SUCCESSFUL.

## ABOUT THE CENTER FOR PROMISE

The Center for Promise, affiliated with Boston University, is the applied research institute of America's Promise Alliance. Its mission is to develop a deep understanding of the conditions necessary for young people in the United States to succeed in school, work, and life. The Center's unique value as a research institute is its dedication to youth voice, whether by highlighting the voices and views of young people or through working with youth to develop and implement research methods to study the issues affecting their lives.

## ABOUT THE YES PROJECT

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. To tackle this ambitious goal, the YES Project works with nonprofit organizations, employers, researchers, policymakers, and young people to drive collective action so that young people are ready for, connected to, and continually supported within the world of work.

*Finding A Way Forward*, the YES Project's qualitative study that preceded this survey report, found that:

- 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.

# Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	1
<b>ABOUT THIS REPORT</b>	2
Study Overview and Methods	2
Research Questions	3
Theory and Context	3
<b>FINDINGS</b>	6
FINDING ONE: Young people in America are struggling—they are financially strained, emotionally drained, and facing significant barriers to employment.	6
FINDING TWO: COVID-19 and the related economic recession have disrupted young people's work lives in myriad ways and prompted extraordinary levels of concern about the future.	10
FINDING THREE: Young people encounter pervasive race- and gender-based discrimination within the world of work.	13
FINDING FOUR: The professional connections and supportive relationships that can help young people advance their work-related goals are out of reach for most youth.	16
FINDING FIVE: Young people's hope about their future work lives is in jeopardy.	19
<b>A CALL TO ACTION: POLICIES, PROGRAMS, AND POSSIBILITIES</b>	21
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	26
<b>APPENDIX</b>	27
<b>ENDNOTES</b>	34
<b>REFERENCES</b>	36

# INTRODUCTION

*What do you do? How has your work changed over the past year? What role does work play in your life?* These kinds of questions highlight the central role of work for many individuals and families—beyond exchanging time for a paycheck.

Work offers opportunities to fulfill basic needs, support oneself and one's family, participate in society, and for some, to express identity and purpose.<sup>1</sup> Year after year, however, unemployment rates for young people remain far greater than for the general population.<sup>2</sup> When young people are unable to gain a foothold at work, they lose more than an earning opportunity. They are disconnected from the social networks, family and community contributions, and sense of identity that work can offer.

Unemployment has spiked dramatically over the past year, and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have widened the longstanding employment gap between young people and the rest of the working population. Further, young people of color, already facing the greatest barriers to decent early employment prospects, are experiencing disproportionate hardships as they try to secure sustainable employment in good jobs. For these reasons and more, youth unemployment and underemployment has grown in size, complexity, and urgency during the pandemic.

The global pandemic has also underscored the deep interdependence that enables the 21st century labor market. As work, school, and home become increasingly entangled, the importance of youth employment as an essential element of individual, family, and societal wellbeing has become even more apparent. When young people are able to work, it sets them on a path to independence and distributes both earning capacity and caregiving resources across a broader population. Our country cannot afford to slow that trajectory during the coming recovery, given that providing early and stable access to employment is one of the key predictors of long term individual financial health and societal economic vitality.<sup>3</sup>

To better understand young people's perspectives on their employment experiences during an unprecedented time, the Center for Promise at America's Promise Alliance asked more than 3,500 people aged 16-24 about the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic inequities have affected their work lives. Overall, their responses to a nationally representative survey show that:

- **FINDING ONE:** Young people in America are struggling—they are financially strained, emotionally drained, and facing significant barriers to employment.
- **FINDING TWO:** COVID-19 and the related economic recession have disrupted young people's work lives in myriad ways and prompted extraordinary levels of concern about the future.
- **FINDING THREE:** Young people encounter pervasive race- and gender-based discrimination in the world of work.
- **FINDING FOUR:** The professional connections and supportive relationships that can help young people advance their work-related goals are out of reach for most youth.
- **FINDING FIVE:** Young people's hope about their future work lives is in jeopardy.

While these findings represent challenges confronting many young people today, they suggest that young people of color and women face disproportionately higher hurdles and experience significantly more negative effects than their peers. This pattern, which cuts across each of the findings, reflects the pervasive and persistent inequities that shape young people's experiences within, and en route to, the labor market. The findings in this report signal the urgent need for a renewed, intensive effort to ensure that a generation of young workers does not lose hope in the economic promise that this country can offer to all families.

# ABOUT THIS REPORT

*The State of Youth Employment* is the second segment of a research series focused on understanding the experiences, assets, and conditions that shape young people’s career development. *Finding a Way Forward*—a 2020 exploratory study based on interviews with young people across the country—yielded several findings about how young people experience entry to and growth within the world of work. Insights included how young people conceptualized becoming ready for work, the connections and support that facilitate their professional development, and the inseparable relationships between their professional and personal lives. The State of Youth Employment builds upon that qualitative study to explore the state of young people within the workforce in this current moment in history. This publication aims to elevate young people’s work and career experiences over the past year to inform youth-centered policy, practice, and economic recovery efforts moving forward.

## ABOUT THE YES PROJECT

The YES Project (Young, Employed, Successful), a national initiative launched by America’s Promise Alliance, was created to support and grow the youth workforce so that every young person seeking a job can find a job. To tackle this ambitious goal, the YES Project teamed up with nonprofits, researchers, and employers to articulate three conditions for success: Ready, Connected, and Supported. The Ready, Connected, and Supported framework is the backbone of the YES Project and serves as a consensus point for everyone—from public officials, to community leaders, to young people themselves—to drive action toward increasing youth employment.

## Study Overview and Methods

The Center for Promise, the research center at America’s Promise Alliance, conducted a nationally representative survey<sup>A</sup> of 3,530 young people as part of the Young, Employed, Successful (YES) Project. The study was designed to assess young people’s career and work-related experiences amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the related economic recession, and our nation’s ongoing struggle toward racial justice.

Survey respondents were ages 16-24 and self-identified as fitting one of three federally-designated labor market participation statuses:<sup>4</sup>

- **Employed:** working or holding a job for pay, part-time or full-time, at the time of the survey administration.
- **Unemployed:** not currently employed but available to work and have actively searched for work over the previous four-week period.
- **Marginally attached:** not currently employed nor actively searching for work over the previous four-week period but maintaining labor force attachment by having searched for work within the past 12 months (or since the last date of employment if within the previous 12 months).

A Representative sampling is a strategy used to enhance external validity and improve confidence in the ability to generalize findings and estimates from the sample to the broader population of youth across the United States (Laurson, Little, & Card, 2011). For the current study, nationally representative sampling parameters were established along dimensions of age, gender, ethnicity, race, geographic region, enrollment status, and education level.

To account for seasonal fluctuations in youth employment (which typically rises over the summer and during the winter holidays) the survey for this study was disseminated over a three-week period from late January through mid-February 2021.<sup>5</sup> For a full description of study design, sample, and measures please see Appendix A.

## Research Questions

The survey items and analysis pursued five related research questions:

1. What is the current state of young people within the world of work? In other words, how are young people, including those within and on the fringes of the labor force, faring in the current moment?
2. How has COVID-19 shaped young people's work lives?
3. To what extent do young people report experiencing race- and gender-based discrimination within the world of work?
4. What levels of social connections and support do young people report that can help manage these barriers?
5. What sense of hope do young people hold for their future?

## Theory and Context

The Center for Promise's research is grounded in a positive youth development (PYD) framework.<sup>6</sup> This perspective embraces the belief that all young people have strengths, agency, and the ability to thrive; and that every young person's development is shaped by the dynamic relationships between themselves and the multiple contexts or environments in which they grow up. Each of these contexts is linked, nested, or embedded within a broader youth-centered ecology. When those contexts are saturated with resources and aligned to support a young person's strengths and help to meet their needs, that supportive youth system can help a young person realize positive developmental outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

However, our nation's long history of discriminatory social systems, institutions, and practices present certain groups of young people with fewer supportive resources and more severe barriers to positive developmental outcomes than others. Psychology of Working Theory (PWT), accordingly, emphasizes the critical role that contextual factors such as economic and social marginalization play in young people's ability to access, sustain, and progress along dignified and fulfilling professional pathways.<sup>8</sup> Together with PYD, PWT emphasizes the relationship between person and context over time as a fundamental framework for understanding young people's professional journeys.

These theoretical perspectives guided much of the survey design and analysis represented in the current report, helping to frame the focus of the research questions and the applied implications of the findings in 2021 and beyond.

## Young People at Work: A Year of Challenges and Change

The past year has presented new and unforeseen challenges to young people's work lives and career development, with profound implications for the youth employment landscape and for our nation's economic health. From Spring 2019 to Spring 2020, youth unemployment nearly tripled—from 8.4% to 24.4%—with even higher unemployment rates for Black, Latinx, and Asian-American and Pacific Islander youth.<sup>9</sup> Part of that increase is related to the high numbers of young people working in industries such as hospitality and food service that have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> These losses also included those with postsecondary credentials; college graduates experienced 13.2% unemployment as of June 2020, up from 4.1% in the year prior.<sup>11</sup> Moreover,

those numbers fail to account for young people who may be out of work and, for any number of reasons, not currently searching for work. Thus, the true impact of the pandemic on young people's work lives may be far greater than can be understood by traditional labor market indicators.

**Youth unemployment nearly tripled, to 24%, between spring 2019 and spring 2020.**

Historically, one of the factors leading to lower levels of youth employment during economic recessions has been that young people have enrolled in higher education at greater rates. For instance, during and after the recession in 2008, college enrollment rose nearly 16%.<sup>12</sup> However, current data show that enrollment in higher education has declined precipitously in 2020, down 6.8% overall and 10.7% for students attending schools in lower income areas.<sup>13</sup> FAFSA completion, another key predictor of postsecondary enrollment and persistence among low-income students, is down 9% overall and more than 12% in Title 1 eligible high schools.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the current moment is one of unique vulnerability as rising unemployment and falling enrollment threaten to imperil the current and future prospects of a generation and elevate the risk of long-term adverse impacts on opportunity, achievement, and earnings.

## Systemic Inequity: Race and Gender in the Labor Market

While this study and other recent research offer a snapshot of COVID-19's disproportionate impact on select groups of young people, such differences also reflect long-standing, deeply entrenched, systemic inequities. Identity, oppression, and privilege, therefore, provide an important lens through which to understand young people's experiences in the labor market and workplace. Decades of literature and research, in addition to first-hand testimony from marginalized individuals and communities, make clear that social and economic privilege, or lack thereof, profoundly shapes young people's career trajectories, opportunities, and experiences within the labor market, contributing to persistent disparities in labor market outcomes and economic mobility.<sup>15</sup> Race and gender have long been pillars of social privilege, oppression, and discrimination that influence one's treatment and opportunity within the world of work.<sup>16</sup>

Racism remains an insidious and profound influence—shaping access to the labor market, affecting experiences in the workplace, and contributing immeasurably to the observed disparities in wealth,<sup>17</sup> education,<sup>18</sup> opportunity, employment, and income that exist within American society.<sup>19</sup> Highly publicized recent events—from police brutality against people of color, to politically and racially motivated violence at the Capitol, to inhumane immigration policies and the separation of children along the U.S. borders, to anti-Asian racism and violence amidst the backdrop of COVID-19—have evoked another necessary racial reckoning. The collective impact of these events calls society—particularly white communities—to grapple more honestly with the current and historical existence and influence of racism in the U.S., as well as the recognition that racism's destructive role continues to manifest, not on the margins, but at the very center of American society and its institutions.

