

Research Brief: Expanding the Evidence Base for Reconnecting Opportunity Youth to Pathways to Thriving

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There are approximately 5 million young people between the ages of 16 and 24 in the United States who are not in school or working and are at risk of surviving rather than thriving.¹ The pathways to thriving are fraught with amplified disconnection. Although communities made progress during the last decade in reconnecting youth to opportunities to thrive and build skills through school and employment, the COVID-19 pandemic reversed some of this progress. This is the challenge, and now is the time to address these inequities through a learning agenda for opportunity youth.

Understanding the barriers faced by opportunity youth and identifying promising strategies for better supporting their success is a key focus of AIR's PROMISE (Promoting Resiliency, Opportunity, and Mobility in Service of Equity) Center. Funded by a generous grant from AIR's Equity Initiative in 2021, PROMISE is committed to creating solutions that provide equitable pathways to a thriving workforce for all individuals, particularly those who have been most harmed by the effects of segregation by race and place. While effective workforce training practices exist, structural inequities prevent many opportunity youth from participating in these programs and opportunities. PROMISE is seeking to better understand the barriers these individuals face, identify promising practices that better support their strengths and needs, and build bridges to effective workforce and postsecondary training.

Youth who are between the ages of 16 and 24 and are neither working nor in school are sometimes referred to as "opportunity youth" but are also sometimes labeled "disconnected youth" or "at-risk youth." The different terms used to describe young people are a direct reflection of society's changing views on youth and the promise they hold. The term "opportunity youth" conveys the optimism and promise that young people represent for thriving at multiple levels—individual, community, and economic.



In our previous brief, [*An Opportunity to Do Better: Youth Pathways to Thriving*](#), we provided a brief description of opportunity youth and reviewed the program evidence on nine programs designed to serve opportunity youth. In this brief, we

- expand our understanding of the barriers opportunity youth face,
- explore the research and practice evidence on particular strategies intended to support opportunity youth, and
- identify a researcher–practitioner learning agenda to support opportunity youth on a path to thriving.

A Lost Opportunity

The challenges that opportunity youth face are not singular. They arise from an inequitable access to resources and opportunities, maintained by oppressive factors such as racism, economic injustice, and under-resourced schools.² Within this context, many schools and youth-serving organizations lack the funding and resources to provide necessary supports, such as career exploration to young people who are no longer in school or are unemployed.³ The public school system is often one of the last places where disconnected youth will attempt to reconnect, but even the public school system has eligibility requirements that may exclude some opportunity youth.⁴ The large numbers of opportunity youth and the limited availability of high-quality alternatives to college for skill building in the United States increase the challenges of reconnecting opportunity youth to successful pathways.

Opportunity youth rates of disconnection vary by race and ethnicity. Asian youth have the lowest rate of disconnection (6.6%), followed by White (9.2%), Latino (13.7%), Black (17.2%), and Native American (25.8%) youth.⁵ Opportunity youth also differ from their connected peers in several important ways, and youth disconnection affects a myriad of long- and short-term outcomes (see text box). The more systemic barriers that opportunity youth face (including marginalization on the basis of race, gender, disability, socioeconomic status, or region), the greater the challenge connecting them to programs that can serve their needs adequately. The longer that a young person is not in school or not working, the more lasting the impact on their life. These include not only their future earnings but also their overall well-being.⁶

Opportunity youth differ from their “connected” peers in several important ways.

They are:

- nearly twice as likely to live in poverty,
- twice as likely to be living apart from both parents (in the case of 16- and 17-year-olds),
- more than three times as likely to have a disability,
- nine times as likely to have discontinued high school, and
- more than 20 times as likely to be living in an institutionalized group setting.

Youth disconnection affects a myriad of long- and short-term outcomes, including:

- mental health,⁷
- civic engagement and political participation,⁸
- health and life expectancy,⁹
- the stability and quality of personal and familial relationships,¹⁰ and
- overall resilience and ability to adjust to changes.¹¹

Prior research shows the importance of personal and familial relationships as a source of social capital for the development of life and work readiness skills, and opportunity youth tend to be more likely than their peers to be disconnected from key sources of social support.¹² This gap in social capital is due to the lack of opportunity and resources, especially among those who identify as young people of color and/or are living in poverty.¹³ Social disconnection among opportunity youth is expanded even further by geography. About a quarter of youth living in the rural South (24%) have reported social disconnection.¹⁴ Racism and other forms of discrimination have led to exclusionary policies, such as residential and educational segregation, that contribute to inequities in social capital development among opportunity youth.¹⁵ These disparities have been attributed to heightened exposure to

