



# The Youth Workforce

## A Detailed Picture

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**American public policy largely centers on the belief that a good job is the surest path to economic security. Given that young people will soon drive our economy and that youth employment has positive implications for future life outcomes, ensuring that young people have access to work experiences should be a national priority. However, youth employment rates are very low relative to historical standards, triggering what some have called a “youth employment crisis.”<sup>1</sup> In this brief, we use data from the 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) to examine the characteristics of young workers (ages 16 to 24). We find disparities in employment by age, sex, race and ethnicity, education, and income, and we find that female, black, and Latinx youth are earning lower wages than others.**

Since the turn of the century, concerns have been rising over declining youth labor market participation and the possible repercussions for young people’s long-term employment outcomes. The Great Recession exacerbated this decline in youth labor market participation, drawing attention to the youth employment crisis. Though the youth employment rate has remained stable since 2010, it is very low relative to historical standards. The overall youth labor force participation rate was 55.5 percent in July 2018, down from a high of 69.1 percent in 1979. The labor force participation rate among teenagers (those ages 16 to 19) declined even more dramatically, from 59.3 percent to 35.2 percent, over the same period.<sup>2</sup>

Part of this decline in youth employment rates, particularly for teens, is driven by increases in schooling, which is a positive investment in the future of youth and the country (Davis and Bauman

2013). However, young people who are not in school or working (often called “disconnected youth” or “opportunity youth”) are at a higher risk than their peers for negative outcomes, such as lower future earnings, lower educational attainment, worse health, and higher rates of criminal justice involvement (Lewis and Gluskin 2018). Opportunity youth feel an immediate burden, but their economic burden also leads to lower economic growth, lower tax revenues, and higher government spending. One estimate finds a lifetime taxpayer burden of \$235,680 and a lifetime social burden of \$704,020 per opportunity youth (Belfield, Levin, and Rosen 2012).

Persistently low rates of youth employment are also troublesome for both in-school and out-of-school youth because youth employment affects a variety of long-term outcomes. Young people who do not have stable jobs by their early twenties are at greater risk for joblessness and permanently lower earnings, suggesting that early work experience has a longer-term effect on socioeconomic mobility (Rockefeller Foundation 2014). Research also shows that students in high school who work light to moderate hours during their senior year will, six to nine years later, earn an annual income 22 percent higher than their counterparts who did not work during their senior year (Ruhm 1997). The promise of youth employment has higher stakes for black and Latinx individuals, who are more likely to experience negative life outcomes than their white counterparts. This is particularly true for black boys, whose prospects for socioeconomic mobility are severely limited (Chetty et al. 2018).

Effective youth employment programs have demonstrated positive effects on long-term outcomes. Year Up, a one-year intensive training program that combines work experience and professional development for 18- to 24-year-olds, has been shown to increase average earnings 53 percent in the sixth and seventh quarters after program inception (Fein and Hamadyk 2018). And although summer youth employment programs<sup>3</sup> have not yet shown a proven effect on employment or earnings beyond the initial summer of participation (Valentine et al. 2017), some of these programs have been shown to improve other long-term outcomes by reducing criminal justice involvement (Modestino 2017; Heller 2014; Gelber, Isen, and Kessler 2015), decreasing mortality (Gelber, Isen, and Kessler 2015), and improving school attendance and graduation rates (Leos-Urbel 2014).

Studies have also shown that effective summer youth employment programs expand youth’s professional networks and contribute to their development of critical “soft skills.” Past participants have reported improvements in communication and responsibility, academic and career motivation, and work readiness (Modestino 2017; Sachdev and McDonnell 2011). Many of the positive effects of summer youth employment programs, such as reducing crime, developing soft skills, and improving school attendance, are stronger for disadvantaged youth and youth of color, suggesting that summer jobs programs may be a key intervention for combating inequities (Modestino 2017; Heller 2014; Leos-Urbel 2014).

This brief uses data from the first wave of the 2014 SIPP to analyze youth employment across a variety of metrics, including age, sex, race and ethnicity, education, income, wages, and industry.<sup>4</sup> This survey provides the best, most recent data on the characteristics, work habits, and earnings of households. We build on the existing body of literature on this topic by exploring the intersection of multiple domains to present a comprehensive picture of youth employment. This analysis provides a

more holistic understanding of underlying disparities by tying employment opportunities to employment outcomes, offering information that can help explain and address broader equity issues among youth.

We first present demographic information on the population of employed youth. We then analyze subgroups of youth workers and their jobs, highlighting disparities in work participation and employment outcomes. Finally, we discuss the new insights that these findings offer into how youth workforce development efforts can be effectively targeted to ensure that all youth, regardless of background or circumstance, have access to important early work experiences.

## Who Are Youth Workers?

Youth workers are better understood as two groups: younger youth (those ages 16 to 19) and older youth (those ages 20 to 24). Younger youth are more likely to be enrolled in school than older youth because most are still high-school age. Younger youth are also more likely than their older counterparts to be financially supported by a parent or guardian. We use “younger youth” and “older youth” throughout our analysis to indicate those age groups.

**TABLE 1**  
**Characteristics of Youth Workers**

	Ages 16–19 (%)	Ages 20–24 (%)
All youth	5,640,770	15,537,715
<b>Characteristics</b>		
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	45.7	51.2
Female	54.3	48.9
<i>Race or ethnicity</i>		
White, non-Hispanic	65.3	59.9
Black, non-Hispanic	10.6	13.7
Hispanic or Latino	17.0	19.6
Asian	2.7	3.58
<i>Education enrollment</i>		
High school	48.6	1.0
College or graduate school	35.9	42.2
Other education	1.8	4.2
Not enrolled	13.7	52.6
<i>Household income</i>		
200% FPL or below	35.2	42.5
Above 200% FPL	64.8	57.4

**Source:** Authors’ analysis of 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

**Notes:** FPL = the federal poverty level. “Education enrollment” includes young people enrolled at any point in 2013. “Other education” includes a non-degree-seeking program or vocational, technical, or business school.