Gender- and sex-based discrimination also persist at scale, leading to glaring educational and economic disparities for women, trans, and non-binary individuals and communities and reflecting the systemic and institutional embeddedness of male privilege.<sup>20</sup> Gender pay inequities mean that compared to men, women with a college degree will earn \$700,000 less and those without a high school diploma will earn \$200,000 less over their careers.<sup>21</sup> Recent events such as the #MeToo movement, controversy over anti-trans education and labor policies (e.g., “bathroom

bills”), and pervasive cross-sector incidents of sexual assault and the systemic silencing of women illustrate that sexism and gender bias in the workplace extend far beyond the gender pay gap.

To better understand young people’s experiences and the progress that our nation has made toward equity, the present study asked young people directly about their experiences with race- and gender-based discrimination; the analysis throughout this report also examines group differences along the lines of race and gender where appropriate and possible.

## Individual and Societal Costs of Youth Unemployment

Early experiences of unemployment lead to significant individual and societal costs. Young people who experience unemployment early in their careers are more likely to experience lower rates of employment over the course of their lifetimes, which, in turn, leads to decreased earnings. For example, young people who are unable to access consistent work before age 25 will earn 44% less over the course of their lives.<sup>22</sup> The costs to society are immense as well, with some estimating the annual cost to the nation at \$25 billion dollars in lost taxes per year.<sup>23</sup> Further, young people who are unable to provide for themselves and their families through employment are likely to rely on public assistance programs to help meet their needs. In 2013, economists estimated the cost to taxpayers for those programs at \$26.8 billion dollars. The current rise in youth unemployment, therefore, has significant implications both for the young people unable to access steady employment and for society. Without a robust response to this crisis, the consequences of rising youth unemployment will be felt for years to come.

**Young people who are unable to access consistent work before age 25 will earn 44% less over the course of their lives.**

Although federal labor statistics can sketch the broad outline of employment trends, this report colors in the lines. It offers much-needed insight into young people’s experiences with employment from the perspectives of young people themselves. Considered in the context of overall trends, as well as existing literature related to youth employment, this new study’s findings can point toward specific policies and practices that will enable young people to regain and sustain connections to the world of work.

# FINDINGS

Pursuing the five research questions yielded a rich set of findings that offer a snapshot of young people’s wellbeing, the barriers and discrimination they face, the personal and professional support available to help them, and their sense of hope related to work and their futures. Additionally, the findings give a troubling glimpse into the ways that race and gender explain differences in the amount and type of disruption young people are experiencing during the COVID-19 era.

## FINDING ONE

**Young people in America are struggling—they are financially strained, emotionally drained, and facing significant barriers to employment.**

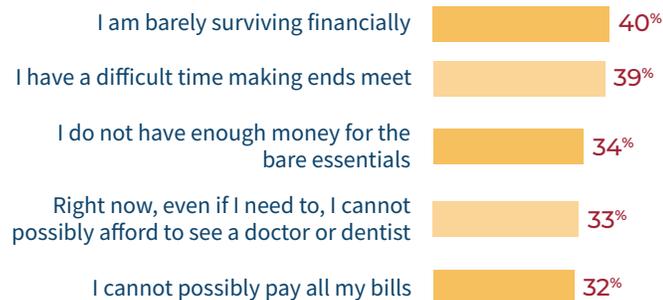
What is the current state of young people within the world of work? How are young people faring in the current moment? The answer is grim. Young people are financially deprived, emotionally depleted, and confronted by significant barriers—barriers that are most severe for Black and Latinx young people and women.

### Young people are financially strained.

The young people surveyed indicated experiencing an acute sense of financial strain. For example, nearly 40% reported barely surviving financially; respondents indicated similarly high levels of difficulty making ends meet, affording bare essentials, paying their bills, and affording basic healthcare costs.

FIGURE 1: Young people’s sense of financial strain

*Numbers represent the percentage of young people reporting that they “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement describing financial deprivation*



### Young people are emotionally drained.

The strain that young people are experiencing is not solely financial; it extends to their broader wellbeing. Nearly one in four young people (22.5%) assessed their current mental health as only “fair” or “poor.” Further, more than two-thirds of young people (70.1%) report experiencing an elevated state of stress “about half the time” or more; and more than one in three young people (34.5%) report feeling this way “most of the time” or “always.”

FIGURE 2: Young people’s assessment of their own mental health

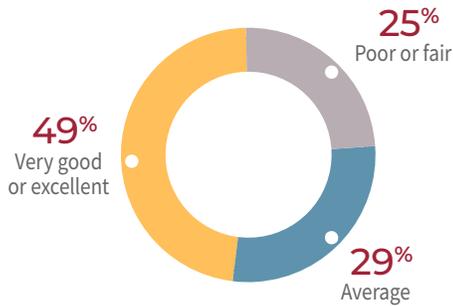
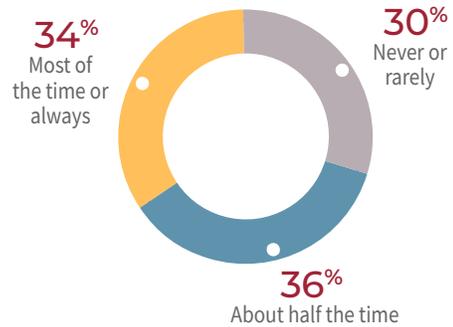


FIGURE 3: Percent of time young people report experiencing a state of heightened stress

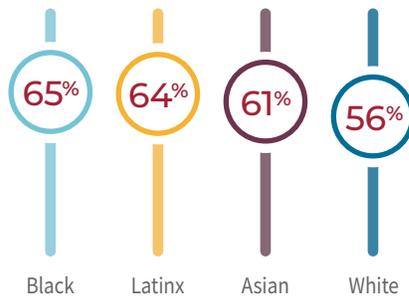


### The considerable career barriers confronting young people are grave—most so for Black and Latinx young people as well as women.

**GENERAL PERCEPTIONS.** Nearly two-thirds of young people (60.7%) indicated a general belief that many existing barriers will make it difficult to achieve their career goals.

FIGURE 4: General perceptions of career barriers, disaggregated by race

Numbers represent the percentage of young people indicating “yes” to the statement “In general, I think that there are many barriers that will make it difficult to achieve my career goals”



Further, meaningful differences emerged across groups, indicating that some groups of young people perceive significantly higher barriers than others. In particular, Black and Latinx young people were significantly more likely (10%) to indicate a general perception of barriers to achieving their career goals than white students, even after controlling for differences associated with other characteristics.<sup>B</sup> Women were significantly more likely (7%) to perceive barriers to achieving their career goals than men (see Figure 5).

**FIGURE 5: General perceptions of career barriers, disaggregated by gender**

*Numbers represent the percentage of young people indicating “yes” to the statement “In general, I think that there are many barriers that will make it difficult to achieve my career goals”*



**SPECIFIC BARRIERS ENCOUNTERED.** In addition to assessing general perceptions of barriers, participants indicated the extent to which specific barriers have affected their employment pathways to date (see Figure 6).

On average, approximately 75% of young people reported that the specific barriers referenced have had *some effect or a large effect* on their ability to get the job they desire or achieve their career goals. Participants reported an average of five out of 11 barriers ( $m = 5.34$ ,  $sd = 3.11$ ). Compared to White youth, Latinx youth reported 24% more barriers, Black youth reported 20% more, and Asian youth reported 19% more barriers. There were no statistically significant differences between Black, Latinx, or Asian youth or by gender. The data highlight substantial differences, including sizable disparities in the extent to which young people of color face barriers related to racial discrimination; immigration, documentation, and citizenship status; and criminal record compared to white youth.

The financial strain, emotional hardship, and career barriers reported by the young people in this study provide important reference points to better understand young people’s experiences in the current moment. Literature indicates that higher levels of social, economic, and educational barriers are associated with employment, earnings, access to decent and meaningful work experiences, and job satisfaction.<sup>24</sup> Helping young people successfully connect with work is crucial, as research has repeatedly demonstrated that early employment is strongly tied to long-term employment outcomes and lifetime earnings,<sup>25</sup> decreased risk of incarceration,<sup>26</sup> improved educational outcomes, and other indicators of health and wellbeing.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>B</sup> All group comparisons in this report were conducted using regression analysis to examine the unique contribution of the group characteristic of interest (e.g., race/ethnicity) in explaining differences in the outcome variable of interest (e.g., barriers). All models also controlled for differences explained by related characteristics, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, participant education level (college degree v. not), parent education level (college degree v. not), employment status (e.g., employed, unemployed, marginally attached), parental status (e.g., caretaker of children v. not) and place of birth (e.g., U.S. or non-U.S.). All statistically significant differences reported in text were significant at the level of  $p < .05$ . Though more complex examination of subgroup differences (e.g., disaggregation by race and gender simultaneously) was outside the scope of this report, extant literature documents the importance of intersectional approaches for understanding complex human phenomena and experiences. Future publications and analyses within this research series will explore such differences.

