

SEPTEMBER 2026

Career Navigation Among Opportunity Youth Experiencing Significant Disconnection:

How Internal Readiness Factors Support Decision-Making and Action in Early-Stage Education and Career Journeys



Acknowledgments

The Britebound Center for Career Navigation at Jobs for the Future (JFF) and the Aspen Institute acknowledge and appreciate the support from Britebound in funding this research project. We also extend our deepest appreciation to the Opportunity Youth Forum regional sites that partnered with us in this research, enabling us to engage and learn from young people and practitioners across the nation.

About Britebound, Jobs for the Future, and Opportunity Youth Forum

Britebound (formerly American Student Assistance) is a national, Massachusetts-based nonprofit with a mission to inspire middle and high school learners to explore their interests, experience potential careers, and navigate a meaningful and rewarding future. Britebound fulfills its mission by providing free, digital experiences including Futurescape and GoZig directly to millions of students, and through policy, impact investing, research, and philanthropic support for organizations and their leaders who guide young people along the way. Since 2021, Britebound has awarded more than \$54 million in grants and deployed more than \$118 million in impact investments. Working with more than 150 active strategic partners, Britebound is helping learners navigate today's rapidly changing education and career landscape while reshaping the systems they will need tomorrow, preparing them for whatever path comes next after high school.

Jobs for the Future (JFF) is a national nonprofit that drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve economic success for people, businesses, and communities. We do this by designing solutions, scaling best practices, influencing policy and action, and investing in innovation. We forge deep partnerships with employers, investors, entrepreneurs, policymakers, and education and workforce development providers to break down barriers and reimagine what is possible. JFF's goal is to align education, workforce, and employment changemakers toward a shared North Star: **By 2033, 75 million Americans facing barriers to economic advancement will have quality jobs.**

The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions promotes collaborative, community-based efforts that build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity. AFCS supports communities to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and determine their own solutions to their most pressing challenges. We envision a future where communities self-determine their own vibrant and lasting solutions to the social and economic problems that they face. We believe that if communities have more power to lead change, they will create a just and equitable society. The Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) began in 2012 (as the "Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund") to use momentum coming out of the White House Council for Community Solutions. It is comprised of a network of more than 40 urban, rural, and Indigenous communities seeking to scale multiple reconnection pathways that achieve better outcomes in education and career opportunity for youth.

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Introduction

An estimated 4.1 million young Americans between the ages of 16 and 24 are disconnected from school and work—a population often referred to as “opportunity youth.” Many more young people experience significant barriers to accessing and persisting across learning and career preparation activities as they deal with a range of systemic, community, and personal barriers to building thriving futures.¹ For too many of these young Americans, meaningful progress towards quality jobs, career and economic advancement, and a sense of purpose, belonging, and well-being remains elusive, despite the presence of a continuum of policies, practices, and investments in this area of work.

Existing research has documented the prevalence, disparities, and long-term consequences of youth disconnection.²⁻³ Additional research has documented program design(s) and interventions aimed at re-engagement and connection.⁴⁻⁶ An emerging body of research is focused on additional outcomes such as educational attainment and employment, as well as more downstream outcomes such as long-term economic well-being.⁷ Far less is known, however, about how opportunity youth and young adults experiencing disconnection—once they have experienced some initial connection and engagement with programming—decide whether, when, and which education or employment pathways to pursue, particularly under conditions of instability and constraint.⁸ This study responds to that gap by shifting analytic attention to the decision and action moments that occur when young people begin to navigate their career journeys, making key choices and taking specific steps toward education or employment goals.

Drawing on a collaborative partnership between the Britebound Center for Career Navigation at Jobs for the Future (JFF) and the Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum, this research uses a qualitative design that centers the voices of young people and the direct service staff who work with them to help advance knowledge about how young adults experiencing disconnection approach decision-making and execute on action steps that support progress towards education and employment outcomes. The learnings from this research are poised to help practitioners, policymakers, funders, and other key stakeholders strengthen the way we support young people in moving towards economic well-being and positive, thriving lives.

Literature Review and Key Concepts

As noted in the introduction, a substantial share of young people in the United States experience periods of disconnection from both education and employment. National estimates consistently indicate that millions of young adults are neither enrolled in school nor participating in the labor market at any given point in time, with disparities that persist across race, income, geography, and family circumstances.^{9 10} While aggregate rates fluctuate with economic conditions, the persistence of youth disconnection suggests that the challenge is not solely cyclical, nor fully addressed by existing programmatic interventions.¹¹ Administrative and evaluation data from reengagement initiatives show steep attrition between outreach, intake, enrollment, and completion, highlighting how many young people disengage before programs can plausibly influence longer-term outcomes.^{12 13} Longitudinal research further demonstrates that reconnection to work or school is often fragile and episodic, with young people cycling in and out of education and employment rather than following linear pathways.^{14 15}

Despite these patterns, much of the existing research and evaluation literature pays only limited attention to how young people approach whether, when, and how to make decisions about, and take actions toward education and career activities. The internal conditions of readiness that shape young people's willingness and ability to act, as well as

the contextual factors that enable or constrain those decisions, remain underdeveloped in the field, particularly for youth navigating unstable connections to work and learning. Even less is known about how opportunity youth themselves experience, understand, and describe the internal thought processes that help them feel ready to make and act on decisions related to education and career pathways.

