

INVESTING IN BOYS AND YOUNG MEN OF COLOR: THE PROMISE AND OPPORTUNITY



Employment is an important part of youth development and the successful progression into young adulthood. Ages 16 through 24 are critical development years, as young people prepare to take on adult responsibilities. A key predictor of consistent employment in adulthood is early exposure to the world of work through summer and year-round employment, internships, and service opportunities in the teen years. Youth who have been employed tend to have higher earnings in young adulthood. Additionally, teens who are employed are more likely to stay in school and graduate high school.ⁱ Beyond the many developmental benefits, youth employment is also helpful for the quality of community life. Dollars earned by these youth are most often spent within the community, so the ripple effects can improve the local economies of entire neighborhoods. Yet, too often, low-income young men of color have very little opportunity to be exposed to careers, build work experience and history, and establish a network of employers who can vouch for their skills and employability. This has a long-term negative impact on their ability to secure a job with decent wages and chart a career with upward mobility.

Youth Employment Crisis

Despite all that is known about its benefits, youth employment in our nation is currently 17 percentage points lower than it was 25 years ago.ⁱⁱ Youth and young adults 16 to 24 years old account for nearly 30 percent of all unemployed people. The proportion of teenagers and young adults able to find jobs has declined since the 1980s, with the steepest drops occurring in the past decade and among teens. Since 1978, teen employment has fallen from 50 percent in 1978 to just 25.8 percent today. Employment among young adults peaked at 72.9 percent in 2000, falling to 60.8 percent today. By contrast, employment among Americans of prime working age (individuals age 25 to 54) currently stands at 75.9 percent, about the same as it was in the mid-1980s.ⁱⁱⁱ

Figure 1.

Male Unemployment Rates by Race and Ethnicity			
Age	Black	Latino	White
16-19	49%	33%	26%
20-25	29%	15%	14%

Source: National Council of La Raza, (Working Title) Giving Them an Edge? The Effects of Work Experience on the Employment Prospects of Latino Boys and Young Men, 2014.

Unemployment is a major problem for young Americans in general, but it's an even bigger problem for young people of color. When the data is disaggregated by race, it shows that black youth are the least likely to be employed.^{iv} While the overall unemployment rate for teenagers is 25.5 percent, the unemployment rate for all black teens is 44.5 percent – and nearly half of black males (49 percent) ages 16 to 19 are looking for work but

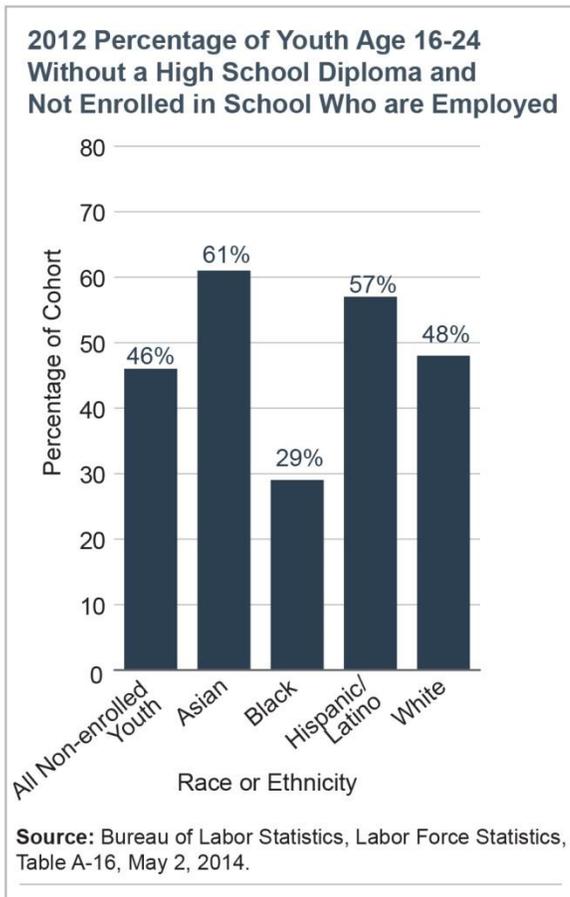
unable to find a job.^v Latino young males also struggle to find work and become attached to the workplace; one in three are not working as compared to 26 percent of white male teens. Black men ages 20 to 25 are facing an acute employment crisis, 29 percent are unemployed (See Figure 1). The employment picture for Asian American youth varies greatly by subpopulation. Low-income and poor Asian and Pacific Islander youth are more likely to suffer from lack of work opportunities.