FIGURE 6: Perceptions of specific career barriers

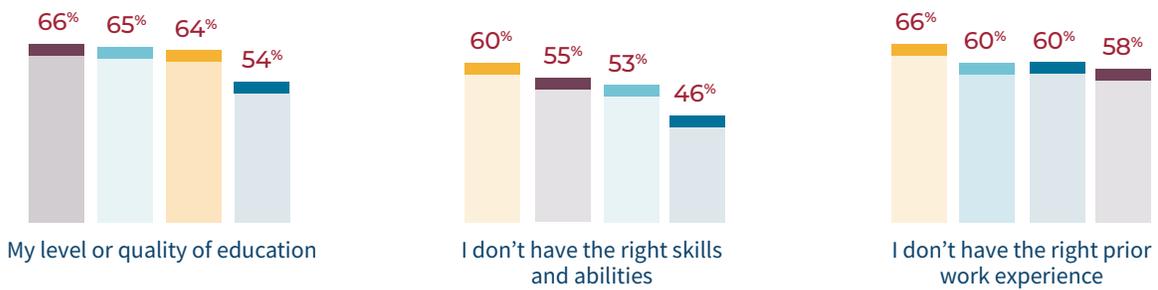
Numbers represent the percentage of young people indicating that the barrier had “some effect” or “a large effect” on their ability to get the job they desire

Asian Black Latinx White

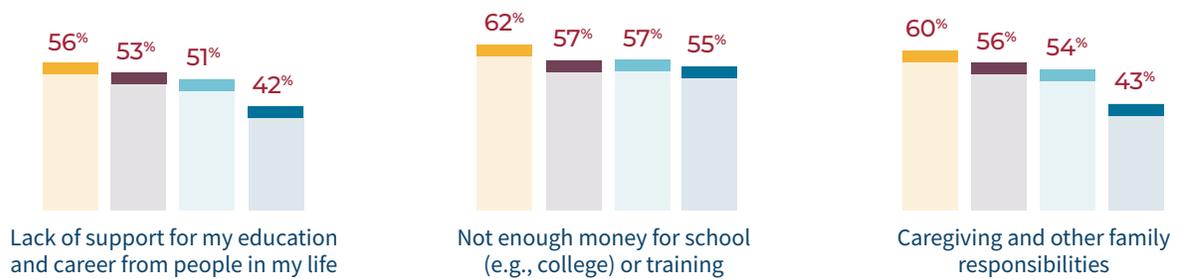
EMPLOYMENT



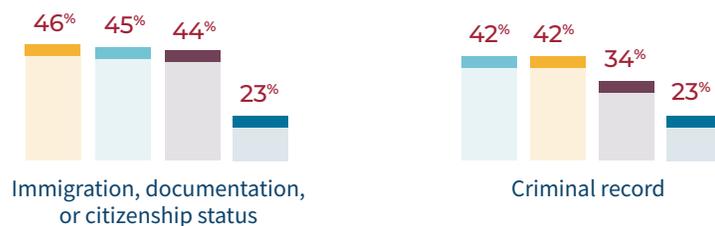
EDUCATION & EXPERIENCE



SUPPORT & RESPONSIBILITIES



STATUS LIMITATIONS



## FINDING TWO

**COVID-19 and the related economic recession have disrupted young people's work lives in myriad ways and prompted extraordinary levels of concern about the future.**

How has the COVID-19 pandemic shaped young people's work lives over the past year? While young people report a host of hurdles along their paths, COVID-19 ranks among the most imminent. The young people surveyed suggest that COVID has devastated their work lives along multiple fronts and evoked monumental concerns about the future; these adverse impacts and worries disproportionately affect young people of color and women.

**COVID-19 has adversely impacted young people's work situations, and the effects are disproportionately felt by young people of color.**

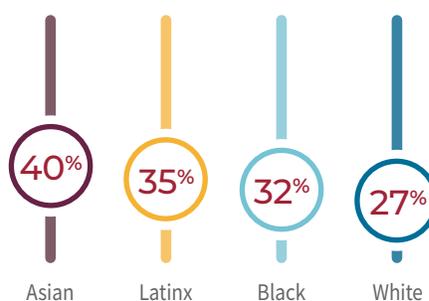
Among the many barriers confronting young people, more than two-thirds (67.8%) indicated that COVID-19 and the related economic recession have had some effect or a large effect on their work life (e.g., getting the job that they desire or achieving their career goals; see Figure 6).

Young people reported that COVID has adversely impacted their work lives on multiple fronts. Participants evaluated a list of 11 specific ways that COVID-19 may have impacted their work situation and were asked to indicate whether they have experienced each type of impact (see Figure 8). Participants indicated an average of three adverse COVID-related experiences on their work lives ( $m = 3.10$ ,  $sd = 2.60$ ).

Race significantly predicted the number of adverse COVID-related experiences impacting one's work situation. Specifically, Latinx and Black young people reported significantly higher adverse COVID-related experiences (33.9% and 27.8% higher, respectively) than white or Asian young people. There were no observed differences by gender.

Further, unemployed and marginally attached young people report that COVID-19 is fundamentally disrupting their ability to get connected or reconnected with work and opportunity. Among unemployed and marginally attached youth, three in four (76%) reported that COVID-19 has made their job search more difficult and nearly one in three (31%) reported having stopped their job search due to COVID-19.

**FIGURE 7: Percent of young people who stopped their job search due to COVID-19, disaggregated by race**  
*Numbers represent percentage of young people responding "yes" to "Have you stopped your job search due to the COVID-19 pandemic?"*



Examination of group differences indicated that the likelihood of stopping one's job search due to COVID-19 differed significantly by race/ethnicity. Asian and Latinx youth were significantly more likely (14.8% & 7.4%, respectively) to report stopping their job search compared to white youth. No gender differences were observed.

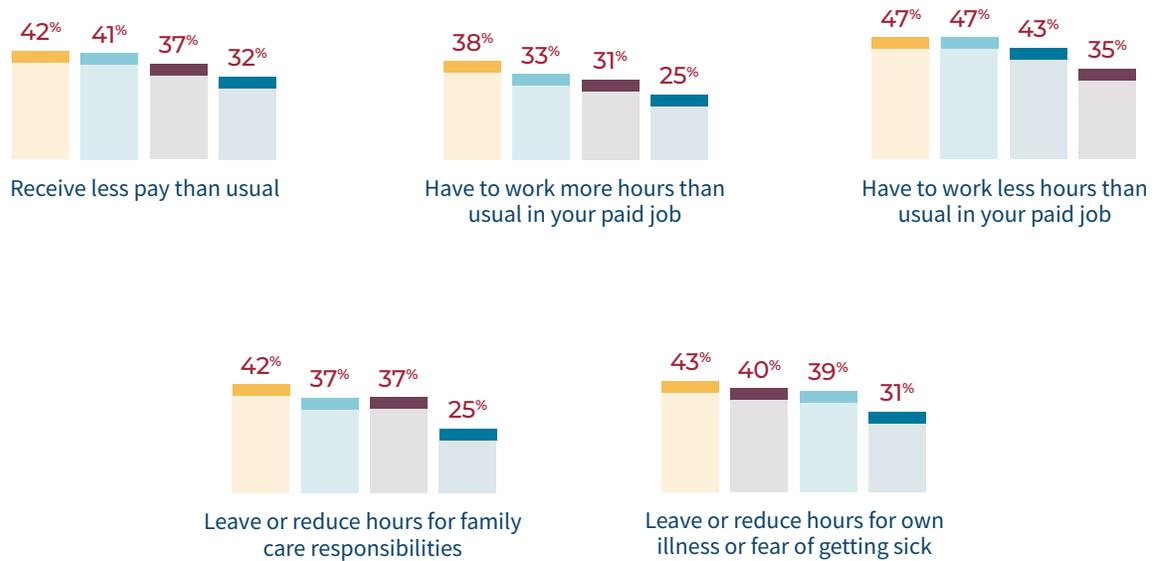
FIGURE 8: Specific impacts of COVID-19 on young people's work lives, disaggregated by race  
 Numbers represent the percentage of young people responding "yes" to the statement "As a direct result of COVID did you ..."

■ Asian ■ Black ■ Latinx ■ White

CHANGES TO JOB STATUS



CHANGES TO HOURS AND PAY



### Beyond its current impact, young people, particularly Latinx youth and women, are acutely concerned about the future effects of COVID-19.

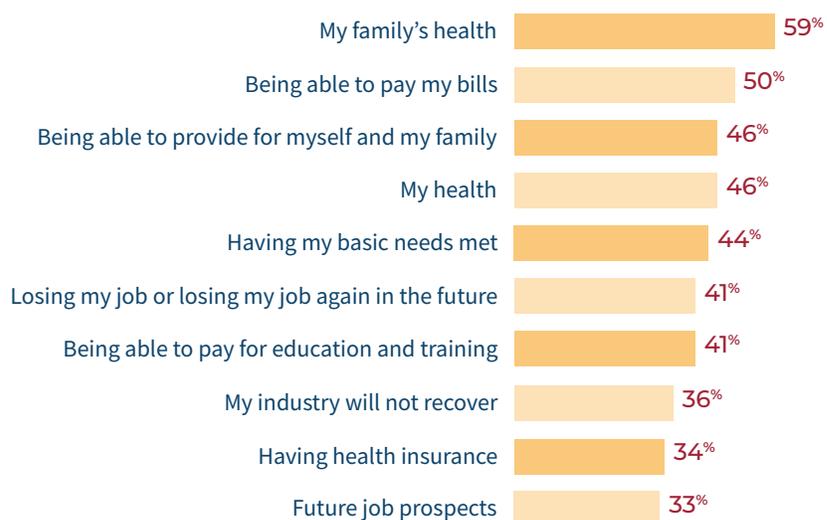
Young people are acutely concerned about the future effects of COVID-19 on their families' and their own physical health, economic wellbeing, and career prospects. Participants were asked to evaluate a list of specific potential effects of COVID-19 and assess the extent to which they are concerned about each.

More than 3 in 4 (75–92%) young people reported worrying at least a little about each type of concern. Further, among the 11 types of concerns presented, young people reported an average of 8.76 concerns (sd = 2.85) for which they worried at least *a little*.

Among unemployed and marginally attached youth, 76% reported that COVID-19 has made their job search more difficult and 31% reported having stopped their job search due to COVID-19.

FIGURE 9: Concerns about the future impacts of COVID-19

Numbers represent the percentage of young people reporting that they worry “a lot” or “a great amount” about each concern



Examination of group differences indicated that race and gender significantly predicted levels of concern about COVID-19's impact on physical health, economic wellbeing, and career prospects. Specifically, Latinx young people reported significantly higher numbers of concerns than white or Black young people. Further, women reported significantly higher concerns than men.

These findings are important, yet in many respects unsurprising. In Spring of 2020, amidst sweeping and historic job losses related to the COVID-19 pandemic, Black and Latinx workers, particularly women, were hit the hardest.<sup>28</sup> The downstream effects of such losses have also more acutely impacted families of color, on average, as the compounding influences of persistent income inequality, increased familial responsibilities, disparities in health and healthcare, and wealth disparities render many Black and Latinx workers more vulnerable during times of need.

Since April 2020, the economy has begun to recover, as evidenced by monthly employment gains across racial groups.<sup>29</sup> The data in the present study, however, challenge the assumption that a rising tide lifts all boats, as young workers in this study report vast differences by race and gender in their work-related experiences over the past year.