This is especially notable, as across youth development, psychology, and workforce development fields, research repeatedly emphasizes the importance of these internal readiness factors—including self-efficacy, locus of control, motivation, belonging, purpose, and self-regulation—in enabling young people to meaningfully engage in education and career pathways. Frameworks from the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), SAMHSA, and positive youth development (PYD) models highlight that these mindsets and internal conditions form the psychological foundation for persistence, problem-solving, and future-oriented decision-making.

Understanding how the internal conditions of readiness shape young people's decision-making and action in the early stages of career navigation will enable those shaping systems, designing programs, and delivering services to align these efforts with emerging knowledge about how these critical factors show up in how young people think and act.

Key Concepts

Opportunity youth

Refers to young people ages 16–24 who experience significant disconnection from education and employment.^{16 17 18}

Career navigation

The ongoing, nonlinear process through which individuals engage in interconnected activities such as self-discovery, learning about options, pathway planning, skill-building, and working to make informed decisions and pursue quality jobs.¹⁹ Progress often includes pauses, re-entry, and course correction. Effective career navigation depends on individuals' readiness and confidence to act, access to clear and actionable information, supportive relationships and networks, and coordinated supports across education, workforce, and social systems that reduce barriers, clarify pathways, and enable follow-through as circumstances change.²⁰

Internal readiness factors

Include self-efficacy, agency, motivation, belonging, purpose, and self-regulation.²¹

Self-efficacy

Refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments or achieve specific goals.²²

Motivation

Refers to the impetus that gives purpose or direction to behavior; it operates at both a conscious and unconscious level.²³

Locus of control

Refers to how much an individual believes that they have control over the conditions, events, and outcomes of their lives.²⁴

Action moments

Refers to specific points in time when a young person is considering a key decision or action related to their education and career journey.

Research Questions

This study aims to advance learning in this understudied area by centering opportunity youth perspectives on the internal psychological conditions that influence their engagement in early career navigation decisions and activities. It examines how these internal states may interact with external supports—such as caring adults, exposure to opportunities, and affirming feedback—to build or inhibit readiness to embark on the decisions and actions of early career navigation. The study focuses on career navigation decision and action moments, which are specific points in time where youth are considering whether a decision or action is worth taking (motivation), whether they are capable of making a decision or taking an action that will drive achievement of a specific goal (self-efficacy), and whether their decision-making or action will influence outcome(s) (locus of control) in the context of real world systems, challenges, and constraints.

The study focuses on the following research questions:

1. How do opportunity youth currently engaged in services describe the internal mindsets, beliefs, motivations, and readiness conditions that influence their decision-making and action related to early career navigation activities?
2. What experiences, relationships, and program or community supports do opportunity youth identify as most helpful in building internal readiness related to early career navigation activities—and what barriers make readiness to engage in these decisions and activities more difficult?

In addition, the research team was interested in how insights from youth and youth-serving staff perspectives can inform the design of practice, policy, and investments that are designed to engage and support opportunity youth and other young people experiencing significant disconnection in achieving positive career and economic outcomes.

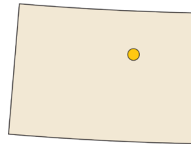
Methodology

The study used a qualitative design that leveraged five Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) sites as a vehicle to connect with opportunity youth and the program staff that work directly with these young people.

Specifically, the study engaged the following OYF sites:



**Greater Houston Opportunity
Youth Collaboration**



**Denver Opportunity
Youth Initiative**



Stockton Youth Collective



**Community Foundation
of Greater Buffalo**



**Boston Opportunity
Youth Collaborative**

The research team identified and interviewed a total of 41 young people (18–24) across these five regions. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was conducted using remote meeting technology and/or telephone. In addition, the research team held two focus groups with staff from youth-serving organizations that were part of the OYF partnership(s) in the region. Each focus group lasted one hour, and a total of 11 staff participated in the focus groups; this included staff from across all five sites.

Interview and focus group data was audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach.²⁵ An initial coding framework was developed deductively based on the study's theoretical constructs—self-efficacy, locus of control, motivation, contextual constraints, and relational support—with additional codes added inductively to capture themes emerging from participants' narratives. See [Appendix A](#) for interview and focus group questions. See [Appendix B](#) for additional information about methodology and coding framework.

