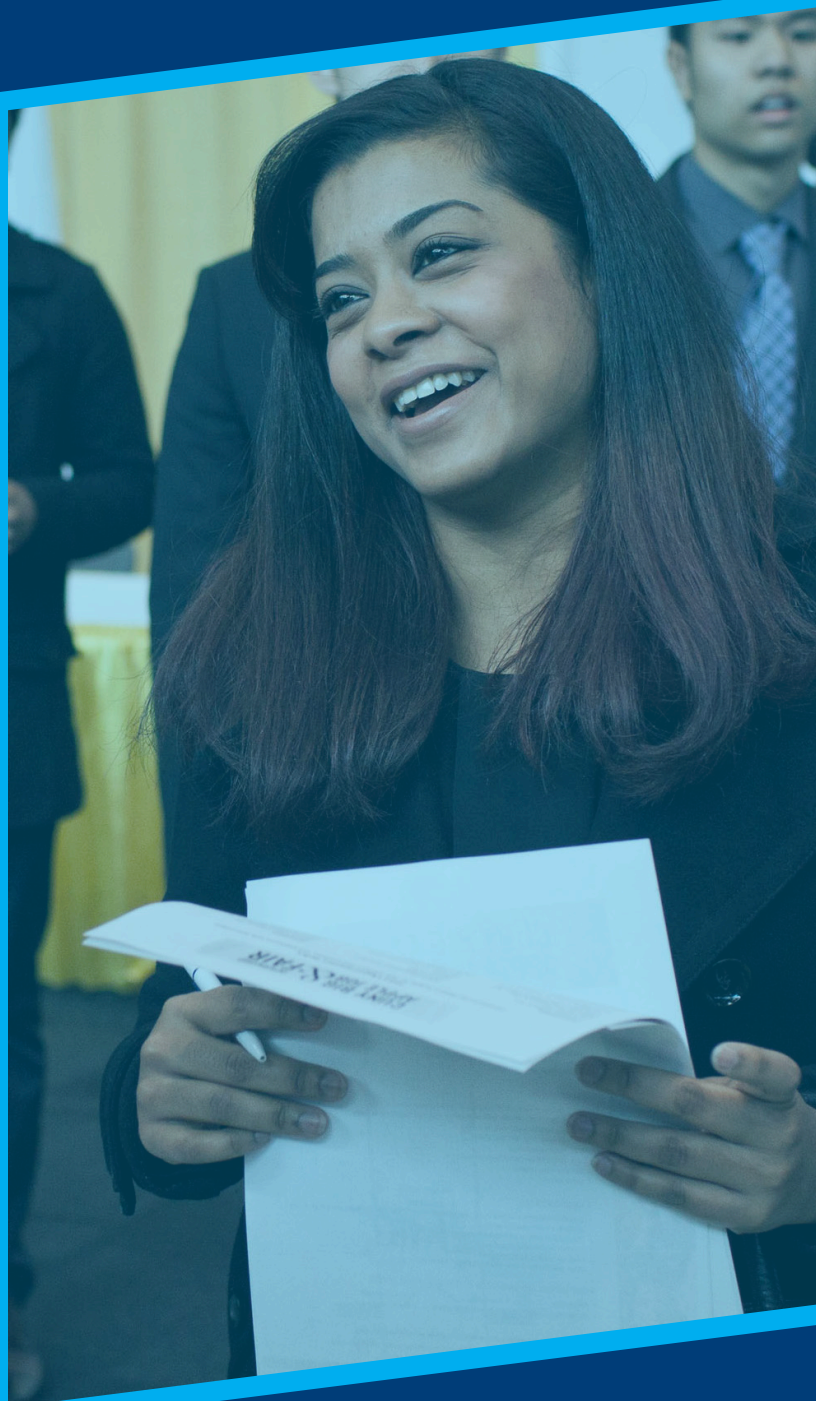


PATHWAYS TO HIGH-QUALITY JOBS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



October 2018

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Helping young people prepare to engage in work and life as productive adults is a central challenge for any society. Yet, many young people in the United States find that the path from education to employment and economic security in adulthood is poorly marked or inaccessible. As a result, those from low-income and less-educated families have lower rates of high school graduation, college enrollment, and college completion. Moreover, once they enter the labor market, they have lower employment rates and wages.

Using an advanced methodology and longitudinal data, this report examines two main questions:

- the quality of jobs (as measured by wages, benefits, hours, and job satisfaction) held by 29-year-olds who experienced disadvantage in adolescence
- the particular adolescent and young adulthood employment, education, and training experiences of people from disadvantaged backgrounds that are associated with higher-quality jobs at age 29

Among those who were disadvantaged as adolescents, the vast majority (79 percent) are employed at age 29. Among those workers, 38 percent have high-quality jobs as measured by our job quality index. Their counterparts—29-year-olds from non-disadvantaged backgrounds—fare better: 90 percent are employed, and 48 percent of those have high-quality jobs.