### FINDING THREE

## Young people encounter pervasive race- and gender-based discrimination within the world of work.

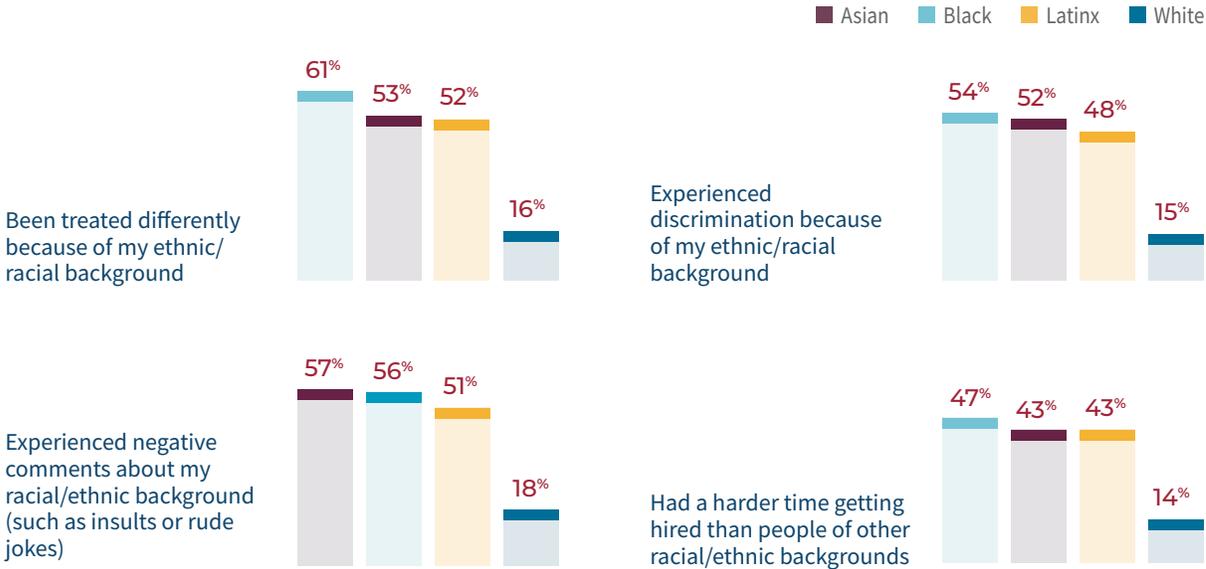
To what extent do young people report experiencing race- and gender-based discrimination as part of their work-related experiences? The adverse impacts of COVID-19 are not the only barriers disproportionately impacting young people of color in today’s society and economy. The young people who participated in the present study report widespread race and gender discrimination in today’s labor market and workplace.

### Racial discrimination is the norm for many young people of color in today’s labor market.

Young people of color across racial/ethnic groups report experiencing or anticipating<sup>30</sup> high levels of race-based discrimination within the world of work. Approximately half or more Asian, Black, and Latinx youth reported experiencing or anticipating discrimination in the workplace because of their race (e.g., “been treated differently”; “experienced negative comments”; “experienced discrimination”). Moreover, roughly 40% or more Asian, Black, and Latinx youth report having a harder time getting hired because of their race.

Compared to white youth, these differences are significant and substantive. Asian, Black, and Latinx youth were 1.9, 2.2, and 1.8 times more likely, respectively, to report experiencing racial discrimination compared to white youth, even after controlling for differences associated with other characteristics. There were no observed differences by gender.

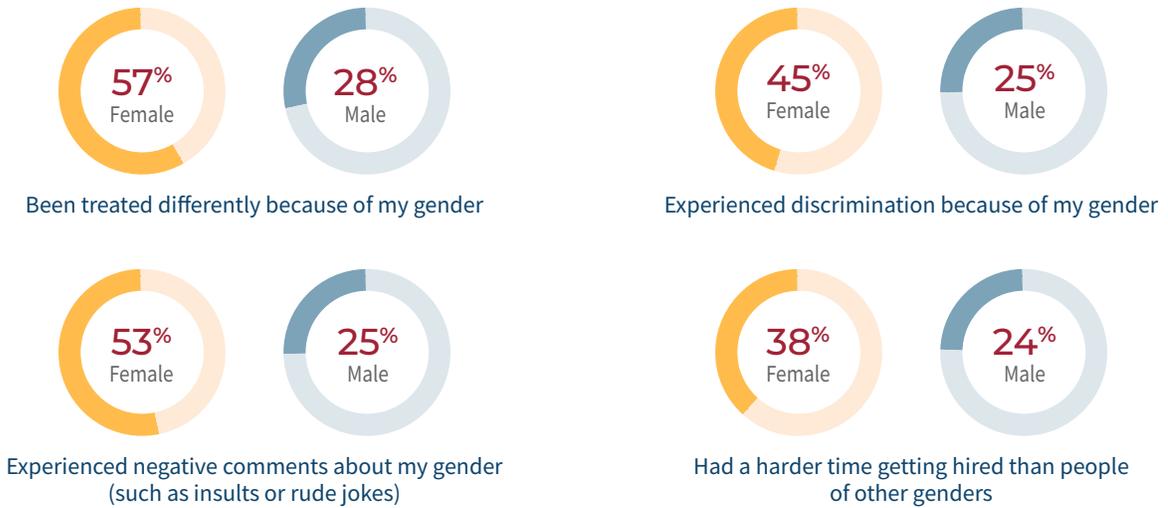
FIGURE 10: Experiences of racial discrimination in the world of work, disaggregated by race  
Numbers represent the percentage of young people responding “yes” to the statement “In my current or previous job(s), I have...”



### Gender-based discrimination remains persistent as well, particularly for young people of color.

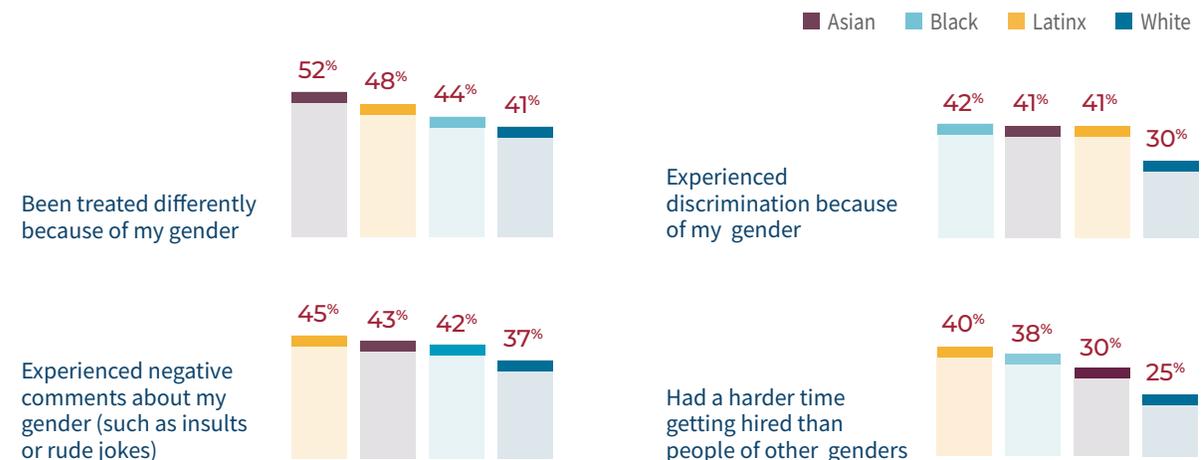
In addition to the pernicious race-based discrimination confronting young people of color, survey responses also highlight the persistent presence of gender-based discrimination. Approximately two thirds of women (66%) reported experiencing at least one item related to gender-based discrimination (see Figure 11). Compared to men, women were 77% more likely to report experienced or anticipated gender-based discrimination.

FIGURE 11: Experiences of gender discrimination in the world of work, disaggregated by gender  
 Numbers represent the percentage of young people responding “yes” to the statement “In my current or previous job(s), I have...”



Examination of group differences indicated that the likelihood of experiencing gender-based discrimination differed significantly by race/ethnicity. Specifically, both Black and Latinx youth were 22% more likely than white youth to report gender-based discrimination, highlighting important insights about the intersectionality of gender and race and the potentially compounding effects of discrimination for young people of color in the labor market.

FIGURE 12: Experiences of gender discrimination in the world of work, disaggregated by race  
 Numbers represent the percentage of young people responding “yes” to the statement “In my current or previous job(s), I have...”



While COVID-19 levied the biggest impacts against Black, Latinx, and women workers—in particular Black and Latinx women—young people’s reports of racial and gender discrimination emphasize the persistent discriminatory interpersonal, institutional, and structural conditions that have made young people of color and women more vulnerable both in times of crisis, and beyond. Discrimination is associated with adverse education, workforce, and developmental outcomes for young people, including increased likelihood of disconnection and disengagement from education and work.<sup>31</sup> As noted throughout this report, when young people are disconnected from these pathways to adulthood, it has long-term consequences for them, their families, and their communities.

### FINDING FOUR

The professional connections and supportive relationships that can help young people advance their work-related goals are out of reach for most youth.

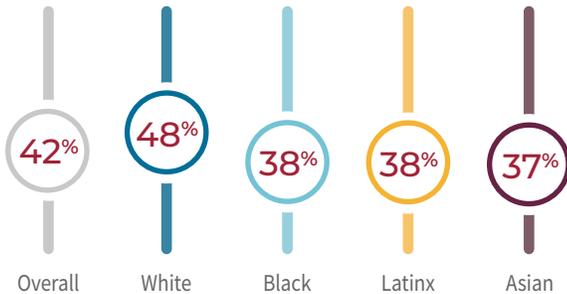
This report’s findings emphasize that young people are facing considerable challenges, constraints, and concerns. Social connections and supports can help mitigate these barriers, but many young people do not have ready access to these resources.<sup>32</sup>

#### Young people are struggling to identify professional connections that can help them find a job.

Fewer than half of young people (42%) reported having an available network of professional connections that can help them find a job. Further, this sense of connection is not experienced equally by all young people. Young people of color, and those that are unemployed or marginally attached to the labor market, have limited access to relationships that can help them attain employment and their work-related goals.

FIGURE 13: Percent of young people reporting having a network of professional connections, disaggregated by race

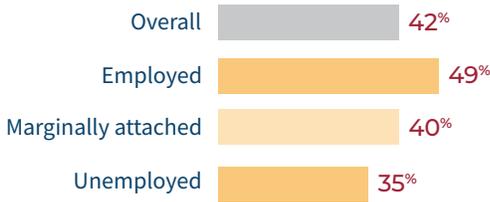
Numbers represent percentage of young people reporting they “agree” or “strongly agree” that they have an available network of personal or professional connections that can help them find a job



Levels of connection differed significantly by race/ethnicity. Specifically, Black and Latinx young people were 9.3% and 8.8% less likely than white young people to report having an available network of connections that can help them find a job. No differences were observed by gender.

FIGURE 14: Percent of young people reporting having a network of professional connections, disaggregated by employment status

Numbers represent percentage of young people reporting they “agree” or “strongly agree” that they have an available network of personal or professional connections that can help them find a job



Employed young people indicated significantly higher levels of connection than their unemployed or marginally attached peers. Specifically, unemployed youth and marginally attached youth were 11.2% and 5.6% less likely, respectively, to report having a large network of connections that can help them find work.