Key Findings

Analysis of information gathered through the youth interviews and staff focus groups led to the identification of six key findings around how youth experience readiness for action in navigating their education and employment journey and the aspects of programming and support that were identified as critical in nurturing and enabling that readiness for action.

Key Finding #1: Youth experienced many significant system and external barriers to action.

These barriers to action were diverse and included financial instability, housing insecurity, repeated experience in jobs with low pay, intermittent hours, or limited flexibility, health challenges, caretaking responsibilities, and interactions with low-quality institutional support and relations (e.g., school, justice system). Many youth and their service providers described a complex, highly challenging “stack” of these barriers that were persistent factors in the lives of young people. These external barriers to action had practical, direct impacts on how young people considered decisions about education and employment.



THEIR STORIES, THEIR WORDS

Program participants reported that financial stability, records of arrest, conviction, or incarceration, and physical and mental health all affected their education and career paths.

“Because of personal life at home, and just not living in the best circumstances, like being in poverty... my home life, it affected how I showed up in school.”

“I sometimes don’t feel like I have a say in the opportunities that appear to me.”

“I didn’t get to finish high school, because it was either high school or not being homeless. And I wasn’t going to be homeless, so I decided to drop out.”

“I got in a bit of trouble. I got a felony. It has been harder for me to get jobs. Because of that, so when the jobs I do get, it’d be minimum wage, low income.”

“The depression was, like, kind of affecting my choices.”

“I got shot, and I can’t use my left hand, and most of the jobs that I’ve been trying to look at require both hands.”

Key Finding #2: Youth experienced the three core readiness beliefs (self-efficacy, locus of control, and motivation) on a continuum, and with significant fluidity.

Youth described motivation, self-efficacy, and locus of control as existing along a continuum, with their strength and alignment varying by the specific decision, task, system, and stakes involved. Motivation shapes whether a step feels worth taking, self-efficacy, whether it feels doable, and locus of control, whether effort seems likely to matter. Action becomes less likely when any one of these weakens: a young person may want the goal but doubt they can carry out the next step, believe they can do it but question whether the system will reward their effort, or feel hopeful yet view the immediate opportunity as too costly or risky. These appraisals shifted quickly in response to changing circumstances, including competing demands, prior experiences with institutions, immediate stressors, and whether a pathway felt navigable and worthwhile. Rather than a fixed trait, readiness emerged as a dynamic appraisal of whether taking the next step felt possible, worthwhile, and likely to lead to a meaningful outcome.

This interpretation also helps explain why providers emphasized repeated reinforcement. Staff described helping young people re-stabilize and realign these beliefs in specific moments by building confidence, reinforcing what was within their control, and making next steps feel more manageable, timely, and worthwhile. Readiness, then, is interactive and dynamic: it depends not only on internal beliefs, but also on whether relationships, navigation support, and surrounding conditions help those beliefs remain strong enough to translate into action.



THEIR STORIES, THEIR WORDS

R. described a sharp shift in confidence as he moved from applying to an education program to participating in its classes. Although he felt fully confident completing the application, adapting to a different educational culture and learning English made classroom participation feel isolating and uncomfortable.

“The only one...who doesn’t understand everything was me. So I was, not feel too much confident...I always feel a little bit uncomfortable with that.”

For C., pursuing a GED meant working toward better-paying employment, even while facing uncertainty about her academic preparation. Her confidence experienced “ups and downs,” particularly when math and English coursework felt difficult, and she sometimes considered leaving the program. Her motivation, family support, and access to program resources helped her persist and ultimately complete the program.

“Sometimes I wanted to quit the program because I was like, I can’t do it, it’s hard. I don’t know no math, I don’t know nothing about English.”

Before beginning the job, H. questioned whether they were qualified and rated their confidence at about 6 out of 10. Reading the job description made them question whether they were qualified, and they were concerned about being able to support and connect with students because they did not see themselves as especially talkative. Once they began the work, they recognized they were capable and found that the role went well.

“Sometimes you read descriptions and stuff, and you think you’re not qualified, but then when you do it, you’re like, oh, that’s it. You realize you’re capable more than you think you are, but at the time, I was scared.”

Key Finding #3: The concept of time showed up in many ways as a powerful factor in whether youth felt ready and able to navigate career decisions and actions.

Throughout their interviews, youth regularly referenced the concept of “time” as a factor in whether they felt ready to make an education or employment decision and further, whether they would act on it. Notably, some of these references to time were grounded in the practical—e.g., a youth was too busy with work to find the time to apply to an education program or participate in mentorship or other supports. While many youth were grounded in the present about decisions around how they spend their (limited) time in pursuit of education and employment goals, some youth also expressed a future orientation as they considered the trade-offs of time.