Younger youth workers were mostly female (54.3 percent), non-Hispanic white (65.3 percent), in high school (48.6 percent), and in higher-income households (65.3 percent). (We define higher-income

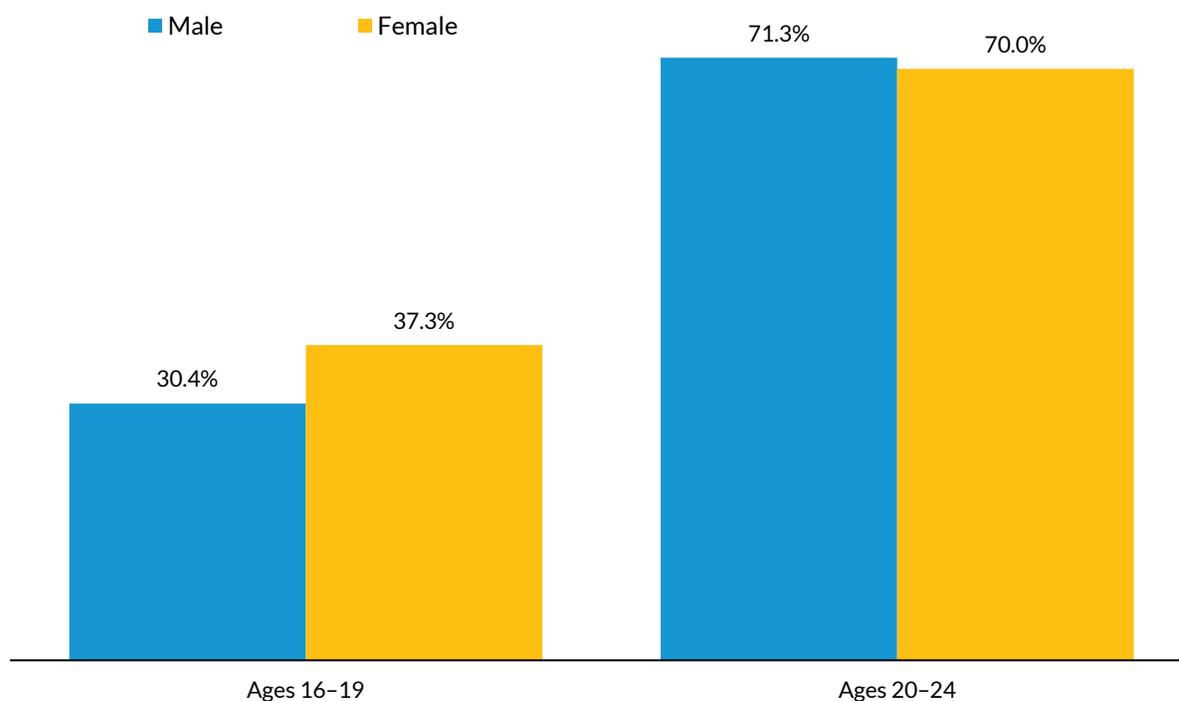
households as those earning more than 200 percent of the federal poverty level.) Older youth workers differed: approximately equal shares were male and female, and a majority were not enrolled in school (52.6 percent). A lower share of older youth were white (59.9 percent) and lived higher-income households (57.4 percent), but these groups were still the majority.

## Subgroup Analysis

Taking a deeper dive into the youth workforce reveals disparities in employment across age, sex, race and ethnicity, education, and household income. These disparities warrant further investigation and point to areas where targeted interventions would benefit the individuals and groups most in need.

### Younger Workers Were More Often Female, While Older Workers Were More Often Male

**FIGURE 1**  
Share of Youth Employed, by Age and Sex



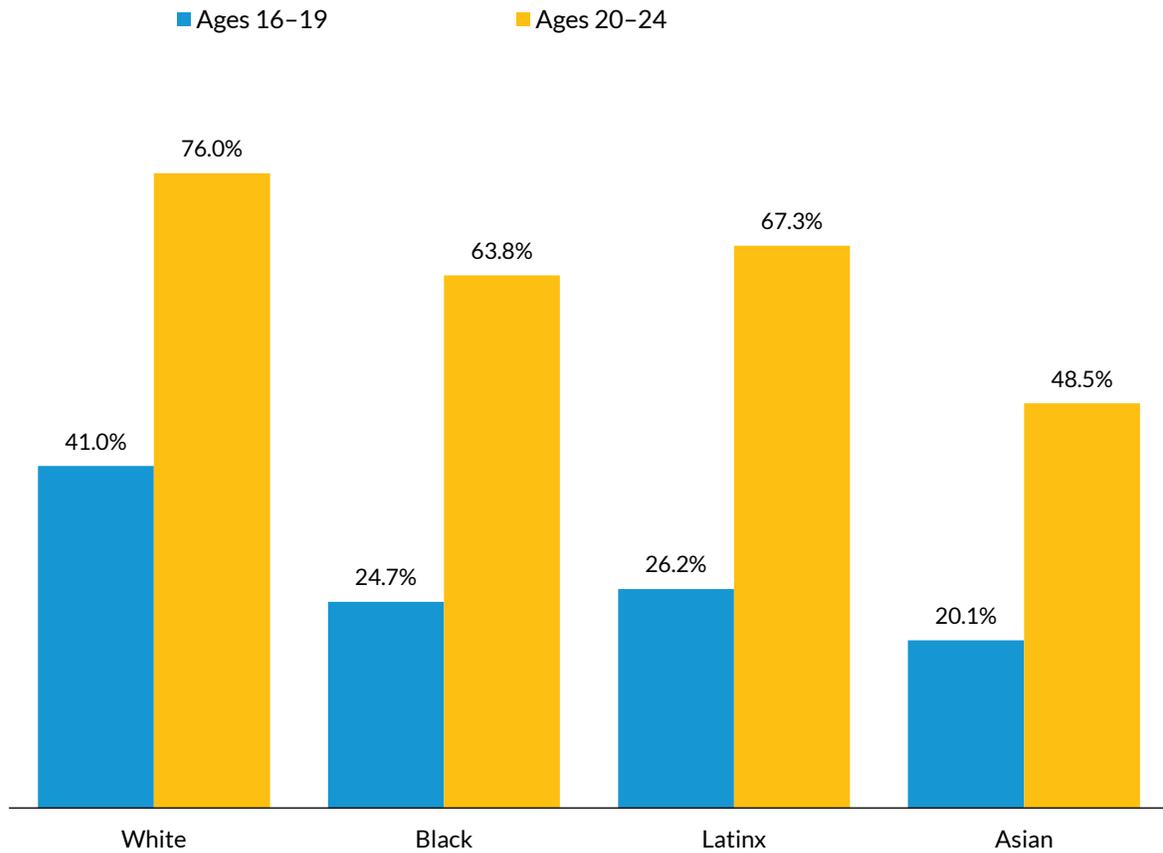
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Source: Authors' analysis of the 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