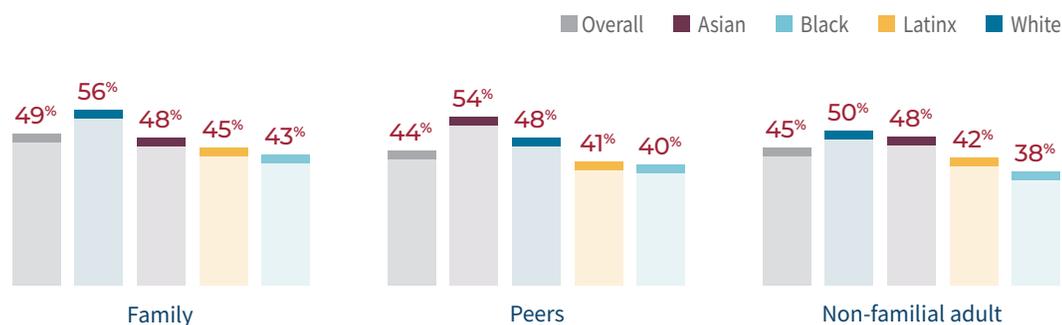
### Social support for young people's broader personal and professional needs is also scarce, particularly for young people of color, women, and those who are unemployed or marginally attached to the labor market.

Extant literature, including our recent report *Finding a Way Forward*, indicates that in addition to connections that can help with employment, young people rely on their relationships for various forms of social support that help manage personal *and* professional challenges in their lives.<sup>33</sup> The participants surveyed in the present study were asked about the personal (e.g., “My family really tries to help me”) and professional (e.g., “My family helps me find information about college or jobs”) supports they receive from family, friends, and non-familial caring adults (e.g., teachers, mentors, coaches).

Overall, the young people surveyed reported limited levels of social support from each of these sources; just 49% of young people reported receiving support from family, 44% reported receiving support from friends, and 45% reported receiving support from non-familial caring adults. Moreover, while support was limited across the full sample, important group differences emerged suggesting that social support is not experienced equally by all young people.

**RACE.** Reported levels of social support differed significantly by race/ethnicity. On average, Black, Latinx, and Asian young people were significantly less likely (12.4%, 11.4%, and 9.5%, respectively) than white young people to report family support for their professional and personal needs. Black and Latinx youth were significantly less likely (5.6% and 5.3% less likely, respectively) than white young people to report peer support. Finally, with respect to non-familial caring adults, Black young people were significantly less likely (11.8% and 6.2% less likely, respectively) than white and Latinx young people to report support from a non-familial caring adult.

FIGURE 15: Percent of young people experiencing support across sources, disaggregated by race  
Numbers represent the percentage of young people reporting “agree” or “strongly agree” that they receive social and career support from each source



**GENDER.** Young men and women were equally likely to experience support from family or non-familial caring adults but women were significantly less likely (4.3%) to report peer support compared to men.

**EMPLOYMENT STATUS.** Though no significant differences were observed in levels of support from family or peers, employed young people were significantly more likely than unemployed and marginally attached peers (4.7% and 5.8% more, respectively) to report support from a non-familial caring adult.

Relationships and social support are associated with positive outcomes related to career development,<sup>34</sup> employment and training,<sup>35</sup> and long-term indicators such as persistence, earnings, and sustained employment.<sup>36</sup> Approximately half of U.S. workers attain employment through personal or professional connections, offering stark advantages for young people whose relationships can broker access to new networks, resources, and opportunities.<sup>37</sup>

Importantly, disparities in perceived connections and supports do not indicate race- or gender-based differences in the absolute levels of care, competence, or capital offered to young people within their relationships, families, and communities. All families and communities offer a diverse profile of assets, resources, and experiences. Disparities in perceptions of career-relevant connections and supports may, therefore, reflect differences in the degree to which diverse forms of social, educational, and economic capital (e.g., connections, knowledge, resources) are aligned with, valued within, and rewarded by the white dominant norms, practices, and institutions of the formal labor market.<sup>38</sup>

## FINDING FIVE

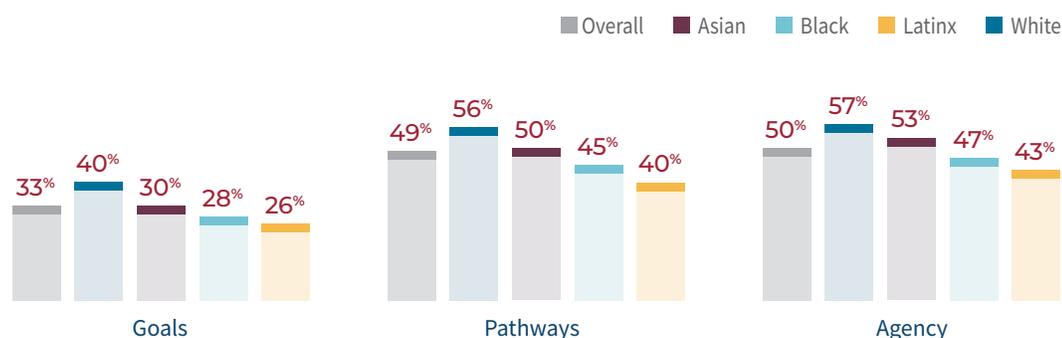
### Young people's hope about their future work lives is in jeopardy.

As young people navigate a volatile labor market imbued with the trauma, tension, and turmoil imposed by the pandemic and the racial reckoning of the past year, what sense of hope do young people in America hold for their futures? The answer: not much, but perhaps more than might be expected given the constraints that young people are up against.

Literature and theory suggest that work hope comprises the extent to which an individual holds a positive outlook on future work-related goals, the perceived pathways available to meet those goals, and one's sense of agency to navigate the world of work in pursuit of those ambitions.<sup>39</sup>

Overall, just one quarter (26%) of young people reported holding hopeful goals, and about half reported envisioning pathways to success (49%) and feeling a sense of agency to pursue their goals (50%). Moreover, this sense of hope is not experienced equally by all young people. Optimism about what's to come appears lowest among Black and Latinx youth, men, and employed youth.

FIGURE 16: Percent of young people indicating hope about their future work lives, disaggregated by race  
Numbers represent the percentage of young people indicating they “agree” or “strongly agree” on average with items describing different dimensions of work hope



**RACE.** Levels of hope differed significantly by race/ethnicity, even after controlling for differences associated with other characteristics. Overall, white and Asian youth were significantly more likely than their Black and Latinx peers to indicate a sense of hope about their work futures.

- Goals.** Latinx and Black young people were 8.7% and 8.5% less likely, respectively, to report having hope about their work goals compared to white peers. Further, Latinx and Black young people were 12.9% and 12.7% less likely, respectively, to indicate a sense of hope toward their goals than Asian young people. There were no differences between white and Asian young people.
- Pathways.** On average, Black and Latinx young people were 10.1% and 13.7% less likely than white peers to indicate a sense of hope about the pathways available to achieve their goals. Further, Latinx young people were 11.3% less likely than their Asian peers to report hope about the pathways to reaching their goals.
- Agency.** Finally, Black and Latinx young people were significantly less likely (11.1% and 14.0% less likely, respectively) than white young people to report feeling a sense of agency to pursue their work-related ambitions. Further, Latinx young people were 10.9% less likely than Asian young people to indicate a sense of agency.

**GENDER.** Levels of hope differed significantly by gender, even after controlling for differences associated with other characteristics. On average, women reported similar levels of hopeful goals compared to men, yet significantly higher levels of hope about the pathways available (7.4%) and their sense of agency to pursue their ambitions (7.1%).

**EMPLOYMENT STATUS.** Levels of hope differed significantly by employment status as well. Overall, employed youth were significantly less likely than their unemployed peers to hold a sense of hope about their goals (4.5% less likely), the pathways available (5.8% less likely), and their sense of agency to pursue their work ambitions (5.9% less likely). Employed young people were also 5.6% less likely than marginally attached young people to have hope about their own agency to pursue their work ambitions.

In summary, just half of all young people surveyed hold hope about their futures. The presence of hope among young people in the labor market is crucial as research suggests that hope is associated with positive career development, self-efficacy and -esteem, work performance, and employee wellbeing.<sup>40</sup>

These data present a critical inflection point for society. On one hand, 1 in 2 young people are not hopeful about their future work lives, illustrating a collective discouragement of our nation's youth and the unfulfilled promise of America as a land of opportunity. On the other hand, approximately 1 in 2 youth maintain a sense of hope in spite of the enormous barriers confronting young people in today's labor market—showcasing an optimism and resilience that we as a nation cannot let go unrealized. These findings, particularly the differences across groups, illustrate the complexity of young people's experiences across the labor force and raise additional questions about the confluence of factors that shape one's sense of hope for the future. What is clear, however, is the urgent collective imperative to maintain and restore the hope of this generation of young people in the workforce.

# A CALL TO ACTION: POLICIES, PROGRAMS, AND POSSIBILITIES

The young people surveyed for this study provide a glimpse into the devastating impact the pandemic has had on their efforts to access work, gain a foothold on a career path, and fulfill both personal and professional goals. What's more, the findings point us once again toward the ways that systemic racism, sexism, and other intersectional barriers constrain young people's hopes.

What is also important to note is that employers, youth-serving professionals, policymakers, and caring adults in communities can all play a part in creating a more hopeful future. Making young people a priority in the nation's ongoing recovery is an important first step. Overall, the 2021 [American Rescue Plan](#) represents an enormous recovery effort, including provisions for working parents, lower-income workers, and college-age youth.<sup>c</sup> Therefore, the coming year offers historic opportunities to advance comprehensive, multi-generational employment strategies that center young people as well as the adults and communities that support them.

The following recommendations offer specific suggestions for action that can address long-standing systemic issues, mitigate the disparities that have widened over the last year, and seize the moment of change that the American Rescue Plan offers.

## **1** Leverage existing infrastructure to engage young people in high-quality programs and practices.

Research shows that young people achieve specific gains when they participate in pathways programs that combine support for education, training and employment.<sup>d</sup> Many public-private partnerships and locally-managed public-sector programs that focus on youth employment already exist, and several are expanding as a result of new investments.<sup>e</sup> Here are three ways elected officials, employers, and workforce development practitioners can maximize the benefit of existing resources for young people who urgently need to get reconnected to the workforce.

- Summer jobs are one way that young people gain early work experience. Multiple public and private funding streams support summer youth employment programs (SYEP), a proven way to offer career development to young people from families with low income. See the “[learn more](#)” box for information and inspiration.
- Encourage young people to apply to national service programs supported by [AmeriCorps](#), which offer professional development, modest compensation, post-service hiring preference within a network of employers, and money to enroll in continuing education or repay student loans after a service member's term is complete. Similarly, young people can enter other federally-supported programs like [JobCorps](#) and [Youth Build](#) across the country, or nonprofit programs like [YearUp](#) and [Genesys Works](#) in specific locations.
- [Registered Apprenticeship Programs](#) offer supported education and employment pathways to living-wage jobs in industries like construction, health care, hospitality, and information technology. Participating employers have access to a network of technical assistance providers, may be eligible for tax credits, and can offer

C These include making child care more affordable, expanding eligibility for the Earned Income Tax Credit to young workers ages 19-24 who are not full-time students, and easing access for some college students to federal food assistance. See, e.g., [www.childrendefense.org/blog/american-rescue-plan-act/](http://www.childrendefense.org/blog/american-rescue-plan-act/); [frac.org/blog/new-exemptions-will-help-narrow-the-snap-gap-for-college-students-during-the-pandemic/](http://frac.org/blog/new-exemptions-will-help-narrow-the-snap-gap-for-college-students-during-the-pandemic/); and [www.americanactionforum.org/insight/the-american-rescue-plans-assistance-for-children-elderly-and-low-income-families/#ixzz6qRr8FgX](http://www.americanactionforum.org/insight/the-american-rescue-plans-assistance-for-children-elderly-and-low-income-families/#ixzz6qRr8FgX)

D See, e.g. [National Service: Providing Pathways to Employment](#); [Pathways After Service Report: Education and Career Outcomes for Service Year Alumni](#); [Laying a Foundation: Four-Year Results from a National YouthBuild Evaluation](#); and this [PACE evaluation of the Year Up program](#).