In addition to these practical discussions of time, youth also referenced the concept of time in ways that were more abstract and often seemed to capture a more generalized sense of unreadiness to make decisions or take actions. For example, youth expressed variations of the idea that it simply was “the wrong time” to do something without being able to specify why. Other youth expressed hesitation around making education and employment decisions because they felt that they had missed some key window of time or societal expectation of the right time to do something. While these invocations of time did not directly explain why a youth was making a specific decision, they are suggestive of the idea that internalized beliefs about how and when a young person “should” engage in specific education and career steps may be an important factor in influencing readiness and action in this context.



THEIR STORIES, THEIR WORDS

R. was offered the opportunity to return as a success coach after funding for the role became available again. Although the position would have provided additional higher education experience, R. decided not to accept it because the full-time schedule conflicted with classes and observation hours. R. also considered weekend and travel requirements, pay, the workload of school, and how adding the job could affect their mental health.

“It was a full-time 40-hour schedule and they weren’t able to work with my class and school schedule.”

B. applied for a warehouse job paying \$23–\$25 per hour but did not accept it because the long hours conflicted with shared care of their newborn and the other parent’s work schedule. B. also said they had a felony and were not yet on probation or through case processing, which made it harder to find employers willing to hire them. B. later found work with hours that fit better.

“It was a great job...but I didn’t go through with it...Because it was a warehouse, they have long hours. It didn’t really fit the time [with a baby].”

X. weighed the immediate financial trade-off of pursuing a HiSET against the longer-term value of preparing for a career. They noted that studying would leave less time for paid work and delay entering the job market. At the same time, X. viewed completing the HiSET as a way to move toward an actual career rather than a temporary solution.

“In terms of the HiSET, the cons would be, I have less time to allocate towards actually making money...but it sets me up for an actual career, and then I can just kind of get it out the way, and then pursue something that’s going to not be a temporary fix, but a permanent solution to finding a career.”

Key Finding #4: Relational support is a key mechanism to transform readiness to act into action.

While feelings of self-efficacy and motivation were identified by youth as important in feeling ready to act, the interviews with youth and staff focus groups consistently identified how important support from program(s) and program staff were in translating this readiness to act into action. This took many forms and included significant practical support such as helping youth complete forms, collect documents, providing direct assistance with transportation, and more. It also included social and emotional actions such as repeatedly reminding youth of their sense of personal motivation and goals, iteratively and intentionally building and reinforcing confidence, serving as an at-the-ready sounding board and support when small delays or challenges arose, and more.



THEIR STORIES, THEIR WORDS

A. said that having supportive people in her life—including family, her organization, and the school where she worked—helped her feel she had control over her career direction. Although she said she “didn’t really know” what she wanted to do next, she was considering returning to college to pursue a master’s degree in social work.

"I feel like I do have control right now. Now that I have supportive people in my life, and a great support system."

X. described the support they received from program staff as a "great support system." Staff set up their HiSET program, scheduled the test, and helped them obtain identification.

X. said staff *"went above and beyond"* and that this support was *"a great motivator to continue to pursue education."*

After leaving one college, J. reentered higher education with help from a mentor connected to a previous youth program. The mentor suggested a community college and helped J. apply again, complete financial aid, and select classes. J. contrasted this support with the independent process she experienced after high school, when she said she did not know how to navigate applications or whom to ask for help.

"This mentor who noticed that I left [college] and said, you know, community college is free here. You should go to [community college], and so they helped me with the whole process of applying to a school again, and applying for financial aid..."

C. said that encouragement from teachers and other people in their life influenced decisions about pursuing new opportunities. They described having people "rooting" for them and explaining why they should move forward, saying this support helped with anxiety. *"I have so many people behind my back to... tell me, this is why you should do it. And they beat up the anxiety for me."*

Key Finding #5: Youth career navigation is nonlinear and often precipitated by windows of readiness, which can include both positive and stressor events.

By definition, career navigation is nonlinear, and the research team's engagement with youth and staff participants reinforced how consistently this non-linearity shows up as young people prepare to make and act on decisions about education and employment. Strongly contributing to this non-linearity were the appearance of precipitating events, which young people often described as influential in making them feel ready (or pressured) to decide and act at a specific moment. Notably, these precipitating events were both positive—for example connecting with an outreach worker who provided information about a program, or moving to a new housing situation that afforded the chance to enroll in school or access more job opportunities—and negative, such as a decrease in work hours that pushed a youth to seek other employment or a family health crisis that provided new motivation for a young person to build toward education and earning potential. While some precipitating events were entirely or nearly entirely outside the control of the youth or a specific program, many of the identified precipitating events toward readiness are elements that are, or could be, within the realm of personal, program, or system factors, and later in this report, we offer expanded thinking on this critical issue.



THEIR STORIES, THEIR WORDS

C. left high school after her mother left the family and she took responsibility for caring for her younger sister who has autism. She worked at a daycare where she could care for her sister while earning income and gaining childcare experience. Later, her stepmother and siblings helped with her sister's care. C. then joined a youth program to earn her GED.