We identify a number of factors that shape job quality among 29-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds:

Work-based learning incorporating positive relationships with adults. Participating in a cooperative education, internship, apprenticeship, or mentorship program in high school is related to higher subsequent job quality. The relationships built between participants and adults set these programs apart from other career-related high school activities, like job shadowing, career majors, and tech prep, which we find are not related to job quality. While we do not have many details about the quality or intensity of these work-based learning experiences in high school, it is notable that they affect job quality at least a decade later.

Earlier experiences in the labor market.

Having a job as a teenager (ages 16-18) predicts higher job quality in adulthood, as do higher wages at age 23. Given that the analysis controls for education, work experience, and other characteristics, the wage finding suggests that regardless of a young person's education or work history, early good jobs (as measured by wages) lead to later good jobs. Periods of unemployment in one's 20s are associated with lower job quality.

Educational credentials and training. Those with high school diplomas and post-secondary degrees have higher job quality at age 29, as do those who participated in a training program between the ages of 24 and 27. Completing a post-secondary degree (two-year, four-year, or graduate) is the strongest predictor of a high-quality job among all factors considered in this report.

This report also analyzes a number of demographic and personal characteristics and their relationship to later job quality. Job quality is systematically lower for women than for men, even after controlling for education, experience, and cognitive ability. Net of these factors, blacks are not significantly more or less likely to have a high-quality job compared to whites, while Hispanics are more likely. Those who have previously been incarcerated also have lower job quality.

Based on these findings, this report provides four recommendations to improve the employment prospects of young people growing up in disadvantaged households:

Expand work-based learning within high school career and technical education.

Well-designed work-based learning (WBL) experiences such as internships, apprenticeships, and mentoring enable adults to provide students with developmentally appropriate and incremental guidance that helps them develop the skills that employers

seek in new hires. WBL provides students a chance to learn essential employability skills such as problem-solving, communication, and teamwork in ways that are difficult to achieve in the classroom alone. Research and practice provide an established body of knowledge that districts, principals, and teachers can draw upon to create or strengthen such programs. One key lesson is the need for sufficient resources and staffing. Cultivating employer relationships and handling the logistics of internships and workplace visits takes legwork and cannot simply be an add-on to the existing duties of teachers and other staff.

Increase completion rates of post-secondary degrees, with an explicit focus on quality and equity.

The road to completion must run through quality teaching and curricula, since completion goals otherwise can be gamed by diluting curricula or screening out less-prepared students. There is no easy or quick answer to help less-prepared students persist in their education and successfully complete a degree, but broadly speaking, many proposals converge on a set of shared elements:

- greater alignment with high school curricula and learning goals
- more student supports and services such as tutoring and proactive advising
- assistance with financial emergencies
- restructuring course offerings so that required course sequences are clearly laid-out and accessible
- reforming developmental education so that more students successfully move into credit-bearing courses
- providing additional resources for open- and broad-access schools

Improve on-ramps to employment for teens and young adults, particularly for those without post-secondary credentials. These on-ramps to employment can take many forms, including the work-based learning programs referred to above for high school students.

Nonprofits and community-based groups can offer them as well, and such organizations may be especially appropriate for older youth who are past high-school age and unsure about college. Programs for young adults not in high school or college typically offer work readiness and technical skills development, often in combination with academics, mentoring, supportive services, and paid internships or stipends. Well-designed programs align training with local employer needs and look for employment opportunities with potential for advancement.

Promote further research and action on the role of positive relationships in employment and training programs for youth and young adults. Assess the feasibility and value of embedding supportive relationships between young people and caring adults as core principles in education and workforce programs. While it is well-known that positive relationships are important to human development, it is not always apparent that fostering and supporting relationships are essential elements in program design and implementation.

Most of the factors studied in this analysis have somewhat small effects on job quality a decade later, but our findings align with other research on education, training, and employment. A constellation of factors affects whether a person obtains a good job, and these likely include many outside of formal education or workforce development institutions: neighborhood and family characteristics, economic trends, and employer hiring practices, to name a few.

Helping young people become productive adults means not only ensuring that they have a full range of opportunities as they develop and grow, but also that they have the skills and readiness to tackle the problems and jobs of the future. We have sufficient knowledge from evaluations, research, and practice to make major improvements in how we prepare young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to fully participate in and contribute to economic prosperity. What we need is the political and civic will to pursue and implement investments and reforms like the ones listed above.



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