

Young People Believe It's up to Them When It Comes to Their Futures

In June 2020, [Equitable Futures](#), a project of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, released a report called [Striving to Thriving](#) which outlined key insights about the various ways young people think about their future lives and careers and how they form their occupational identities—how they see themselves, how they understand what they're good at, and where they think they belong. The insights came from qualitative and quantitative research conducted in 2018 and 2019 with thousands of Black and Latino young people of all incomes and white young people from households with lower incomes.

Equitable Futures is part of the [Pathways portfolio](#) of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which aims to support students in their transition from high school to college, career, and beyond. The goal of Pathways is to ensure that Black and Latino students and students experiencing poverty can develop the skills and access the support and relationships necessary to thrive as they pursue their education and enter the workforce.



What the *Striving to Thriving* research showed is that many Black and Latino young people and white young people from households with lower incomes have a wide diversity and range of career and life goals.

In the *Striving to Thriving* research, young people were asked how they saw themselves and how their perceptions of their identities fit in with their career goals. The research findings countered many of the prevalent characterizations of young people who fall into groups often described as “at risk” or “vulnerable.” For example, many young people of color often hear the message that education and employment institutions struggle with racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion—which could potentially lead young people of color to feel as if their race or ethnicity is a challenge to be overcome. Instead, many Black and Latino young people reported that they experience their identities as an asset—as something that will help them determine what they want to do and be. And all of the young people represented in *Striving to Thriving*, like other young people all over the world, find themselves at different stages of thinking about their career pathways. They feel a powerful sense of agency in terms of carving their own paths, and, at the same time, they recognize that they need supportive relationships outside of their own families to reach some of their goals. Many are not sure how to develop these relationships.

Striving to Thriving is a critical part of Equitable Futures' efforts to center young people's voices in the programs, policies, institutions, and systems that support and enable young people to navigate their education and career pathways. From the report's key insights, Equitable Futures developed [recommendations, tools, and resources](#) for the adults working with young people as young people pass through high school and into post-secondary education and the workforce. In addition, Equitable Futures commissioned the [National Youth Poll](#) in 2020 to continue capturing the voices of young people and to understand how young people were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and by other events that dominated the headlines throughout that year, like racial justice and policing protests and the 2020 presidential election.

The Equitable Futures National Youth Poll took place in four waves, starting in September 2020 and concluding in May 2021 (referred to throughout this brief as the 2020-21 National Youth Poll). This brief examines the findings from the fourth and final wave of the poll. When notable, comparisons are made to the previous waves as well as the 2019 *Striving to Thriving* survey.

As with most of the efforts to document and understand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the results were variable. The first two waves of the 2020-21 National Youth Poll, conducted in August and September 2020, showed significant disruptive impacts from COVID-19. In the early waves of the survey, many young people reported changed life circumstances. For example, many young people reported that they were newly caring for family members or helping to support their family financially compared to before the pandemic. Early waves of the poll also showed significant declines in young people's optimism about the future when compared to the 2019 *Striving to Thriving* survey. After decreasing further in wave 3, young people's optimism appeared to rebound by May 2021, reaching the highest levels in that were observed over all four waves of the 2020-21 National Youth Poll. Although still lower than optimism reported in the 2019 survey, that a majority of survey respondents still feel optimistic about the future is a remarkable testament to young people's resilience during times of crisis and uncertainty. Other impacts of COVID-19 also appeared to lessen over time based on the results of waves 3 and 4 in December 2020 and May 2021.

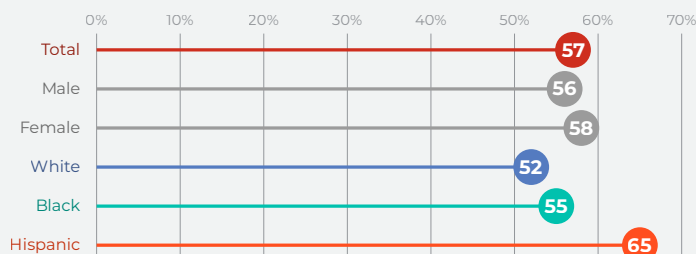
In previous briefs, we examined key findings from [Wave 1](#) and [Waves 2 & 3](#) of the 2020-21 National Youth Poll, as well as a special brief on young people's perspectives on racial justice. We saw many through-lines from the young people who participated in the 2019 *Striving to Thriving* research to the young people who responded to the 2020-21 National Youth Poll. Like the young people in the 2019 *Striving to Thriving* poll, young people today still feel a strong sense of agency, are eager to explore and learn about new career pathways, and feel positively about their futures when thinking about social movements on racial justice, climate change, and immigration.



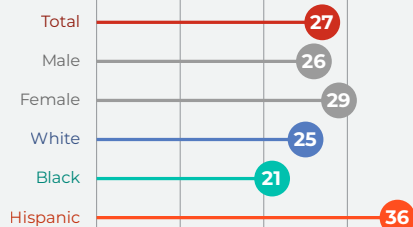
Photograph by
Ava Victoriano, age 12

Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the way you are thinking about either your future education plans, your work and/or career goals, or both?