"My stepmom stepped in as well, and she's been helping us with my little sister till this day...we just came with a plan on how to take care of my little sister, get her to her appointments, and get her where she's supposed to be every week."

B. said he had done well in high school and attended community college until his mother became ill and was hospitalized for two years. He tried to continue school remotely but ultimately stopped attending and focused on caregiving. After becoming a parent, he worked at Burger King and Verizon, choosing jobs with schedules that fit his caregiving responsibilities. With his daughter in daycare, he began considering trade school.

"Now that she's older now, now I'm trying to get back in trade school. She's about to be 2 in July, so now she's in daycare, so we will have our time to do trade school."

D. left a three-year restaurant job after being told to attend orientation for another position, believing this meant they had been hired and would start work. The new employer then delayed the start while reviewing background information. D. said the experience felt "lost" and wished the employer had explained during the interview that starting could take two to three weeks.

"The only reason why I left is because they told me I had orientation, and when you say you have orientation at a job, you kind of think you're hired, you start your first day."

Key Finding #6: Youth often experience “being navigated” into education, career, and broader life situations.

While this study included a strong focus on youths’ sense of readiness to make and act on education and career journeys, it was notable that many youth shared experiences of “being navigated” by the system(s), program(s), and or program staff they were engaged with. Youth shared many examples where a specific decision—such as what job skills training program to enroll in—was one that they experienced as being largely made by someone else, or by a set of circumstances that they experienced as so limiting and so constraining as to preclude any real sense of agency and choice. Staff focus group participants touched on this topic as well, including through expressing the way that systems (such as foster care or the justice system) are often structured in ways that limit youth agency and decision-making, and that they often have to strike a challenging balance between empowering and building youth agency while also helping them navigate system(s) and program(s) with constraints.



THEIR STORIES, THEIR WORDS

C. learned about YouthBuild from a cousin who knew she had left high school before earning a GED. Her cousin explained that the program could help her enter a career field while earning her GED and receiving pay. C. initially applied for health and wellness/CNA, but those spaces were full, so she entered construction instead. Although construction was not her first choice, she decided to continue pursuing her GED after leaving her daycare job.

“At first, I applied for the health and wellness, a CNA position, right? And it was all full, and I can only qualify for construction...and I was just already overwhelmed. And I was like well, I’m, gonna have to just stick in this program, because I had already quit my other job.”

After aging out of foster care at 18, H. said he had “no support” and no one to rely on to help him move forward. He explained that people stopped helping once he became a legal adult and that he needed to prioritize avoiding homelessness over continuing school. *“I didn’t have any support...I was freshly out of foster care and 18, so basically everybody washed their hands when I became a legal adult.”* After leaving school, H. said he went into fast food because he felt he had “not many options” and believed he lacked the schooling needed for other work. He also said he did not know that other possibilities were available to him at the time.

“Then I went into fast food because I didn’t have many options, because I didn’t have the schooling to do something else, or I didn’t think I did. I didn’t know that I could have gone and done something else.”

An Integrated Perspective on Key Findings

Taken together, these key findings suggest three critical and interconnected takeaways.

- 1 First, it is clear that alignment among the three core readiness beliefs—motivation, a sense of self-efficacy, and a perceived internal locus of control—is frequently not enough to enable opportunity youth and those experiencing significant disconnection to make decisions and take action related to their education and career pathway. These youth are often confronted with such significant challenges across multiple areas of personal, family, and community experiences that these personal beliefs are simply insufficient to drive decision-making and progress through complex educational and labor market pathways. While this finding is not inherently new, as there is a strong body of research that shows the negative impacts of socio-economic, systems, and other barriers on young people, it is notable as it draws attention to the interconnectivity of policies and practices that target both internal readiness factors and system and program-level interventions.
- 2 Second, this research is suggestive of the idea that young people must both perceive that it is the “right time” to make and act on a decision and receive personalized navigation support to do so. As presented above, the factors going into what makes a moment the “right time” are complex, and more research on this nuanced and important concept is warranted. Further, this research suggests that a wide continuum of personalized navigation support that is inclusive of both practical and social and emotional support helps create space for and activate decision-making. The perspectives shared by both youth and staff also highlighted how intensive, iterative, and deep this support often is, arching over months and years and characterized by consistent, persistent, high-dosage engagement with a young person.
- 3 Third, this research draws attention to the experience that many young people have around limited agency. Whether due to system, family, economic, or other practical constraints or the operationalization of youth-serving programs and services on the ground, the young people interviewed through this research consistently identified decision moments and actions that, to them, felt less like expressions of their own career navigation journey and more like something that happened to them. To be sure, there is more research to be done here, but this finding serves as an important reminder of opportunities to think carefully about how we support youth to experience their transition into adulthood and careers as one that is agentic and imbued with a sense of personal ownership, while still providing the high-touch guidance that is often so critical in enabling success.