What research tells us about programs that support opportunity youth

AIR reviewed the published research evidence on nine rigorously studied programs that serve opportunity youth in *An Opportunity to Do Better: Youth Pathways to Thriving*. Based on our evidence scan of these programs, we found the following:

- The benefits achieved by the most comprehensive programs tend to fade over time.
- Many programs struggle to retain youth.
- Due to eligibility criteria, many programs exclude the hardest-to-reach opportunity youth.
- There is a paucity of research on how to best serve opportunity youth that incorporates equity considerations.

structural violence, experiences of race-based trauma, and segregated communities. Programs that facilitate developmental relationships may be uniquely positioned to enhance the social capital of opportunity youth and promote more positive outcomes.¹⁶

Strategies to Support Opportunity Youth

For this brief, we expanded our literature search to include literature reviews and syntheses, mixed-methods studies, and program practice reports to delve deeper into the evidence, especially evidence on the common strategies employed by U.S.-based opportunity youth-serving programs. We were particularly interested in identifying promising practices for youth who face a multitude of barriers to reengagement. After completing a series of keyword searches, we identified 97 articles and reports, which we then screened for relevancy. Our screening criteria included recency of publication (published in 2016 or later), a focus on opportunity youth, and whether articles and reports addressed barriers and strategies. Following the screening process, we reviewed 42 articles and reports. Using thematic mapping, we identified the following common and promising strategies that opportunity youth-serving programs currently employ: youth-adult partnerships and mentoring, reengagement, paid opportunities for work-based learning, and the integration wraparound services within programs.

It is important to note that despite expanding the literature search for this brief, we found few studies that adequately define or evaluate interventions designed to serve opportunity youth who **face a multitude of barriers to reconnecting**, nor did we find studies focused on generating evidence that allows for an in-depth investigation of **opportunity youth subgroups**. From our assessment, this is due to two primary reasons: First, many of the youth facing multiple barriers to reconnecting with school or work are not participating in opportunity youth-serving programs because (a) these barriers are not being addressed and (b) the youth are screened out by most of the traditional programs designed to serve opportunity youth, so there is little or no evidence for **these subgroups**. Second, many studies aggregate all opportunity youth for analysis purposes and do not have a sufficiently large sample to disaggregate results for subpopulations. There are some exceptions to this such as the National Study of Job Corps. However, as we noted above, even large programs with intensive education and training and extensive wraparound services do not yield long-term results. For these reasons, it is very difficult to identify which strategies are effective for opportunity youth experiencing a

multitude of barriers and to determine how these young people would have fared if had they participated in appropriate programs.

Strategy 1: Youth–Adult Partnerships and Mentoring

Around a quarter of the articles and reports we reviewed highlighted **youth–adult partnerships** as a strategy to address the barriers that opportunity youth face.

Through the formation of youth–adult partnerships and mentoring, the paths of opportunity youth can be redeveloped by implementing supports and spaces where youth are able to showcase their strengths and potential.¹⁷ This is a common practice that draws from the science of learning and development and positive youth development.¹⁸ For example, drawing from Search Institute’s Developmental Relationships framework, Opportunity Reboot partners with MENTOR Minnesota



to provide youth with positive mentors and critical skill–based training.¹⁹ Developed to leverage the existing capacity and strengths of community programs to more effectively create pathways, the Opportunity Reboot model includes four key features: “(a) positive mentoring relationships; (b) individualized goal supports; (c) coordinated career pathways supports; and (d) impactful cross-sector partnerships.”²⁰ In the Opportunity Reboot model, youth were able to build new mentoring relationships through the implementation of skill-based training. These positive mentoring relationships established new connections between program sites as well as connections with others outside of the program.²¹ Program staff were also able to support the maintenance of these relationships by introducing youth to a larger network of supportive adults.²²

Strategy 2: Reengagement

Around a quarter of the articles and reports we reviewed highlighted **reengagement** as an important strategy for supporting opportunity youth. Reengagement involves staff, typically at a school or dropout recovery center, identifying young people who have stopped attending school and then reaching out to those students through letters and phone calls and by visiting students’ homes.²³ Staff establish a connection with young people to learn more about their interests and goals and then work to identify an appropriate placement (e.g., traditional high school, alternative educational setting, or high school equivalency program) to help them

complete their high school degree and prepare for postsecondary opportunities or a career.²⁴ One example is Opportunities for Youth Coalition, a countywide coalition in Phoenix, Arizona, of over 70 partner organizations collectively working to reengage opportunity youth. The coalition uses data to identify higher concentration areas where youth have stopped attending school so that program staff may prioritize their recruitment efforts.²⁵ In a two-year period of external review, the coalition significantly increased the number of youth they reengaged through their use of data.²⁶ To support the expansion of reengagement efforts such as these, coordinated data systems across sectors such as health, education, and social services may help to identify opportunity youth so that they may be reengaged. In addition, by expanding data collection to include critical information on subpopulations, such as youth in foster care or in institutionalized settings and LGBTQ+ young people, reengagement specialists may be better able to connect opportunity youth with the supports and services that they need to thrive.²⁷