- Among younger youth, a significantly higher share of female youth were employed than were male youth (37.3 percent versus 30.4 percent). Among older youth, however, young males were employed at slightly higher rates.

## White Youth Get a Head Start in Employment and Are More Likely Overall to Be Employed

FIGURE 2  
Share of Youth Employed, by Race or Ethnicity and Age



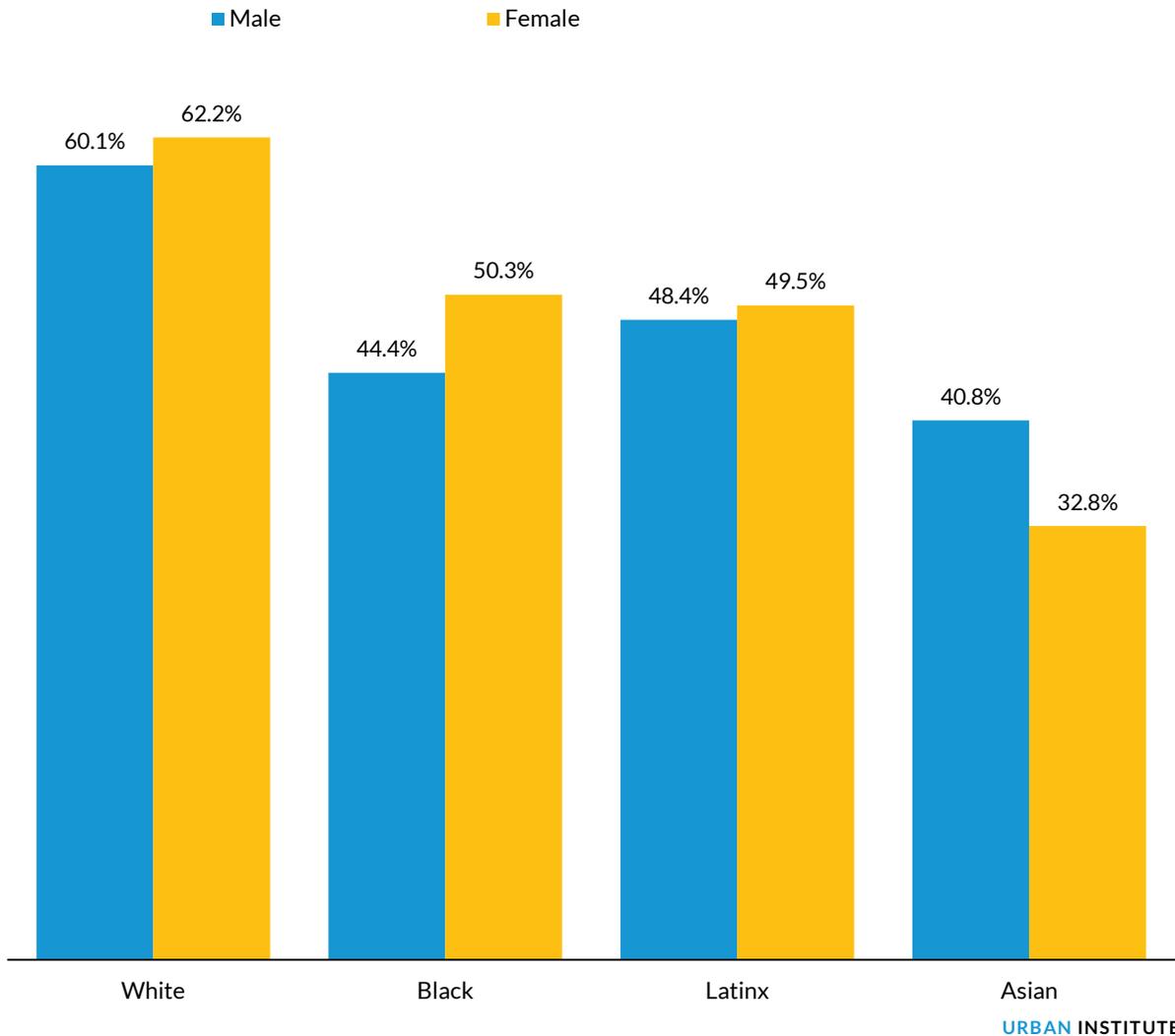
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Source: Authors' analysis of the 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