Strengthening Practice, Policy, and Investment

Drawing on this research and findings, we offer the following strategies that practitioners, policymakers, and funders can use in increasing positive education, career, and economic outcomes for opportunity youth.



Practitioners can:

- Deliver and scale high-touch, youth-centered programs—within their own organization and across the regional youth ecosystem—that nurture and reinforce internal readiness factors, including motivation, self-efficacy, and an internal locus of control, as a part of the approach to service delivery and youth experiences.
- Identify and strengthen opportunities for youth agency throughout all aspects of program design and delivery. This may include an intensified focus on securing resources that enable investment in program supports beyond some of the more typical education, skills, and career pathway services to provide additional opportunities for program components that center and empower youth and offer access to flexible future pathways.
- Continue and deepen a consistent focus on barrier reduction through supportive services (especially around housing and basic needs) that can help create the space for youth to perceive a broader array of educational and career pathways, engendering a realistic sense of agency and opportunity. These supportive services can also play a critical role in mitigating the impact of negative precipitating events that, if unaddressed, may sharply decrease a young person's sense of self-efficacy in acting on positive, future-oriented education and career activities.



Policymakers can:

- Ensure that timeline(s) for youth-serving programs across systems (education, workforce, child welfare, justice) are inclusive of longer, multi-year timelines for support and minimize abrupt cliff(s) of access to service and supports, and as appropriate, consider opportunities to resource cross-system and intermediary work to support positive outcomes for young people. Many programs still have, in statute, timelines and limitations on access to services and supports that prevent youth service providers from delivering consistent support over the arc of transition from adolescence into adulthood, and even among youth who are motivated and agentic in their education and career journeys, these supports play a critical role.

- Invest in education and career exploration and navigation activities in K-12, including an emphasis on early grades. Opportunities to foster future-oriented education and career planning, especially planning that is connected to quality, local jobs that are accessible to next-generation workers, have the potential to engage and equip young people with critical skills and experiences at the beginning of their learning journey, and help prevent long-term and persistent cycles of disconnection where progress towards thriving careers becomes more challenging.
- Prioritize intergenerational policy solutions that help stabilize economic well-being for all families, reducing the impact of sustained poverty and financial fragility in limiting real and perceived options for young people growing up in low-income households. These policy solutions can also play a critical role in reducing acute, negative precipitating events that may pressure a youth into experiencing a sense of limited self-efficacy and control due to financial and other shocks to household and family stability.



Funders can:

- Identify opportunities to deepen investments in existing education and career exploration, navigation, and preparation programs to bolster opportunities for youth agency and to strengthen alignment with the non-linear journey(s) that many young people—especially those with barriers—take in building their future.
- Think intentionally and in a data-informed manner about key cost-of-service-delivery metrics in the context of existing and emerging research that highlights the role of high-touch services and trusted adults in supporting young people to develop and maintain internal readiness factors as they navigate complex education and career systems.
- Direct investments to create more “possible pathways” that mitigate some of the stark tradeoffs that young people often make between a need for immediate income, a desire to build towards economic mobility, and personal and family caretaking responsibilities. Such “possible pathways” are critical if young people are going to fully capitalize on investments made in their motivation, sense of self-efficacy, and internalized locus of control.

Appendix A

Youth Interview Questions

01 Warm-Up and Current Life/Career Snapshot

Purpose: To build rapport, understand what is going on currently with work/school, and understand career locus of control.

To start, can you tell me a little about yourself—anything you think is important for me to know about who you are right now?

When you think about your career overall, how much control do you feel you have over where things are headed?

Optional probes: What makes you feel that way? What feels most within your control right now, and what feels least within your control?

02 Education Journey

Purpose: Understand how education has been experienced, trusted, and interpreted over time. Identify their mindset if they are currently in education, or their mindset about pursuing education.

What is/was school like for you overall?

Optional probes: Did you feel like you belonged there? Were there moments that really stand out—good or bad? Were there people who made school feel more possible or less possible?

03 Work Experience and Orientation to Pathways

Purpose: Surface how work is experienced as opportunity, risk, identity, or constraint, including informal or unstable work. Gain further insights into career locus of control.

Tell me about any jobs or work experiences you've had, including short-term, informal, or cash work.

Optional probes: How did you get those opportunities? What made you leave, if you did?

When you think about the kind of work you'd like to do someday, what comes to mind—if anything?

Follow-ups: How realistic does that feel right now? What makes it feel possible or not possible?

04 Identifying a Focal Action or Near-Action Moment

Purpose: Anchor the interview around a concrete decision or near-decision related to pathway selection.

I'd like to focus on one specific moment when you made a decision related to work or learning—or came very close to it. My remaining questions are about this decision moment. This could include signing up for a program, applying for a job or training, reaching out for help, or deciding not to act after seriously considering it. Can you tell me about one moment like that?