E See, e.g. the recent [billion-dollar boost](#) to AmeriCorps national service programs.

graduates a nationally-recognized credential. A new \$31M investment in technical assistance centers includes an emphasis on diversity and inclusion.

## learn more

### High-Quality Supported Pathways

- The Aspen Institute created, tested, and revised a [toolkit](#) in 2020 that offers strategies for program leaders, policymakers, employers, and others interested in planning for summer youth employment in 2021 and beyond. Cities are already announcing creative, youth-centered approaches, including Washington, DC's decision to utilize a portion of their summer employment funds for a [blended "earn and learn" program](#).
- JFF's [Framework for High Quality Pre-apprenticeship Programs](#) outlines key characteristics for practitioners, programs, and employers to design equitable experiences that can prepare young people to enter into registered apprenticeships and employment.

**2 Dismantle workplace policies, practices, and systems that have adverse impacts on women and people of color.** This study’s findings emphasize the need for urgent attention to an anti-racist, intersectional approach to all facets of young people’s relationship to work. This includes expanding and redesigning education and training pathways; rethinking and refining recruiting and hiring strategies; and reconstructing workplace culture, policy, and practice to promote a sense of belonging at work and close long-standing gaps in opportunity and advancement. How employers recruit, hire, and retain a diverse workforce is one starting point. Here are actionable policies and practices that employers can adopt to widen access for job-seekers.

- Specific educational requirements, like “must have a bachelor’s degree,” can create an unnecessary and discriminatory barrier for candidates who are otherwise well-qualified to do a particular job.<sup>41</sup> The federal government [limits the use of degree requirements in hiring practices](#); other employers can follow their lead.
- Similarly, asking about salary history during the recruitment and hiring process [reinforces pay inequity](#) for women, people of color, and anyone with a caregiving or unemployment gap in their work history. About two dozen states have instituted a ban on the practice; individual employers can too.
- Employers can diversify their workforce by utilizing the [Work Opportunity Tax Credit](#), which creates incentives to hire people who have faced significant barriers to employment. Summer youth employees, recipients of federal food assistance (SNAP), and people living in designated high-poverty neighborhoods are all among the “targeted groups” for this program.

## learn more

### Inclusive and Equitable Workplaces

- The Meyer Foundation’s racial equity toolkit includes resources curated from multiple sources in a number of categories, including Hiring and Employment Practices. See, for example, this guide to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in [Recruitment, Hiring, and Retention](#).
- Take a look at this report from Bentley University and YW Boston on [Intersectionality in the Workplace: Broadening the Lens of Inclusion](#) for insights into how to make work more inclusive and equitable for women, people of color, and women of color.
- [Dismantling Racism Works](#) (dRworks) offers rich, web-based resources for organizations interested in adopting an anti-racist frame and examining how white supremacy culture permeates the ways that people work together. For a summary of characteristics that show up in organizations, and suggested “antidotes,” [see this PDF](#) (see also Okun & Jones, 2000).

**3 Enrich young people’s network of relationships.** To participate fully in our nation’s recovery, young people need to build not just human capital, but social capital. This study’s findings are a starting point for asking young people what they need in terms of workforce engagement. Educators, family members, faith leaders, youth-serving professionals, and employers can help young people build connections to the world of work that are centered on a young person’s goals and ambitions so that they have ready access to webs of supportive relationships that are tailored to their career needs.<sup>42</sup> Here are three ways that caring adults can get started.

- Recognize that there is no “one size fits all.” [Ask each young person](#) what they need right now. For some, work is a crucial economic lifeline for themselves and their families; others may be seeking social connection through work in a time of great isolation or want the opportunity to make a social impact.
- Free downloadable tools from the [Search Institute](#) can help family members and youth-serving professionals start and continue conversations with young people about their current concerns and their hopes for the future.
- Youth-supporting adults can help young people navigate Career Information Systems and tools as part of their career development process, like O-NET’s [My Next Move](#), managed by the federal government; or state-level resources such as [MassHire CIS](#).

Given the pandemic’s widespread cross-generational impact, implementing “two-generation” approaches whenever possible will benefit youth and families together and build adult capacity to support young people.

## learn more

### Relationships that Support Youth Employment

- For youth-centered and programmatic perspectives on the importance of building relationships that support young people’s workforce journeys, take a look at previous Center for Promise publications [Finding a Way Forward](#), [Turning Points](#), and [Relationships Come First](#).
- A new resource from [The Clayton Christensen Institute](#) offers educators and other youth-serving professionals a framework and customizable planning worksheets focused on helping students develop the supportive networks they need to thrive as they make transitions to work and other post-secondary efforts.
- [Youth Investment in Rural Areas](#), developed in partnership with a group of Texas Workforce Development Boards, is one in a series of training guides from [School and Main Institute](#). It includes a rich set of tools for place-based resource mapping and workforce development planning.

**4 Measure success beyond the numbers.** Creating a more hopeful future means more than a strong employment rate or quarterly jobs report; it means reimagining the world of work that young people step into. If we are to fulfill our promise to young people, we must think beyond traditional indicators of employment and workforce success. In this study, even employed young people reported low levels of hope about reaching their goals. Alleviating the emotional and financial strain young people are carrying now requires actions like:

- Raising the minimum wage and overhauling the federal poverty guidelines—two outdated measures that keep lower-income working people in poverty even when they are working full-time.
- Prioritizing decent and meaningful work opportunities for young people that pay fair wages, offer safe and dignified work conditions, and provide not just a job, but a foothold to a sustainable and purposeful career.<sup>43</sup>
- Broadening our collective definitions of “work” and “careers” beyond formal market occupations to understand and support the range of ways that work manifests (e.g., caregiving for children and elders, pro bono and volunteer efforts, etc.) and influences individuals’ lives and experiences.<sup>44</sup>

## learn more

### Success Indicators

- Watch this one-hour Aspen Institute webinar, [Job Quality in Practice](#), for actionable tips on why job quality matters and how to assess it with attention to race, gender, and place.
- Decent Jobs for Youth offers a range of [resources to support awareness](#) and action toward creating dignified work opportunities for youth across the globe and within the U.S.
- Read this report by Brookings and Child Trends on [Pathways to High-Quality Jobs for Young Adults](#), including key factors that shape access to high-quality employment experiences.

# CONCLUSION

The opportunity to find a place in the world of work is a promise our nation makes to its young people. Realizing this promise offers crucial benefits to individuals, their families, and society at large; yet it remains out of reach for many adolescents as they grow toward adulthood. Countering the effects that COVID-19 and centuries of discrimination has had on many young people's entry to and advancement in the world of work requires concerted collective action.

Research overwhelmingly demonstrates that early and consistent connections to employment yield lifetime benefits, yet American spending on workforce development programs and infrastructure is just one-fifth of what nations with comparable economies invest.<sup>45</sup> Guidance at the federal level, resources allocated to state agencies and community partners, and money flowing directly to families can support immediate and long-term efforts to engage young people in the workforce. New investments in the youth workforce can boost youth employment efforts already underway across sectors and broker the possibility of more wholly fulfilling the promise of opportunity for young people today and tomorrow.

The insights garnered from this study underscore that there is more to learn from young people about the factors that shape their experiences in the world of work. As the nation responds to and recovers from the multiple crises of the last year—compromising not only public health but economic, environmental, and emotional wellbeing—decision makers must deeply consider young people's perspectives. Strategies to promote equitable, transformative, and sustainable change must be grounded in the experiences of the young workers and job seekers themselves, particularly those confronted with the gravest barriers to opportunity. Caring adults, decision makers, and communities seeking to nurture hope among our nation's youth can start by embracing young people as partners who can lead the way in designing the future of work for this generation and those to come.

**Early and consistent connections to employment yield lifetime benefits, yet American spending on workforce development programs and infrastructure is just one-fifth of what nations with comparable economies invest.**

# APPENDIX

## Method & Analysis

### Design

This brief describes selected data from a nationally representative survey of 3,530 young people, aged 16-24, that was conducted as part of the YES Project at America's Promise Alliance. The study employed a correlational, cross-sectional, survey designed by the team at the Center for Promise and America's Promise Alliance. The study was designed to assess young people's career and work-related experiences amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, related economic recession, and the most recent events and efforts in our nation's struggle toward racial justice.

### Procedure

A web-based survey was designed by the authors using Qualtrics and included the measures described below. To ensure face validity of the items, the survey was audited by a research faculty member, senior research scientist, several doctoral research assistants, and staff members at the Center for Promise at Boston University, as well as several staff from America's Promise Alliance.

After obtaining approval from the Boston University Institutional Review Board, the survey was administered online by Qualtrics, an online survey platform, over a three-week period from late January mid February 2021. Participants were not directly compensated for participation. For any young person under 18, consent was obtained via parental consent forms.

### Sample

The sampling design sought to recruit a representative sample of the population of young people within the U.S. labor force, including both employed and unemployed young people, as well as those who maintain more limited attachment to the labor market. Young people were eligible to complete the survey if they were between the ages of 16-24 and indicated falling within one of three labor market participation statuses as defined and designated by federal labor market policy (BLS, 2014):

- **Employed:** Individuals that indicate working or holding a job for pay at the time of the survey administration (includes part- and full-time).
- **Unemployed:** Individuals that are not currently employed but are available to work and have actively searched for work over the previous four-week period.
- **Marginally attached:** Individuals that are not currently employed nor actively searching for work (over the previous four-week period), but maintain some level of labor force attachment evidenced by having searched for work within the past 12 months (or since the last date of employment if within the previous 12 months).