- Across all young people, white youth were employed at significantly higher rates than Latinx, black, and Asian youth, in that order. However, Asian youth were enrolled in school at a much higher rate than white, black, and Latinx youth (13, 18, and 20 percentage points higher, respectively), which may help explain their relatively low likelihood of employment.
- This disparity was largest among younger youth. Among those ages 16 to 19, white youth were employed at a rate 15 percentage points higher than Latinx youth, 16 percentage points higher than black youth, and 21 percentage points higher than Asian youth.<sup>5</sup>

FIGURE 3

Share of Youth Employed, by Race or Ethnicity and Sex

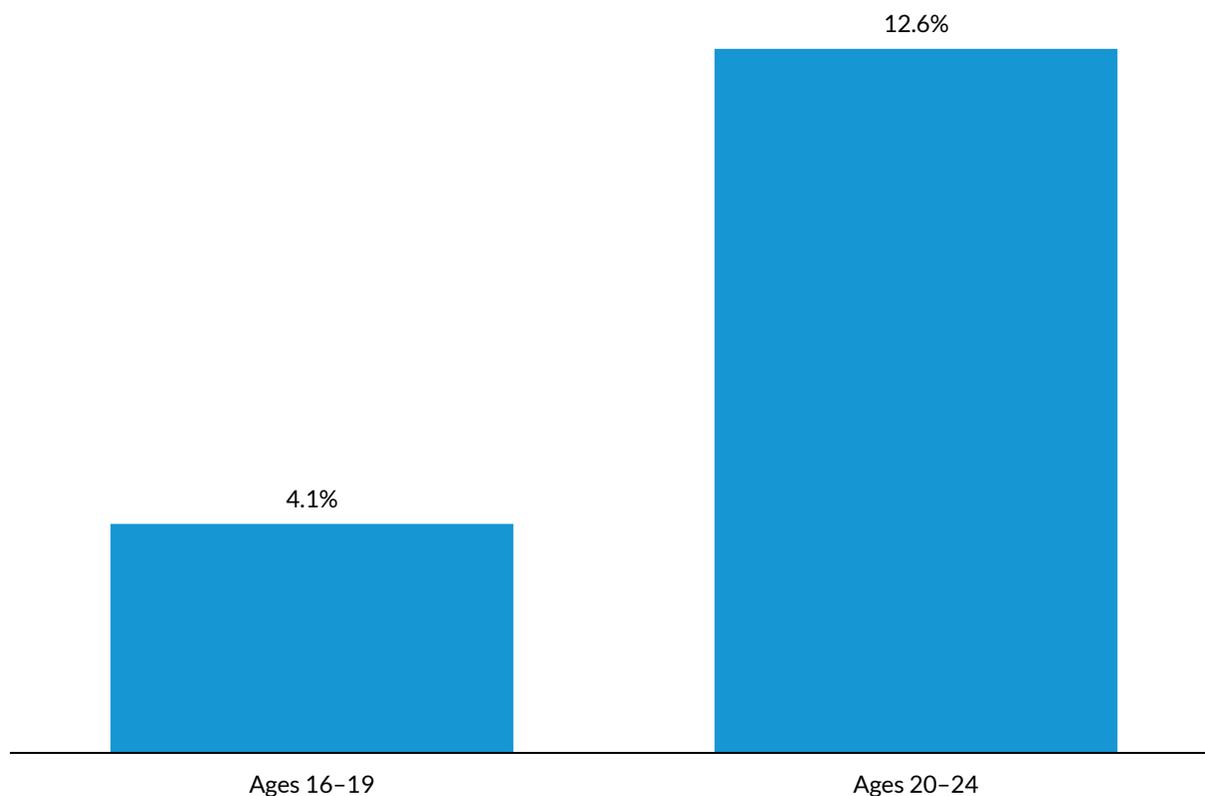


Source: Authors' analysis of 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

- White, black, and Latinx female youth were employed at a slightly higher rate than their male counterparts. However, Asian female youth were 8 percentage points *less* likely to be employed than their male counterparts.
- Across both male and female young people, white youth were employed at significantly higher rates than black, Latinx, and Asian youth. Asian female youth were the least likely to be employed of any group (32.8 percent); white female youth were the most likely to be employed (62.2 percent).

## Older Youth and Black and Latinx Youth Have the Highest Rates of Youth Disconnection

FIGURE 4  
Share of Youth Who Are Disconnected, by Age



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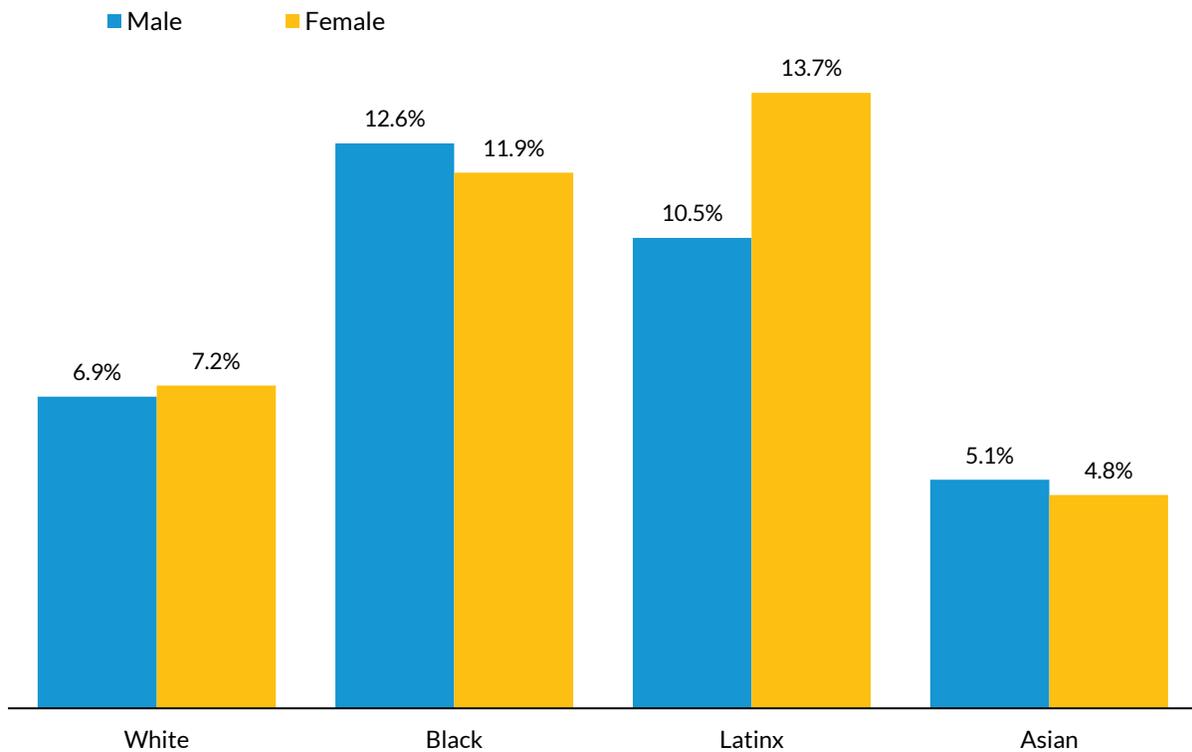
**Source:** Authors' analysis of the 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