05 Decision-Making Under Constraint

Purpose: Surface how young people weigh tradeoffs, risk, and feasibility within real-world constraints.

Tell me how you made the decision. What were you weighing or thinking through at the time?

Optional probes: What were the pros and cons you thought of? What felt most important? What felt risky? What felt hardest to figure out?

What else was going on in your life at the same time that made this decision easier or harder?

06 Readiness, Timing, and Prior Inaction

Purpose: Understand how readiness developed over time and how earlier inaction shaped later decisions.

Before that moment, how much were you thinking about making a change related to work or learning?

Optional probes: Was this something you'd been thinking about for a while, or did it come up more suddenly? Did it feel more like "someday" or "now"?

07 Motivation and Self-Efficacy (5 minutes)

Purpose: Understand motivation as situational energy and self-efficacy as confidence in executing specific steps.

At that moment, what was giving you the push—or energy—to consider taking the step?

On a scale of 1-10 (10 being extremely confident), how confident did you feel about being able to actually do what was required, like applying, showing up, or sticking with it?

Optional probes: Which parts felt manageable? Which parts felt hardest or most uncertain?

08 Help-Seeking, Belonging, and Trust

Purpose: Understand how relationships and institutional interactions shape action.

Did you talk to anyone or get help around this decision? Who helped make it feel possible—or not?

Optional probes: Who did you reach out to? Why that person or program?

When you interacted with the program, school, or employer, how did it feel?

Optional probes: Did you feel welcomed or judged? Did you feel like you belonged there? Did you feel understood?

09 Attribution and Advice

Purpose: Elicit meaning-making, third-person explanations, and participant-generated insight.

Thinking about other young people in situations similar to yours, why do you think many don't end up taking steps toward work, school, or training—even when opportunities exist?

If someone in a similar situation asked you what helps people take that first step, what would you tell them?

Is there anything else you'd like to share with me?

Staff Focus Group Questions

01 Observing Readiness and Timing (Readiness-to-Act)

How do you recognize when a young person is ready, or not, to take steps toward their education or career, including when they are already participating in services?

02 Self-Efficacy in Practice (Can They Do the Steps?)

In your experience, what makes young people feel more or less confident about carrying out the concrete steps required to pursue education or work (e.g., applying, showing up consistently, completing requirements)?

03 Locus of Control and Payoff Beliefs (Will Effort Matter?)

How do young people you work with generally talk about control over their career direction? What feels within their control vs. outside it?

What past experiences seem to shape young people's beliefs about whether systems or pathways will “work” for them?

04 Motivation and Energy to Act (Why Now?)

What tends to give young people the push or energy to act at a certain moment?

What drains motivation or makes action feel not worth the effort, even when opportunities are available?

05 Relational and Environmental Supports (Conversion of Readiness to Action)

What kinds of relationships or program conditions most often help young people move from thinking to acting?

06 Translation to Practice and Design

What do you most wish funders or policymakers understood about why young people delay or decline education and career opportunities?

Appendix B: Analytic Procedures



Data Sources

Primary analytic data consisted of semi-structured virtual interviews with Opportunity Youth participants. Across up to five Opportunity Youth Forum partner sites, the study sought to recruit 8–12 youth per site, for an intended sample of approximately 40–60 participants ages 18–24 who were actively engaged in education, employment, or youth-serving programs. Interviews were designed to elicit detailed retrospective accounts of specific education and employment decision episodes rather than abstract attitudes or generalized opinions. To provide contextual understanding of organizational practice, the study also included one to two optional virtual focus groups with approximately 10–15 youth-serving staff across participating sites. Staff focus groups explored observations about supporting youth decision making, perceived barriers, and program practices. Staff data were analyzed separately and were used to contextualize youth narratives and inform interpretation and design implications rather than as independent evidence regarding youth readiness.



Data Collection and Preparation

All interviews and focus groups were conducted virtually, audio-recorded with participant consent, professionally transcribed, and stored in a secure cloud environment accessible only to the research team. Interviewers reviewed transcripts for accuracy, removed identifying information, and maintained interview notes documenting contextual observations and immediate analytic reflections. All materials were organized within a shared secure workspace to support collaborative analysis. Participation was voluntary and guided by trauma-informed research practices. Participants could decline to answer any question, pause the interview, or withdraw at any time without consequence.



Analytic Orientation

The study employed reflexive thematic analysis using a combined deductive and inductive coding strategy. Initial coding categories were informed by the study's conceptual framework, including self-efficacy, career locus of control, motivation, contextual constraints, and relational support. As analysis progressed, additional codes and conceptual distinctions were developed inductively to capture themes emerging directly from participant narratives. Rather than treating readiness as a stable characteristic of participants, the analysis conceptualized readiness as something expressed within specific education and employment decision episodes. Accordingly, coding focused on concrete moments in which participants considered, initiated, delayed, abandoned, or persisted with a particular educational or career-related action.



