

CAREER PATHWAYS

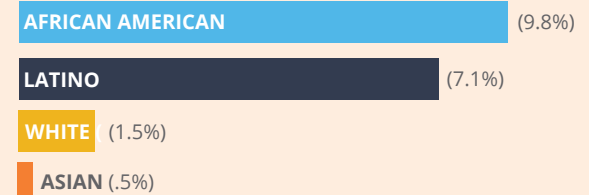
»»» for Boston's Opportunity Youth

Despite a thriving local economy, many young people in Boston face significant challenges transitioning from school to a career pathway. Within the city, nearly 5,000 16- to 24-year-olds are not in school or employed. Most of these young people have already earned a high school diploma, but struggle to connect with employment opportunities outside of unstable, low-paying jobs with limited opportunities for advancement. This group, known as Opportunity Youth (OY), represents incredible untapped promise and potential.

In a new report, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy takes an in-depth look at the state of career pathways for Opportunity Youth by going straight to the source. Through a series of focus groups with Boston youth, researchers gained insight into the educational experiences and career opportunities available across the city. They also spoke with a variety of other leaders in the OY field to gain a comprehensive understanding of the state of local career programming and preparation. The key takeaways from these discussions and recommendations for future action are highlighted below. For more, see the full report, available at www.renniecenter.org.

Boston's Opportunity Youth Population

YOUTH EXPERIENCING DISCONNECTION



OY are largely non-white and have diverse cultural experiences. In Boston, disconnection rates for Black and Latino youth are higher than for White and Asian youth.

Opportunity Youth are also more likely than their peers to have been raised in or near poverty, and they are more likely to be English language learners, high school drop-outs, court-involved and homeless or in foster care. Yet despite the multiple sources of trauma that many OY have faced, they frequently possess deep wells of resilience and a strong motivation to succeed.

Takeaways from Conversations with Opportunity Youth

CAREER EXPLORATION

OY have limited opportunities to explore potential careers. Many have little access to role models who can speak about how they have attained a particular career, and educational institutions rarely offer opportunities for students to learn about their career interests and aptitudes. Additionally, OY struggle to find entry points to careers that engage them and utilize their skills. In focus groups, Opportunity Youth frequently recognized the importance of internships and real-world work experiences to help them explore potential careers, but they did not see unpaid internships as viable options given the often pressing need to earn money to support themselves and their families.

- “I didn't know what I wanted to do. I didn't understand what I was passionate about.”
- “There is an expectation to know what you want right out of high school but nothing to help navigate that.”
- “It's hard to get something unless you know someone.”

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Opportunity Youth generally did not feel that their high school experiences set them on a path toward a career. Schools tended to focus largely (or exclusively) on college as a postsecondary pathway and offered limited insight into real-world skills that support career planning such as financial literacy and resume preparation. Meanwhile, young people who attended college often struggled to see the links between their coursework and access to a career, while feeling keenly the cost of tuition.

- “High school doesn't teach you about taxes, credit, mortgages. They don't prepare you for the real world.”
- “Everything is driving to college, it is all for college.”
- “There were a lot of internships at my community college . . . but you need to find the resources.”

ENGAGING WITH EMPLOYERS

Opportunity Youth were eager to make a good impression and expressed their hopes that employers would consider their individual skills and attributes rather than judging them based on their past records. Once employed, OY benefit from a culturally competent work environment in which employees from a diversity of backgrounds and experiences feel welcomed and appreciated, along with mentors who can help navigate the workplace and expose OY to new opportunities and supportive networks.

- “Learn about me as a person. If you like me, I get a job. Make your own perception of me, don't judge me based on this paper.”
- “My employer isn't aware of our needs at all, as people....It is really hard to get employers to care, especially with family circumstances.”
- “We need accountability, and nurturing. Check in often, and hold us accountable.”

Recommendations: Building More Effective Career Pathways for Opportunity Youth

SUPPORT OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER EXPLORATION

- Develop programming across multiple sectors for youth to build career knowledge and self-understanding
- Map out prerequisites for attaining careers
- Increase opportunities for paid internships and other short-term employment experiences (e.g., job shadowing)

MAKE K-12 EDUCATION MORE RELEVANT TO CAREERS AND LIFE

- Increase opportunities for hands-on learning, including by making vocational-technical coursework available to more students and by connecting vocational pathways more closely with career opportunities
- Offer financial literacy and civic education to help young people prepare for critical life decisions

HELP YOUNG PEOPLE MAKE THE MOST OF EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

- Connect employment (including temporary or part-time employment) to soft skills and on-the-job experiences
- Build social capital by connecting OY to professional networks

CULTIVATE EMPLOYER LEADERSHIP IN THE OY FIELD

- Raise awareness and build support from business and trade associations, city and state governments, and philanthropic partners
- Increase employer engagement in building OY career pathways as part of a more comprehensive workforce development strategy

What should employers know about young people?

Responses from focus group participants

“EMPLOYERS NEED TO KNOW THAT YOUNG PEOPLE MAY NOT HAVE HAD OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERNSHIPS/APPRENTICESHIPS.”

“WE NEED OUR VOICES TO BE HEARD.”

“WE HAVE VALUABLE SUGGESTIONS.”

“WE NEED MONEY. THOSE WHO NEED IT WILL WORK FOR IT. A LOT OF YOUTH COME FROM POVERTY.”