**Notes:** Disconnected youth are those who were not enrolled or employed at any point during 2013. See table 1 for the distribution of employed youth across various types of educational enrollment.

- Youth who are both not enrolled in school and not employed are often referred to as “disconnected youth” or “opportunity youth.” These young people are at greater risk for lower future earnings, lower educational attainment, and higher rates of criminal justice involvement than their peers, and their economic burden leads to lower economic growth, lower tax revenues, and higher government spending (Lewis and Gluskin 2018).
- Older youth were disconnected at more than three times the rate of younger youth (12.6 percent versus 4.1 percent). This represents a total of 3.5 million disconnected youth.

FIGURE 5

Share of Disconnected Youth, by Race or Ethnicity and Sex



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Source: Authors' analysis of the 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

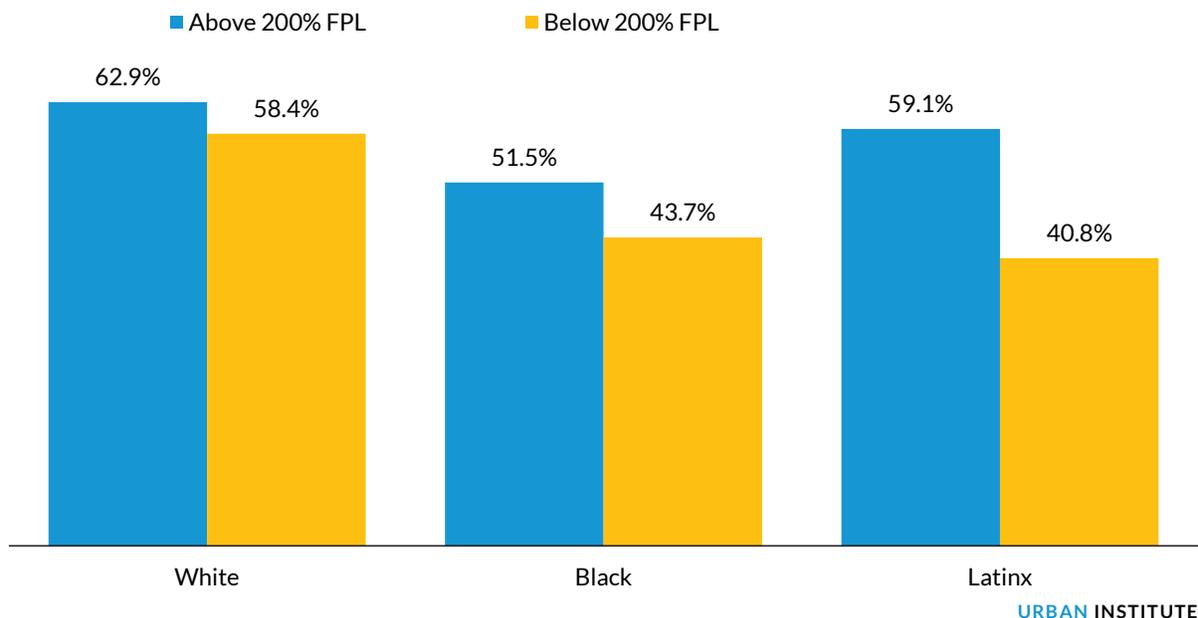
Notes: Includes youth who were not enrolled in school or employed at any point during the reference year. See table 1 for the distribution of employed youth across various types of educational enrollment.

- Black and Latinx youth had the highest rates of disconnection (12.3 percent and 12.1 percent, respectively). White and Asian youth were significantly less likely to be disconnected (7.1 percent and 4.9 percent, respectively). As mentioned, disconnected youth are at increased risk for a variety of negative long-term outcomes.
- Among white, black, and Asian youth, male and female young people were disconnected at similar rates. However, Latinx female youth were 3 percentage points more likely to be disconnected than their male counterparts.
- Racial and ethnic disparities in employment were larger among youth enrolled in school than among youth not enrolled in school. Among enrolled young people, white youth were employed at a rate 17 percentage points higher than the rate for black and Latinx youth. However, this gap shrinks significantly—to 11 percentage points and 9 percentage points, respectively—when focusing on youth not enrolled in school (not shown).

## Youth from Low-Income Households Were Employed Less Often

FIGURE 6

### Share of Employed Youth, by Household Income Status and Race or Ethnicity



Source: Authors' analysis of the 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Notes: FPL = the federal poverty level. Asian youth are not included because their sample size is below 100.