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Too Many Young Men of Color Are Out-of-School and Out-of-Work

Figure 2.



Young people who are undereducated and unskilled experience high joblessness. Just 46 percent of youth age 16 to 24 without a high school diploma are employed. This figure falls to 29 percent for black males who dropped out of high school.

Being disconnected from school and work is much more common among young people of color. Data reveals that black and Latino youth age 16 to 24 make up 15 percent and 18 percent of the overall youth population. Moreover, they account for 32 percent and 22 percent of the young people who are out-of-school and out-of-work, respectively. The gender make up is about evenly split, although the research suggests that young women are more likely to become disconnected because of family responsibilities, while young men become detached due to incarceration.^{vi}

Involuntary part-time work is a major cause of underemployment for youth of color.

While 57 percent of Latino males with limited education attainment are working, many are underemployed (Figure 2). “Underemployment” counts the unemployed individuals working part-time who would rather work full-time, and “marginalized attached” workers who have given up searching for a job but are still available to work. The current underemployment rates by race and ethnicity are: 16.2% for Latinos, 20.5% for blacks and 9.9% for whites.^{vii}

Contact with the criminal justice systems plays a huge role in the employability of young men of color. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, one in three black men and one in four Latino men^{viii} can expect to go to prison in their lifetime. American Indian youth are grossly over-represented in state and federal juvenile justice systems; 79 percent of youth in the Federal Bureau of Prison’s custody are American Indian and Alaska Native.^{ix}

In some regions, Asian and Pacific Islander subgroups also have high rates of arrests and incarceration. For example, in 2006, several Asian and Pacific Islander groups had very high arrest rates in the city of Oakland, including Samoans (who had the highest arrest rate of any racial/ethnic group in the city, 140 per 1,000); Cambodians (63 per 1,000); Laotians (52 per 1,000); and Vietnamese (28 per 1,000).^x



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The disproportionate incarceration of young men of color early in their adult life results in a sizable segment of the young male population in low-income, minority communities being marginalized in the labor force, with little prospect of earning a family-sustaining wage. In many instances, felony convictions prohibit young men from accessing education, training and federal student aid; and they are often banned from employment in certain professions and denied professional licenses despite having been trained.

“I can have an intelligent conversation with anyone but once the employer finds out about my background they aren’t interested. They just see a criminal...Employers need to take the time to get to know the candidate as a person and not as criminal. Employers need to let go of their assumptions.”

- Youth Focus Group Participant, “Opportunity Says It All”

La Plazita’s program model is founded on these core ideas: that all people have the potential to lead; that you can’t help anyone until you’ve helped yourself first; that this work is a marathon, not a sprint; and that they *are* who they serve. La Plazita’s programs aim to connect youth to broader, more historical notions, of cultural identity. Most will not know what tribe their ancestors came from, or what percentage of their blood is indigenous, except through transformation and ceremonial activities that allow young men to begin a new way of life. La Plazita fosters increased employment among its participants through the trade training and life skills development. As the young adults learn to handle their fear, anger, and failures in a healthy way, as well as attain conflict resolution and communication skills, their employability increases. Compound that foundational training with new knowledge and training in a particular trade, and these young adults are more likely to make a living wage and less likely to engage in underground and criminal activities. The farming, craft shops, and silkscreening training programs enable local product development of fresh produce, ceramic products, jewelry, and clothing. Additionally, the program encourages entrepreneurship and strengthens the local economy of Albuquerque, New Mexico.^{xi}

For more information, please visit <http://laplazitainstitute.org/>.



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Figure 3.

2011 Income and Education Levels for Full-Time Workers						
	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	American Indian
All persons, all education levels	\$37,950	\$39,990	\$31,890	\$29,950	\$49,220	\$30,220
Less than high school completion	\$22,860	\$27,720	\$19,450	\$21,670	‡	
High school completion	\$29,950	\$31,950	\$25,290	\$27,940	\$24,940	
Some college, no degree	\$31,990	\$34,710	\$29,330	\$29,980	\$30,890	
Associate's degree	\$37,030	\$39,530	\$33,650	\$34,690	\$34,580	
Bachelor's or higher degree	\$50,000	\$49,640	\$41,520	\$41,190	\$61,100	

‡ Reporting standards not met (too few cases for a reliable estimate).