A non-probability, representative sampling strategy was used to enhance accurate approximation of the U.S. population distributions within each of the three subsamples. Representative sampling is a strategy used to enhance external validity and improve confidence in the ability to generalize findings and estimates from the sample to the broader population of youth across the United States (Laursen, Little, & Card, 2011). For the current study, nationally representative sampling parameters were established along dimensions of age, gender, ethnicity, race, geographic

region, enrollment status, and education level. Parameter estimates were referenced according to the most recently available seasonally adjusted annual and/or monthly federal labor market statistics published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The final sample included 3,530 young people between the ages of 16 and 24. The demographics for the final sample are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Sample Demographics

	EMPLOYED	UNEMPLOYED	MARGINALLY ATTACHED	TOTAL
<b>CHARACTERISTIC</b>	1,544 (43.7%)	1,467 (41.6%)	519 (14.7%)	3,530
<b>AGE</b>				
16-17 Years	90 (5.8%)	170 (11.6%)	51 (9.8%)	311 (8.8%)
18-19 Years	326 (21%)	401 (27.3%)	148 (29%)	875 (24.8%)
20-24 Years	1,128 (73%)	896 (61.1%)	320 (62%)	2,344 (66.4)
<b>GENDER</b>				
Female	727 (47%)	697 (48%)	234 (45%)	1658 (47.0)
Male	739 (48%)	711 (48%)	258 (50%)	1708 (48.4)
Non-Binary	78 (5.1%)	59 (4.0%)	27 (5.2%)	164 (4.6)
<b>RACE</b>				
Asian	74 (4.8%)	73 (5.0%)	29 (5.6%)	176 (5.0)
Black	210 (14%)	294 (20%)	80 (15%)	584 (16.5)
Hispanic/Latinx	394 (26%)	421 (29%)	149 (29%)	964 (27.3)
Other	107 (6.9%)	113 (7.7%)	35 (6.7%)	255 (7.2)
White	759 (49%)	566 (39%)	226 (44%)	1551 (43.9)
<b>ENROLLMENT STATUS</b>				
Enrolled	681 (44%)	682 (46%)	233 (45%)	1596 (45.2)
Not Enrolled	863 (56%)	785 (54%)	286 (55%)	1934 (54.8)
<b>EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT</b>				
Bachelors +	316 (20%)	144 (9.8%)	41 (7.9%)	501 (14.2)
HS Diploma or Equivalent	881 (57%)	913 (62%)	339 (65%)	2133 (60.4)
Less than HS	255 (17%)	344 (23%)	115 (22%)	714 (20.2)
Some College	92 (6.0%)	66 (4.5%)	24 (4.6%)	182 (5.2)
<b>REGION</b>				
Midwest	339 (22%)	261 (18%)	111 (22%)	711 (20.1)
Northeast	269 (18%)	253 (17%)	94 (18%)	616 (17.5)
South	618 (40%)	622 (43%)	201 (39%)	1441 (40.8)
West	308 (20%)	320 (22%)	110 (21%)	738 (20.9)

## Measures

The following section details the survey items and measures that were included in this brief.

**Demographic Covariates.** Demographic information, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, employment status, enrollment status, participant education level, and geographic region are described above.

**Financial Deprivation.** Financial deprivation was measured using five items from the Financial Deprivation Scale (Brief, Konovsky, Goodwin, & Link, 1995), an 8-item measure assessing levels of perceived financial and/or economic strain. To reduce survey burden on youth, the authors selected five items total, prioritizing items with strong factor loadings and representing theoretical coverage within the original scale (original scale items 3, 7, 8 omitted). Sample items include: “I am barely surviving financially,” “I do not have enough money for the bare essentials,” and “I have a difficult time making ends meet.” Participants responded to items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree* with higher scores indicating greater levels of financial deprivation. Brief and colleagues (1995) found strong internal consistency for the total scale ( $\alpha = .84$ ). In the present study, the Cronbach’s alpha was strong for the total scale ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

**Wellbeing.** Wellbeing was measured using the single-item Self-Rated Mental Health Question (SRMHQ; Maguire, Reay, & Raphael, 2016), assessing one’s overall psychological and emotional health. Participants were presented with the following question: “How would you describe your mental health, in general?” and asked to indicate their overall level of psychological functioning on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *Poor* to 5 = *Excellent*, with higher scores indicating higher levels of psychological and emotional wellbeing.

**Stress.** Stress was measured using a single item assessing the frequency by which one experiences psychological stress (Elo, Leppanen, & Jahkola, 2003). Participants were presented with the following prompt “Stress means a state in which a person feels tense, restless, nervous or anxious or is unable to sleep at night because their mind is troubled” and asked to indicate “How often do you feel this kind of stress these days?” Items were answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *Never* to 5 = *Always*, with higher scores indicating higher levels of stress.

**Career Barriers.** Career barriers were measured using a single item adapted from the Perceived Barriers Scale (PBS; McWhirter, 1997), assessing General Perceptions of Barriers related to careers and work. Participants were asked to indicate whether they agree with the following item ““In general, do you think that there are many barriers that will make it difficult for you to achieve your career goals?” Items were answered on a dichotomous response scale ranging from 0 = *No* to 1 = *Yes* indicating one’s general perception of career barriers. Barriers were further assessed using an adapted version of the Perceived Barriers Scale (PBS; Howell, Frese, Sollie, 1977, 1984), which assesses the perceived impact of a range of specific barriers impeding the achievement of one’s career goals. Presentation of the items begins with a general prompt, which asks participants to assess the following, “How much effect do you think each of the following things have had in keeping you from getting the job you desire or achieving your career goals?” with respect to a series of 11 items representing possible career barriers. Sample items include, ‘shortage of good jobs,’ “Not enough money for school,” and “Caregiving and other family responsibilities.” Items were answered on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *No effect* to 4 = *A large effect*. Higher scores indicate higher levels of barriers. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was (.88).

**Impact of COVID on Work.** The Impact of COVID on Work was measured using 11 items adapted from the International Labor Organization’s Technical Note, COVID-19: Guidance for Labour Statistics Data Collection, which provides guidance on the administration of rapid surveys to understand the impact of COVID on individuals and

families (ILO, 2020). The technical note includes a series of 8 items assessing the various impacts of COVID-19 on person-level work situations (ILO, 2020, Strategy II: Module person-level changes in working situation, item WSI\_2). Presentation of the items begins with a general prompt, ‘since the COVID outbreak, did you:’ Subsequent sample items include, ‘Lose your paid job’ and ‘Have to work less hours than usual.’ In the present study, several additional items were developed and included by the authors to capture additional experiences relevant to young people’s work situations (e.g., ‘Have a job offer revoked’). Participants were asked to indicate whether they have experienced each type of impact (e.g., 0 = *No*, 1 = *Yes*) and scores were summed to calculate the total number of negative effects experienced with higher scores indicating more types of adverse effects imposed by COVID.

**COVID-19 Concerns.** In addition to the observed impact of COVID-19 on individuals’ work situations, levels of COVID-19-related Concerns were measured using 10 items developed by the authors to assess participants’ worries about the economic, health, and career-related impacts of COVID-19. Presentation of the items begins with a general prompt, ‘since the COVID outbreak, how much do you worry about:’ Subsequent sample items include ‘Future job prospects’; ‘Having my basic needs met’; and ‘My health.’ Items were answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *Not at all* to 5 = *A great deal*, with higher scores indicating higher levels of worry about the effects COVID-19. Internal consistency estimates for the COVID-19 Concerns scale was strong ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

**Race-based Discrimination.** Race-based discrimination was measured using four items from the Ethnic Discrimination subscale from the Perceived Barriers Scale (PBS; McWhirter, 1997), a measure assessing a range of perceived educational and career barriers. The Ethnic Discrimination subscale is composed of four items assessing the level of anticipated career barriers one expects to encounter based on their racial-ethnic identity. Presentation of the items begins with a general prompt, ‘In my future job, I will probably,’ followed by sample items such as: ‘Be treated differently because of my ethnic/racial background’ and ‘Have a harder time getting hired than people of other racial/ethnic backgrounds.’ Items were adapted to assess experienced, rather than anticipated discrimination, for individuals who currently or had previously held employment. Participants were prompted to ‘Please indicate whether you have had each of the following experiences in your current or prior job(s)’ and sample items included ‘Been treated differently because of my ethnic/racial background’ and ‘Had a harder time getting hired than people of other racial/ethnic backgrounds.’ Participants responded to items on a dichotomous response scale ranging from 0 = *No* to 1 = *Yes*, with affirmative answers indicating that participants had experienced or anticipate experiencing race-based discrimination in their work or career. McWhirter (1997) found strong internal consistency estimates for the Ethnic Discrimination subscale ( $\alpha = .89$ ). In the present study, the Cronbach’s alpha was good for the Ethnic Discrimination ( $\alpha = .84$ ) subscale was good.

**Gender-based Discrimination.** Gender-based discrimination was measured using the Sex Discrimination subscale from the Perceived Barriers Scale (PBS; McWhirter, 1997), a measure assessing a range of perceived educational and career barriers. The Sex Discrimination subscale is composed of 4 items assessing the level of anticipated career barriers one expects to encounter based on their gender-identity. Presentation of the items begins with a general prompt, ‘In my future job, I will probably,’ followed by sample items such as: ‘Be treated differently because of my gender’ and ‘Have a harder time getting hired than people of other genders.’ Items were adapted to assess experienced, rather than anticipated discrimination, for individuals who currently or had previously held employment. Participants were prompted to ‘Please indicate whether you have had each of the following experiences in your current or prior job(s)’ and sample items included ‘Been treated differently because of my gender’ and ‘Had a harder time getting hired than people of other genders.’ Participants responded to items on a dichotomous response scale ranging from 0 = *No* to 1 = *Yes*, with affirmative answers indicating that participants

had experienced or anticipate experiencing gender-based discrimination in their work or career. McWhirter (1997) found strong internal consistency estimates for the Sex Discrimination subscale ( $\alpha = .86$ ). In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha was good for the Sex Discrimination ( $\alpha = .84$ ) subscale was good.

**Connections.** Connections were measured using the three items from the Network Size subscale of the Social Network Characteristics scale (Van Hoya, van Hooft, & Lievens, 2009), a measure assessing the structure, composition, and relevance of one's social network to job seeking and career development efforts. The Network Size subscale is composed of 4 items assessing the availability and size of one's social network related to job seeking and career development. To reduce survey burden on youth participants, one item was omitted in the present study (item 3, "I know few people who might help me search for employment") on the basis of redundancy and readability (e.g., inverse identical to item 1, reverse-coded). Sample items include: "I know a lot of people who might help me find a job" and "I have connections I can talk to to help me find a job". Participants responded to items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree* with higher scores indicating greater levels of connection. Van Hoya and colleagues (2009) found strong internal consistency estimates for the Network Size ( $\alpha = .85$ ) subscale. In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha for the Network Size subscale was strong ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

**Social Support.** Social Support was measured using 12 items adapted from two measures, the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988) and the Contextual Support for Post Secondary Plans Scale (CSPSPS; Ali, Martens, Button, & Larma, 2011), which assess perceived levels and sources of social support for fulfilling domain-general (i.e., any areas of one's life) and domain-specific (e.g., work and careers) needs, respectively. The MSPSS is composed of 12 items comprising three subscales measuring various sources of perceived social support: Family, Friends, and a Significant Other (i.e., 'special person'). The CSPSPS is composed of more than 200 items comprising six subscales measuring various sources (mother, father, sibling, peers, school personnel, and community) of perceived support specific to work and career planning. To reduce survey burden on participants, the authors adapted 4 items (two MSPSS items, two CSPSPS items) to assess perceived support from each three sources (12 items total): Family, Friends, and Non-Familial Caring Adults. In selecting items from each measure, the authors prioritized items with strong factor loadings and representing theoretical coverage (e.g., domain-general and domain-specific supports). The sources reflect the structure outlined within the MSPSS, however, "significant other" was replaced with "Non-familial Caring Adult" to acknowledge caring adults from a range of contexts (e.g., school teacher, coach, mentor). Sample items include: "I can count on my [friends/family/an adult outside my family] when things go wrong" and "I can talk with my [friends/family/an adult outside my family] about my future career plans." Participants responded to items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree* with higher scores indicating greater levels of hope. Zimet and colleagues (1988) found internal consistency estimates ranging from good to excellent for the MSPSS total scale ( $\alpha = .88$ ), as well as subscales of Family ( $\alpha = .87$ ), Friends ( $\alpha = .85$ ), and Significant Others ( $\alpha = .91$ ). In the present study, the Cronbach's alphas were good for the total scale ( $\alpha = .87$ ), Family ( $\alpha = .82$ ), Friends ( $\alpha = .78$ ), and Non-familial Caring Adults ( $\alpha = .85$ ) subscales.