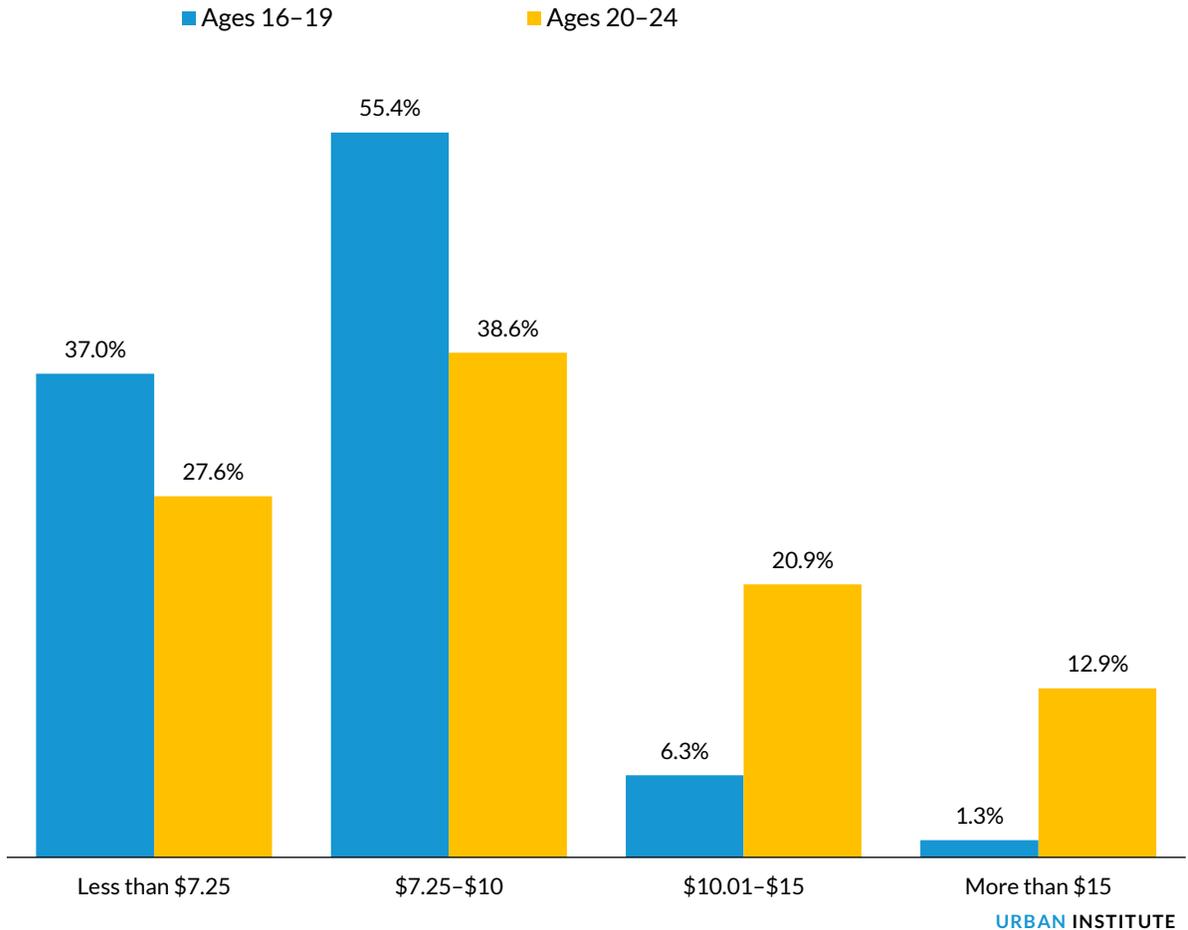
- Across all young people, the majority of youth workers lived in higher-income households. More than two-thirds of youth workers ages 16 to 19 (64.8 percent) and 57.4 percent of youth workers ages 20 to 24 lived in higher-income households (table 1).
- Low-income youth of all racial and ethnic groups were also less likely to be employed. The largest income-based employment gap was observed among Latinx youth, with low-income youth 19 percentage points less likely than their more affluent peers to be employed. For white and black youth, this difference was 5 and 8 percentage points, respectively. Moreover, low-income white youth were 7 percentage points more likely to be employed than higher-income black youth.

## Youth Job Characteristics

The average hourly wages of youth workers varied by age, sex, race and ethnicity, and industry. Younger workers earned less and worked in lower-paying industries than older workers. Furthermore, female youth earned less than their male counterparts, and black and Latinx youth earned significantly less than white and Asian youth. Next, we present a detailed breakdown of the hourly wages youth workers received and the industries they worked in and highlight the disparities.

## Wages Were Lower among Younger Youth, Female Youth, and Black and Latinx Youth

**FIGURE 7**  
Hourly Wages of Youth Workers, by Age



**Source:** Authors' analysis of 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

**Notes:** See the appendix for a description of how average hourly wages were calculated. The federal minimum wage in 2013 was \$7.25 an hour.

- Younger youth earned lower wages than older youth. Thirty-seven percent of younger youth and 30 percent of older youth earned less than the federal minimum wage.<sup>6</sup>
- Across both age groups, the largest share of workers earned between \$7.25 and \$10 an hour (56.0 percent of younger youth and 37.5 percent of older youth).
- Only 6.6 percent of youth workers ages 16 to 19 and 32.5 percent of youth workers ages 20 to 24 earned more than \$10 an hour.

TABLE 2

## Average Hourly Wages of Youth Workers

	Average Hourly Wages	
	Ages 16–19	Ages 20–24
All youth	\$7.06	\$9.82
<b>Demographic characteristics</b>		
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	\$7.30	\$10.59
Female	\$6.85	\$9.01
<i>Race and ethnicity</i>		
White, non-Hispanic	\$7.04	\$10.18
Black, non-Hispanic	\$6.78	\$8.77
Latinx	\$7.35	\$9.32
Asian	NA	\$10.77

Source: Authors' analysis of the 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Notes: NA = not available because the sample size was below 100. See the appendix for a description of how average hourly wages were calculated.