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Table 439, 2011.

Educational Attainment and Employment

Low-skilled jobs that require only a high school diploma are not as accessible or lucrative as they were in the 1960s and 1970s. Jobs in the construction, natural resources, installation, repair, and transportation industries are either disappearing or no longer pay a family-sustaining wage. In today's economy, postsecondary education is a prerequisite to good jobs that open the door to the middle class. Available data clearly demonstrates significantly lower annual wages for adult full-time workers with a high school diploma or less (Figure 3).

Youth Participation and Outcomes in Federal Employment and Training Programs

Figure 4.



Federal youth employment and training programs only serve a fraction of the number of young people who could benefit from them. According to the most recent U.S. Department of Labor program data, only 218,050 young people ages 14 to 21 were served in program year 2012 through Workforce Investment Act Youth Activities Funding.^{xiii} Reported program data for youth education and training programs indicate positive employment and credential attainment across all race and ethnic groups. The good news is that these programs are showing demonstrable, positive outcomes for the young people served. The bad news is that demand for them far outstrips the resources available.



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Building a Lifetime of Options and Opportunities for Men (BLOOM) is a \$5 million, five-year initiative of the California Community Foundation (CCF). Launched in May 2012, it aims to create improved educational and employment opportunities for black male youth ages 14 to 18 who reside in South Los Angeles and have been involved in the Los Angeles County Probation system. The initiative is implemented through nine community partners who offer young men a range of academic, employment, and leadership opportunities by: providing academic support, helping youth identify a career path, promoting accountability and personal responsibility, engaging in culturally responsive programming, exposing youth to new opportunities and life experiences, and encouraging youth to become civically engaged. Established in May 2012, its goal is to reach 2,200 young black men and support them to achieve secondary and postsecondary credentials and employment.

For more information, please visit <https://www.calfund.org/bloom>.

Promising Strategies to Improve Employment Outcomes for Young Men of Color

Build Social Networks

Social access and exposure to work play major roles in the ability of young men of color to get a job. Job access for urban youth of color is less defined by proximity to the worksite as it is by social isolation and the lack of broad social networks.^{xiii} In interviews and focus groups with young men of color conducted by CLASP through the Corners to Credentials Project, lack of work experience and references were cited by young men as chief barriers to getting a job. Investments in communities must:

- Institute employment programs and interventions that are designed to help young men gain access to employers and work opportunities that would ordinarily be closed to them, first by providing opportunities for skill advancement and credential attainment. Having credentials alone does not secure employment or ensure entry into a career.
- Broker relationships with employers and develop strategies that essentially “buy” access for young men to enter employment and gain work experience through a menu of strategies, and provide assurances that the young men are adequately prepared and trained for the workplace. The local youth workforce system and community-based partners play a critical role in engaging employers and making the case for investments in youth generally and young men of color in particular.
- Support program staff to act as a “match service,” identifying eligible youth for job openings and working to build the public and private employer capacity. Staff gives credibility to the young men and helps build trust over time with employers who have positive experiences by helping give young men a chance.



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“I don’t want a steady job; I want a career. To me, a career is something you enjoy and you’re making a certain amount of money and you’re able to pay your bills and provide for your family. A job is just going somewhere to get a paycheck. I want to do something that I enjoy.”

- Youth Focus Group Participant, “Opportunity Says It All”

Create a Sustainable System of Workforce Services^{xiv} that Provide Opportunities for Career Exposure and Career Exploration

Communities should use a menu of employment options – from work exposure and entry-level jobs to career pathway strategies – to respond to labor demand and emerging work opportunities for which young men are prepared. These options should be built into a career pathways approach, which connects progressive levels of basic skills and postsecondary education, training, and supportive services in specific sectors or cross-sector occupations in a way that optimizes the progress and success of individuals - including those with limited education, English, skills, and/or work experience in securing marketable credentials, family-supporting employment, and further education and employment opportunities.^{xv} Building soft and technical skills, including oral and written communication, teamwork, leadership, and critical thinking, is critical to ensuring young men who have little to no experience in work settings and face barriers to employment can build work ethic and history. Communities should use a mix of traditional and non-traditional employment strategies to achieve maximum results for both employers and youth:

- **Work experience:** Provides opportunity to expose young people to careers, professional environments, and the world of work in the public or private sectors, generally for wages or a stipend, in environments that will develop their employability skills, and in many cases, on projects that provide a community service or benefit; can include paid and unpaid internships.
- **Tryout employment:** Entry-level work experiences are provided to young people who would not usually be hired because they lack good work skills, behaviors, or attitudes, or because they face other barriers to employment. Time frames are negotiated with the employers and the workforce system. This strategy may include hourly wages or a stipend.
- **Subsidized employment:** This includes a range of employment positions in either the public or private sector with earnings provided by an employer who receives a wage reimbursement subsidy for creating and maintaining the employment position, which can be a short- or long-term placement.
- **Transitional jobs:^{xvi}** An employment strategy that seeks to support individuals with employment barriers by using wage-paid, short-term employment that combines real work, skill development and supportive services. They are also referred to as public service jobs, community service jobs, and publicly funded employment.
- **Customized training:** This strategy implemented by businesses or qualified training institutions is designed to provide participants with specialized skills training for available positions and to assist businesses in training and hiring new workers.
- **Entrepreneurship development and small business engagement:** strong relationships with small businesses, which often see the immediate benefits of relationships with youth-serving organizations and young men, is a primary ingredient to developing a community-wide employment strategy. Being employed by a small business owner allows young men to learn specific skills associated with a particular industry or trade and provides exposure to



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the skills required to start, own, and operate a small business. This skill set is especially important to young men of color who may face hurdles to traditional employment because of their past involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice systems.

- **Pre Apprenticeships and Registered Apprenticeships:** Pre-apprenticeship programs allow participants to build their vocational, technical and education skills and explore a career path prior to entering a registered apprenticeship program in a specific industry. Participants are paid wages but often not at the level of a registered apprentice. Registered Apprenticeship programs are sponsored by individual employers, employer associations, or jointly through labor/management agreements. Programs are enhanced through strategic partnerships among community-based organizations, educational institutions, the workforce system, and other stakeholders. In this classic “earn and learn” strategy, participants are engaged in classroom and applied instruction and paid for on-the-job learning. After completion, apprentices receive an industry-recognized certificate of completion.
- **Career Academies (CAs):** A form of career and technical education where students, interested in a particular career, take courses together and supplement their classroom education with summer and year-round employment. In an evaluation of CAs, participants had significantly higher monthly earnings, months worked, hours worked per week, and hourly wages than the control group.^{xvii}

Note: The terms “African American” and “Black” and “Native American” and “American Indian” are used interchangeably throughout this document. The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. This brief includes the most recent available data. In some instances, data was not available for all race or ethnic groups.



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Endnotes

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- ^x Sarita Ahuja and Robert Chlala, *Widening the Lens on Boys and Men of Color: California AAPI & AMEMSA Perspectives*, Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, 2013, http://aapip.org/files/publication/files/aapip_bymoc-final.screen.pdf.
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- ^{xii} "PY12 State by State Performance Summaries," Employment and Training Administration, U.S. Department of Labor, updated June 4, 2014, <http://www.doleta.gov/performance/results/>.
- ^{xiii} Kisha Bird, *Against All Odds: Community & Policy Solutions to Address the American Youth Crisis*, University of Pennsylvania Journal of Law & Social Change, Volume 15, Issue 2 (Sparer Edition), 2011-2012, [https://www.law.upenn.edu/journals/jlasc/articles/volume15/issue2/Bird15U.Pa.J.L.&Soc.Change\(2012\)233.pdf](https://www.law.upenn.edu/journals/jlasc/articles/volume15/issue2/Bird15U.Pa.J.L.&Soc.Change(2012)233.pdf).
- ^{xiv} Strategies Adapted from "Opportunity Says It All", Kisha Bird, CLASP, 2013.
- ^{xv} *Alliance for Quality Career Pathways Beta Framework Executive Summary*, CLASP, September 2013, <http://www.clasp.org/documents/Exec-Sum-of-AQCP-Beta-Final-091613-1.pdf>.
- ^{xvi} See Transitional Jobs Network Website: <http://www.heartlandalliance.org/ntjn/about/about-transitional-jobs.html>.
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