**Work Hope.** Work hope was measured using 10 items from the Work Hope Scale (WHS; Juntunen & Wettersten, 2006), a measure assessing one's positive cognitive and motivational state associated with current and future work goals. The WHS is composed of 24 items comprising three subscales measuring one's positive appraisal of work-related: Goals, Agency, and Pathways. To reduce survey burden on youth, the authors selected 10 items total, prioritizing items with strong factor loadings and representing theoretical coverage within and across the three dimensions of the original scale (Goals items = 18, 20, 24; Agency items = 8, 11, 14; Pathways items = 1, 3, 6, 22). Sample items include: "I am confident that things will work out for me in the future", "I can identify many

ways to find a job that I would enjoy”, and “I think I will end up doing what I really want to do at work”. Participants responded to items on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree* with higher scores indicating greater levels of hope. Juntunen and Wettersten (2006) found internal consistency estimates ranging from good to excellent for the WHS total scale ( $\alpha = .93$ ), as well as subscales of Goals ( $\alpha = .81$ ), Agency ( $\alpha = .68$ ), and Pathways ( $\alpha = .87$ ). In the present study, the Cronbach’s alphas were strong for the total scale ( $\alpha = .89$ ), Goals ( $\alpha = .85$ ), Agency ( $\alpha = .82$ ), and Pathways ( $\alpha = .82$ ) subscales.

## Analysis

### Data screening

To ensure data integrity and quality, several rounds of data screening were performed by the authors as well as by Qualtrics. Data was screened and scrubbed for invalid responses according to the following criteria:

- Duplicates
- Response Pattern invalidations (e.g., ‘straight-line’ responses; illogical or inconsistent responses)
- Extreme completion time (i.e., too quickly [1/3rd median response time], too slow)
- Inattentive responders (i.e., start the survey, and return to complete the survey several hours later)
- Illogical or inconsistent answers
- Bots or non-human responders
- Geographic eligibility (e.g., geolocation violations)
- Unintelligible or vulgar open-ended responses

A total of 3,709 participants completed the survey, among which 179 were removed based on the abovementioned criteria, yielding a final sample of 3,530. Following the removal of invalid responses, data were cleaned using standard procedures, including examining descriptive statistics and frequency distributions for outliers and multivariate normality, assessing patterns of missingness, and evaluating the psychometric properties of multi-item scales. On average, participants were missing less than 1% of data. Given the exceedingly small amount of missing data, missingness was managed using listwise deletion in all analyses. Constructs represented using multi-item scales (Race-based Discrimination, Gender-based Discrimination, COVID-19 Concerns, Professional Connections, Social Support, and Work Hope), demonstrated strong psychometric properties with Cronbach’s alphas equaling or exceeding .80, suggesting excellent internal reliability. For scales using a Likert response format, overall scale scores were generated using an average of all items; for scales that used a dichotomous (i.e., Yes/No) response format, overall scale scores were generated by calculating the total number of positively endorsed items.

Throughout this document, subgroup differences in regard to gender, race/ethnicity and employment status are highlighted. All subgroup comparisons were tested using logistic regression analysis to examine the unique contribution of the group characteristic of interest (e.g., race/ethnicity) in explaining differences in the outcome variable of interest (e.g., Work Hope). Logistic regression models were preferred to linear models in order to provide accessible, uniformly reported estimates of subgroup differences across all analyses. To prepare constructs of interest for the logistic regression models, we converted scale scores into median splits with values of “1” given to individuals with scores greater than or equal to .20 points above the median, and values of “0” given to individuals

with scores less than or equal to .20 points below the median. All models controlled for differences explained by related characteristics, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, participant education level (college degree v. not), parent education level (college degree v. not), employment status (e.g., employed, unemployed, marginally attached), parental status (e.g., caretaker of children v. not) and place of birth (e.g., U.S. or non-U.S.). All statistically significant differences reported in text were significant at the level of  $p < .05$ .

## ENDNOTES

1. Blustein, 2006; Duffy, Blustein, Diemer, & Austin, 2016; Savickas, 2012
2. BLS, 2020; Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Palma, 2008
3. Steinberg, 2013; Belfield, Levin, & Rosen, 2012
4. BLS, 2014
5. BLS, (n.d.)
6. Lerner, Lerner, Bowers, & Geldhof, 2015
7. Zaff, Donlan, Pufall Jones, Anderson, & Lin, 2016
8. Blustein, 2006; Duffy et al., 2016
9. Gould & Kassa, 2020
10. BLS, 2020
11. BLS, 2021
12. Gould & Kassa, 2020
13. Causey, Harnack-Eber, Ryu, & Shapiro, 2021
14. National College Attainment Network, 2021; McKinney & Novak, 2015
15. Blustein, 2006; Chetty, Friedman, Hendren, Jones, & Porter, 2018; Chetty, Hendren, Jones, & Porter, 2020; Duffy et al., 2016
16. Chetty et al. 2020
17. McIntosh, Moss, Nunn, & Shambaugh, 2020; Hardy & Logan, 2020
18. Bell, 1995; Emdin, 2016; Nogeura, 2003, 2016
19. Chetty et al., 2018, 2020; Williams & Wilson, 2019
20. Adelman & Lugg, 2012; Arons, 2008; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Gates, 2011; Mishel, 2016; Petersen & Morgan, 1995; Starnski & Son Hing, 2015
21. Arons, 2008
22. Belfield, Levin, & Rosen, 2012
23. Belfield et al., 2012; O'Sullivan, Muggleston, & Allison, 2014
24. Autin & Allan, 2020; Blustein et al., 2020; Chetty et al. 2018; Chetty et al., 2020; Duffy, Kim, Allan, & Prieto, 2020; Kim, Duffy, & Allan, 2020; Lewis & Gluskin, 2018
25. Lewis & Gluskin, 2018; Nichols, Mitchell, & Lindner, 2013
26. Paternoster, Bushway, Apel, & Brame, 2003
27. Ross & Mirowsky, 1995; Burgard, Brand, & House, 2007
28. Black and Latinx women experienced the steepest and deepest job losses of any workers between February and April 2020. 18.8% of Black women workers lost their job in that time, and one in five Latinx women were unemployed as of April 2020 (Gould & Rawlston-Wilson, 2020; Gould, Perez, & Rawlston-Wilson, 2020).
29. For instance, federal data shows a similar 9% unemployment drop for all racial groups from April 2020 to March 2021 (Gould, 2021).
30. Young people who were not currently nor ever previously employed (e.g., has never held a job) were asked to assess the extent to which they anticipate experiencing race- and gender-based discrimination upon entering the workforce. Items presented to employed or previously employed youth were adapted accordingly (e.g., Sample prompt "In my future jobs I will probably:"); Sample items "be treated differently because of my racial/ethnic background", "experience negative comments...", "have a harder time getting hired...").
31. Storlie, Albritton, Cureton, & Byrd, 2019; Block, Koch, Liberman, Merriweather, & Roberson, 2011; Hossain & Bloom, 2015; Pass, 2018; Roscigno, 2019; Yeager, Purdie-Vaughns, Hooper, & Cohen, 2017
32. Chu, Saucier, & Hafner, 2010; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Flanagan, Zaff, Varga, & Margolius, 2020; Fisher, 2018; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Small, 2017
33. Flanagan et al., 2020
34. Kenny, Blustein, & Meerkins, 2018
35. Hossain & Bloom, 2015; Gardecki, 2001; McDonald, Gaddis, Trimble, & Hamm, 2013

36. Nichols, Mitchell, & Lindner, 2013
37. Gardecki, 2001; McDonald, Gaddis, Trimble, & Hamm, 2013
38. Yosso, 2005
39. Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2002; Juntunen & Wettersten, 2006
40. Diemer & Blustein, 2007; Hirschi, 2014; Hong, Choi, & Polanin, 2014; Jackson & Neville, 1998; Kenny, Walsh-Blair, Blustein, Bempechat, & Seltzer, 2010; Juntunen & Wettersten, 2006; Reichard, Avey, Lopez, & Dollwet, 2013
41. Canner, Carlton, Halfteck, & Irons, 2016
42. Flanagan et al., 2020
43. Allan, Batz-Barbarich, Sterling & Tay, 2019; Blustein, Olle, Connors-Kellgren, & Diamonti, 2016; Duffy et al., 2017; Frey, 2017; Steger & Dik, 2009
44. Blustein, 2006; England, 2005; Richardson, 2012; Richardson & Schaeffer, 2013; Schultheiss, 2009
45. White House Council of Economic Advisors, 2016

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## 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 youth, America's Promise leads collective action to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of young people's success. 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.



## About the Center for Promise

The Center for Promise, affiliated with Boston University, is the applied research institute of America's Promise Alliance. Its mission is to develop a deep understanding of the conditions necessary for young people in the United States to succeed in school, work, and life. The Center's unique value as a research institute is its dedication to youth voice, whether by highlighting the voices and views of young people or through working with youth to develop and implement research methods to study the issues affecting their lives.

## Suggested Citation

Flanagan, S.K., Margolius, M., Lynch, A.D., & Hynes, M. (2021). *The state of youth employment: Navigating the world of work during COVID-19*. America's Promise Alliance: Washington, D.C.

## Acknowledgments

This research could not have been completed without the support of the young people who responded to this survey.

We would also like to extend special thanks to Dr. Ryan Duffy, Dr. Kimberly A.S. Howard, and Dr. Jonathan Zaff for their timely thought partnership, comments, and feedback. In addition, the authors would like to thank all of our colleagues at America's Promise, particularly Omofehintola Akinrinade, Marissa Cole, Nathaniel Cole, Monika Kincheloe, Melissa Mellor, Mike O'Brien, Dennis Vega, and Carinne Wheedan.



This research was generously supported through a grant from State Farm®

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