- Average hourly wages were \$7.06 among younger youth and \$9.82 among older youth.
- Younger female youth earned hourly wages that were 94 percent of those of their male counterparts, and this disparity grew to 85 percent among older youth.
- Among younger youth, hourly wages were spread over approximately \$0.60, with Latinx youth earning the highest hourly wages (\$7.35), followed by white youth (\$7.04) and black youth (\$6.78).
- Among older youth, clear racial and ethnic wage disparities emerge that mirror those of the larger labor market (Gould 2019). The spread of hourly wages grew to \$2.00, with Asian youth earning the highest wages (\$10.77), followed by white youth (\$10.18), Latinx youth (\$9.32), and black youth (\$8.77).

## Younger Youth Worked in Lower-Paying Industries

TABLE 3

## Industry Breakdown of Youth Workers by Age

Industry	Share of Youth Employment (%)		Average Hourly Wage
	Ages 16–19	Ages 20–24	All youth
Accommodation and food services	44.0	24.4	\$7.99
Retail	20.7	18.6	\$9.00
Education and health care	11.4	19.9	\$9.80
Professional and administrative services	8.4	13.0	\$12.84
Construction and manufacturing	6.0	10.7	\$12.33
Other services	4.8	5.5	\$9.69
Other industry	4.7	7.8	\$13.09
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	

Source: Authors' analysis of the 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Notes: Industry categorizations are from the US Census Bureau's 2012 Industry Code List. See the appendix for full category names and how industries were combined for this analysis. Also see the appendix for a description of how average hourly wages were calculated. "Share of youth employment" is the percentage of all employed youth in each industry.

- Younger workers were 20 percentage points more likely than older workers to work in accommodation and food services and 8 percentage points less likely to work in education and health care. More than two-fifths of all younger workers worked in accommodation and food services.
- The two industries that employed the highest concentrations of youth—accommodation and food services, followed by retail—were also the lowest paying.

## Industries Help Explain the Gender Wage Gap, but not the Racial and Ethnic Wage Gap

TABLE 4

### Industry Breakdown of Youth Workers by Sex and Race or Ethnicity

*In order of lowest-paying industry to highest-paying industry*

Industry	Share of Employment (%)		Share of Employment (%)	
	Male	Female	White	Black or Latinx
Accommodation and food services	24.9	32.3	29.6	27.6
Retail	20.6	20.3	19.2	23.2
Other services	4.5	5.1	5.3	3.9
Education and health care	10.5	23.2	17.7	15.2
Construction and manufacturing	15.1	3.9	9.5	9.8
Professional and administrative services	12.8	12.3	11.8	13.3
Other industry	11.7	3.0	7.0	7.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Authors' analysis of 2014 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

**Notes:** Analysis is based on industry categorizations from the 2012 Industry Code List published by the US Census Bureau. See the appendix for full category names and how industries were combined. Share of employment refers to the distribution of youth across industries.

- A greater share of female youth than male youth worked in accommodation and food services (32 percent versus 25 percent) and in education and health care (23 percent versus 11 percent). A smaller share of female youth worked in construction and manufacturing than did male youth (4 percent versus 15 percent).
- Female youth worked in low-wage industries at higher rates than their male counterparts, suggesting that industry sector contributed to the gender wage gap.
- Black and Latinx youth did not work in low-wage industries at higher rates than white youth, nor did white youth work in high-wage industries at higher rates than black and Latinx youth.

## Discussion

These data reveal youth employment rates comparable to the low levels reported in recent years, and they highlight the disparities that youth of color face in accessing and benefiting from important early

work opportunities. The following key findings can inform the effective targeting of youth workforce development efforts:

- Only about 33 percent of youth ages 16 to 19 were employed in 2013, compared with 70 percent of youth ages 20 to 24. Summer youth-employment programs currently provide jobs to tens of thousands of teenagers across the country every year, and expanding these programs may be a key avenue for addressing the challenge of providing early employment opportunities, particularly given that some of these programs demonstrate positive effects on criminal justice involvement, mortality, academic outcomes, and development of soft skills and professional networks. **Continuous improvement of these programs** is also important for bringing longer-term, positive, work-related outcomes to fruition.
- Racial and ethnic disparities in employment were also stark, particularly among younger youth. Among those ages 16 to 19, white youth were employed at a rate 15 percentage points higher than Latinx youth, 16 percentage points higher than black youth, and 21 percentage points higher than Asian youth. This suggests a need to **target early work opportunities toward youth of color, particularly black and Latinx youth**, who are at a higher risk for negative long-term outcomes than their white and Asian counterparts.
- Black and Latinx youth were much more likely to be disconnected from both school and work than were white and Asian youth, a predicament that carries a heightened risk for negative outcomes. These youth are a missed social and economic opportunity, and they should be **targeted for education, training, and employment programs. Efforts to equitably increase youth employment should also focus on in-school youth**, because racial and ethnic disparities in employment rates are significantly larger among this group than among out-of-school youth.
- Across age groups and racial and ethnic groups, most youth workers lived in higher-income households. Notably, more than two-thirds of younger workers (64.8 percent) were from higher-income households. This suggests a need to **target early work opportunities toward low-income youth**, who are in greater need of both the immediate and longer-term positive impacts that having a job can provide. Our findings also suggest a need to **target youth jobs toward low-income Latinx youth**, who have the lowest levels of employment.
- Thirty-seven percent of younger youth and 30 percent of older youth earned wages lower than the federal minimum wage, and the industries with the highest concentrations of youth (accommodation and food services, and retail) were the lowest paying. Although wages are not the only benefit of early work experience, youth workers contribute, on average, about 24 percent of household income, indicating that youth wage levels can truly matter to families (Latham, Scott, and Koball 2016). Low wages may present particularly acute challenges for older youth who are supporting themselves and for whom their job is their sole source of income. **Efforts to increase youth employment should consider both whether youth jobs pay sufficiently high wages and whether the job opportunity can lead to well-paying jobs later in life.**
- The hourly wage gap by sex and race and ethnicity emerges early in a young person's life:

- » Across all young people, female youth earned 86 percent of wages earned by male youth.
- » By young adulthood, black youth earned 86 percent and Latinx youth earned 92 percent of the wages earned by their white peers.