Unit of Analysis

The primary unit of analysis was the action moment: a discrete point at which a participant considered taking a specific education, training, or employment step. Examples included exploring options, submitting an application, enrolling in a program, attending after enrollment, persisting through challenges, delaying action, or deciding not to proceed. Each coded episode was anchored to a single action moment rather than to an entire life story or interview. Coders assigned the highest-order action represented in each episode rather than cumulatively coding every implied precursor step. This episode-based approach allowed the analysis to examine how readiness fluctuated across different decisions and contexts within the same participant.



Coding Framework

Coding was guided by a structured coding manual developed iteratively throughout the study. The coding framework integrated theory-driven constructs with emergent themes identified during analysis and organized coding around interconnected domains, including:

- action moments;
- triggers that prompted consideration of action;
- readiness beliefs (self-efficacy, career locus of control, and motivation);
- personal and contextual barriers;
- institutional experiences and friction;
- relational supports;
- risk calculation;
- alignment or misalignment among readiness beliefs;
- pathway trajectories over time;
- explanations for non-action;
- participant advice; and
- reflections on the interview process.

In addition to primary codes, coders applied cross-cutting analytic tags to capture the influence of time and navigation when these factors shaped whether readiness translated into action.



Trustworthiness

The study incorporated several strategies to enhance trustworthiness. Approximately 40% of interview transcripts were independently coded by two researchers, with discrepancies resolved through discussion and consensus. Regular analytic meetings refined code definitions, challenged emerging interpretations, and considered disconfirming evidence. An audit trail, including interview notes, iterative coding manuals, and analytic memos, documented analytic decisions throughout the study. Findings were triangulated across youth interviews, staff focus groups, field notes, and analytic memos, with youth interviews serving as the primary source of evidence.

Endnotes

¹Youth Disconnection in 2025 (Measure of America, 2025)

²Bellfield, C., Rosen, H., and Rosen, R., The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2012)

³Wenger, J, and Bonds S, Understanding Disconnection Among American Youth (Rand Corporation, 2025)

⁴Burd-Sharps, Sarah, and Kristen Lewis, More Than a Million Reasons for Hope: Youth Disconnection in America Today (Brooklyn, NY: Measure of America, 2018)

⁵Lewis, Kristen, et al., Broad Recovery, Persistent Inequity: Youth Disconnection in the U.S. (Brooklyn, NY: Measure of America, 2024)

⁶Loprest, Pamela, Sheila Maguire, and Demetra Nightingale, Disconnected Young Adults: Work, Education, and Family (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2019).

⁷Aspen Institute Opportunity Youth Forum Evaluation and Assessment available at <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/oyf-evaluation-and-assessment/>

⁸Throughout this report, the terms opportunity youth and young people experiencing significant disconnection are used. This is meant to acknowledge and encompass two things. First, as noted in the literature review, many young people experience episodic engagement with education and work and may, over the course of several years of middle adolescence into early adulthood, experience both periods of full disconnection, as well as periods of partial or full connection. Second, the young people interview for this project represented a mix of young people who would clearly have been categorized as opportunity youth during a significant period of their adolescence and young adulthood (but are now connected to services), and those that would likely not have clearly been categorized in this way, but nonetheless experienced significant disconnection from school and work at times, and faced many of the same systemic, community, and personal barriers that are associated with opportunity youth. The authors of this report felt that there was value in including both descriptors and were aligned behind the findings and recommendations bearing value and resonance across these populations.

⁹Burd-Sharps, Sarah, and Kristen Lewis, More Than a Million Reasons for Hope: Youth Disconnection in America Today (Brooklyn, NY: Measure of America, 2018).

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- ¹⁵ Zaff, Jonathan F., et al., “Reconnecting Disconnected Youth: Examining the Influence of Youth Development Program Supports,” Journal of Youth and Adolescence 43, no. 3 (2014).
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- ¹⁹ Jobs for the Future, Gallup, and Families & Workers Fund, “The American Job Quality Study,” Jobs for the Future (JFF), April 15, 2026, <https://www.jff.org/idea/the-american-job-quality-study/>.
- ²⁰ Note that this is a definition developed and utilized by Jobs for the Future (JFF)
- ²¹ These six internal readiness factors are frequently grouped and referenced as the six core readiness factors in the fields of psychology, learning, and behavior change.
- ²² Bandura, A. “Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change,” Psychological Review, 84(2), 191–215 (1977)
- ²³ American Psychological Association, Motivation, (APA dictionary of psychology, 2018)
- ²⁴ Rotter, J. B., “Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement,” Psychological Monographs: General and Applied, 80(1), 1–28, (1966)
- ²⁵ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101. 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa



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