Strategy 3: Paid Opportunities for Work-Based Learning

Nearly half of the articles and reports we reviewed emphasized **paid opportunities for work-based learning**. For example, the Young Adult Internship Program is a subsidized employment program operated by a variety of provider organizations that provides New York opportunity youth with a paid internship, along with additional support services.²⁸ Young people who have participated in this program not only gained valuable experience but more than doubled their annual earnings 1 year following participation, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Subsidized and Transitional Employment Demonstration.²⁹ Another organization, YouthBuild USA, uses a curriculum based upon emerging workforce and industry trends to provide opportunity youth with work-based learning experiences that provide critical job skills.³⁰ Through paid work-based learning opportunities such as these, opportunity youth can gain crucial on-the-job experience and build important professional connections that support long-term job stability, all while receiving the financial compensation necessary to sustain their focus on professional learning.³¹

Strategy 4: Wraparound Services

Nearly half of the articles and reports we reviewed underscored the provision of **wraparound services** as a key strategy for supporting opportunity youth. Wraparound services may include childcare, mental health services, supplemental nutrition assistance, living stipends, and transportation stipends. Providing wraparound services is a common strategy employed by comprehensive programs that serve opportunity youth and is part of a wholistic approach to mitigating the numerous barriers that opportunity youth face. One such program is Job Corps, a nationwide residential career training program serving over 60,000 people. Job Corps

provides meals, housing, clothing, a living allowance, medical care, and a childcare allotment to support young people while they are receiving education and job training.³² These services remove some of the barriers to participation, and the residential nature of the Job Corps program provides the participants with a built-in community to support their growth and success. Unfortunately, not all opportunity youth–serving programs have the resources to provide extensive wraparound services due to the high cost of these services.³³ Supporting opportunity youth with wraparound supports together with education and employment training opportunities may be able to help to prevent program attrition and ensure that these young people thrive.

Helping Opportunity Youth Thrive

Our expanded review of the literature for opportunity youth yielded additional information about promising strategies for supporting youth. This is an important step towards better understanding the collection of program strategies that are offered by many opportunity youth–serving programs. The literature review has yielded additional insights for creating a research agenda that aims to improve our understanding of what works for opportunity youth. To better support opportunity youth, we identified two important priorities for evidence building.

First, we need to learn how to best serve youth who face a multitude of barriers in reconnecting to school and work. Members of the Opportunity Youth Evaluations and Studies project noted that the current approach to evaluation and research of opportunity youth is selective and leaves out segments of opportunity youth.³⁴ This was confirmed by our review. Practitioners, policy makers, and communities must grapple with how to serve the large number of opportunity youth who face a multitude of barriers to reconnecting and staying connected. Future evaluations must therefore draw on the expertise of practitioners and opportunity youth themselves to help identify more nuanced program models designed to meet the needs of opportunity youth facing the greatest number of barriers to participation. This will require research–practitioner partnerships with a focus on equity.

Second, because current programs often employ a collection of strategies and services (e.g., education, training, and wraparound supports), it is difficult to disentangle the relative effectiveness of each of the strategies individually in supporting opportunity youth. Without rigorous research to “unpack” promising and common strategies used by programs and to produce evidence for various subpopulations of opportunity youth, it is challenging for policy makers and practitioners to adopt any of these cutting-edge strategies

in the field. Therefore, more research is needed to produce evidence on the relative effectiveness of the strategies in this review and how to sequence or package them, particularly for opportunity youth facing a multitude of barriers.

AIR's Commitment to Opportunity Youth

AIR is committed to working with our partners as thought leaders (a) to help build innovative opportunity youth program testing sites that take advantage of the innovation currently occurring in programs and (b) to co-build a research agenda to rigorously test new strategies and pedagogy to generate the evidence needed to put opportunity youth back on a path to thriving—especially opportunity youth who are underserved by existing programs. In the next phase of this work, we will conduct interviews with thought leaders, practitioners, and opportunity youth to identify promising practices and new program models that may not have been rigorously studied but are commonly applied and may hold promise for opportunity youth, particularly those facing a multitude of barriers to reconnecting. Of critical importance in co-building an agenda will be attention to cross-sector, cross-systems alignment (e.g., alignment between education, workforce, and community providers and assets) to structure youth serving systems, services, and programs in ways that serve youth more effectively and efficiently and promote more long-term outcomes of opportunity youth.

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