**Efforts seeking to affect youth employment should ensure that those opportunities lead to fair compensation for female, black, and Latinx youth.** Multiple strategies can help achieve this goal, such as enforcing existing laws and regulations, advocating for appropriate policies and practices, educating employers to increase awareness of unconscious bias and statistical discrimination in hiring, and supporting youth in accessing good jobs (Spaulding et al. 2015; Loprest, Spaulding, and Nightingale, forthcoming).

- The distribution of youth across high- and low-wage industries helps explain the gender wage gap but does not explain the racial wage gap. Compared with male youth, female youth disproportionately worked in low-wage industries, but no similar pattern emerged between racial and ethnic groups. **More research is needed to determine the factors driving the gender wage gap and the racial wage gap among youth.**

Early work experiences increase wages, improve academic outcomes and soft skills, and reduce societal costs associated with mortality and justice system involvement. Program and policy interventions to increase youth employment, particularly among younger youth, low-income youth, and youth of color, are needed. These data provide evidence to support targeted investments that ensure that *all* youth, regardless of background or circumstance, can realize the far-reaching benefits of early employment.

## Appendix

### Data and Methods

The SIPP is a nationally representative panel survey administered by the United States Census Bureau that collects information on household composition, receipt of public benefits, education, and employment. It is one of the primary sources of information on topics related to family well-being and family dynamics. SIPP panel data is collected through interviews with the same families every year, asking them questions about the prior year to provide data on changes in family circumstances and income over time.

We examined the first wave of the 2014 SIPP. The first wave of the survey contains information on 29,825 households that were interviewed between February 2014 and June 2014. Respondents were asked to provide information about the year before the interview, so the data represent information from January 2013 through December 2013.

This report uses a sample of 4,676 young people who had a job at any point during the reference period, representing a national total of 21.2 million youth. We define youth as individuals ages 16 to 24, which matches the definition of youth used by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.<sup>7</sup> For our analysis, we

consider youth to have been employed if they reported full-time or part-time work in at least one month of the year. The person-weight from July 2013 was used to construct our nationally representative sample.

## Calculating Average Hourly Wages

The SIPP allows respondents to report wages for up to seven jobs and for up to two changes in pay rate for each job. The individual may report wages according to eight payment schemes that describe how often pay was received. To calculate average hourly wages, each payment scheme was first converted to an hourly rate. Average hourly wages for each of the seven jobs were calculated by averaging the three pay rates within each job, then dividing the sum of average hourly wages for all jobs the person worked (weighted by the number of months the job was worked) by the total number of jobs the person worked. We dropped wages below \$0.50 an hour from the analysis, which amounted to 3 percent of the sample.

## Industry Names

The full category name for Accommodation and Food Services is “Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation, and Accommodation and Food Services.” The full category name for Retail is “Retail Trade.” The full category name for Education and Health Care is “Educational Services, and Health Care and Social Assistance.” The industry “Professional and Administrative Services” combines the following categories: Professional, Scientific, and Management and Administrative, and Waste Management Services; Information; and Finance and Insurance, and Real Estate, and Rental and Leasing. The industry Construction and Manufacturing combines the Construction and Manufacturing categories. The full category name for Other Services is “Other Services, Except Public Administration.” The category Other Industry combines the following industries: Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting, and Mining; Wholesale Trade; Transportation and Warehousing and Utilities; Public Administration; and Military.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “The Youth Employment Crisis,” the Rockefeller Foundation, accessed July 16, 2019, <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/the-youth-employment-crisis/>.

<sup>2</sup> Lydia DePillis, “What’s Really Going On with Youth Unemployment,” CNN, August 17, 2018, <https://www-m.cnn.com/2018/08/17/us/trump-youth-unemployment/index.html>; “US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Civilian Labor Force Participation Rate: 16 to 19 years,” LNS11300012, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, accessed July 16, 2019, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/LNS11300012#>.

<sup>3</sup> Summer youth employment programs are a popular workforce development strategy used by cities across the country to provide early work experiences to tens of thousands of young people each year. These programs are structured differently across cities, but they typically pay subsidized wages to youth who work at select employers during the summer. Often, additional services such as job-readiness training are provided to participating youth. A future Urban report will look at how summer youth employment programs are working with employers to connect youth to longer-term opportunities.

- <sup>4</sup> See the appendix for a detailed description of data and methods used for this study. See also “Survey of Income and Program Participation,” US Census Bureau, last revised April 12, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sipp/data/2014-panel/wave-1.html>.
- <sup>5</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the authors’ findings on race and ethnicity in the youth workforce, see Natalie Spievack, “For People of Color, Employment Disparities Start Early,” *Urban Wire*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/people-color-employment-disparities-start-early>.
- <sup>6</sup> Calculated hourly wages are likely lower than actual earnings because this analysis does not include tipped earnings. In 2013, 5.4 percent of younger youth and 5.3 percent of older youth earned tips on at least one job.
- <sup>7</sup> “Employment and Unemployment among Youth Summary,” news release, Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 16, 2018, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/youth.nr0.htm>.

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