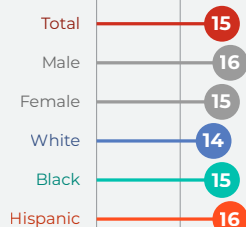
Those answering: Net: yes



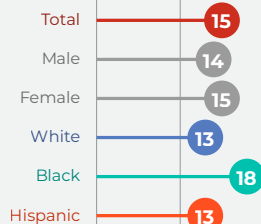
Those answering: Yes, impacted the way I am thinking about my future education plans



Those answering: Yes, impacted the way I am thinking about my future work and/or career goals



Those answering: Yes, impacted the ways I am thinking about both my future education plans and my future work and/or career goals



Those answering: No, not impacted the ways I am thinking about my future education plans or my future work and/or career goals



In wrapping up this latest wave's findings, however, it is important to note that for young people, the glass is neither half-empty nor is it half-full. On one hand, across all four waves of the 2020-21 National Youth Poll it appears that young people have done remarkably well in surviving the effects of the pandemic; despite shifts in familial and financial responsibilities and the changing world around them, they continue to pursue their career and life goals resourcefully and with purpose.

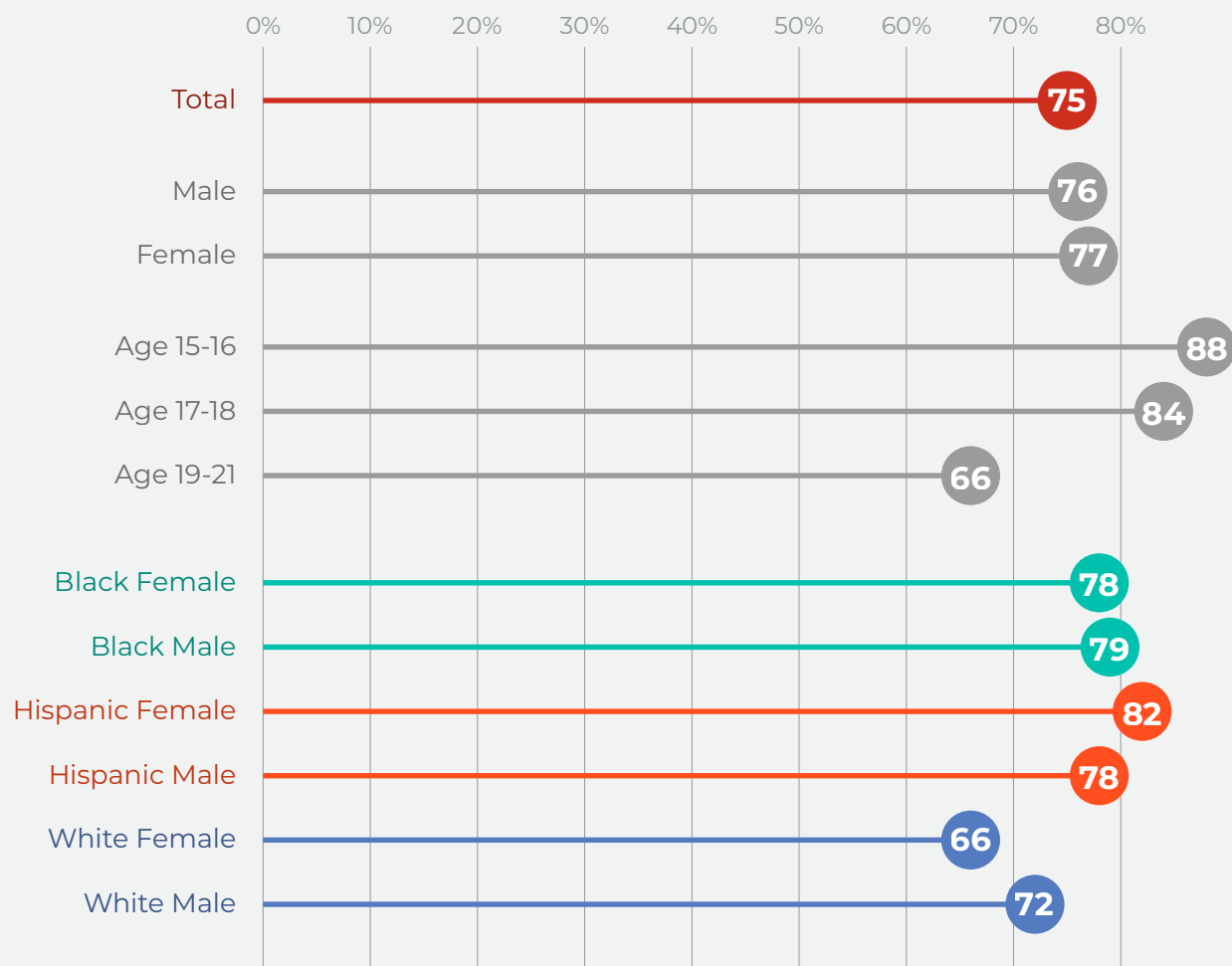
Young people, when asked, often provide plenty of evidence that they have the wherewithal to pursue their goals and that supporting them to achieve those goals would be a worthwhile investment.

For example, more than half of the respondents (57%) said that the pandemic has impacted the way that they are thinking about their future career and education plans. Among those that see the impact of COVID-19 on their education plans specifically (42%), a majority said they ended up feeling satisfied (75%) and optimistic (52%) about their new plans. At the same time, there is always a balance to be struck between responding to the needs that young people can articulate and proactively supporting them in ways they may not know they need or will need.

On the other hand, the 2020-21 National Youth Poll's findings, especially during the final wave, clearly show that the ongoing challenges of inequality—racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic—still very much exist. Many young people,

Thinking about the change(s) you have made to your education plans, how satisfied are you with your new education plans?

Those answering: Satisfied



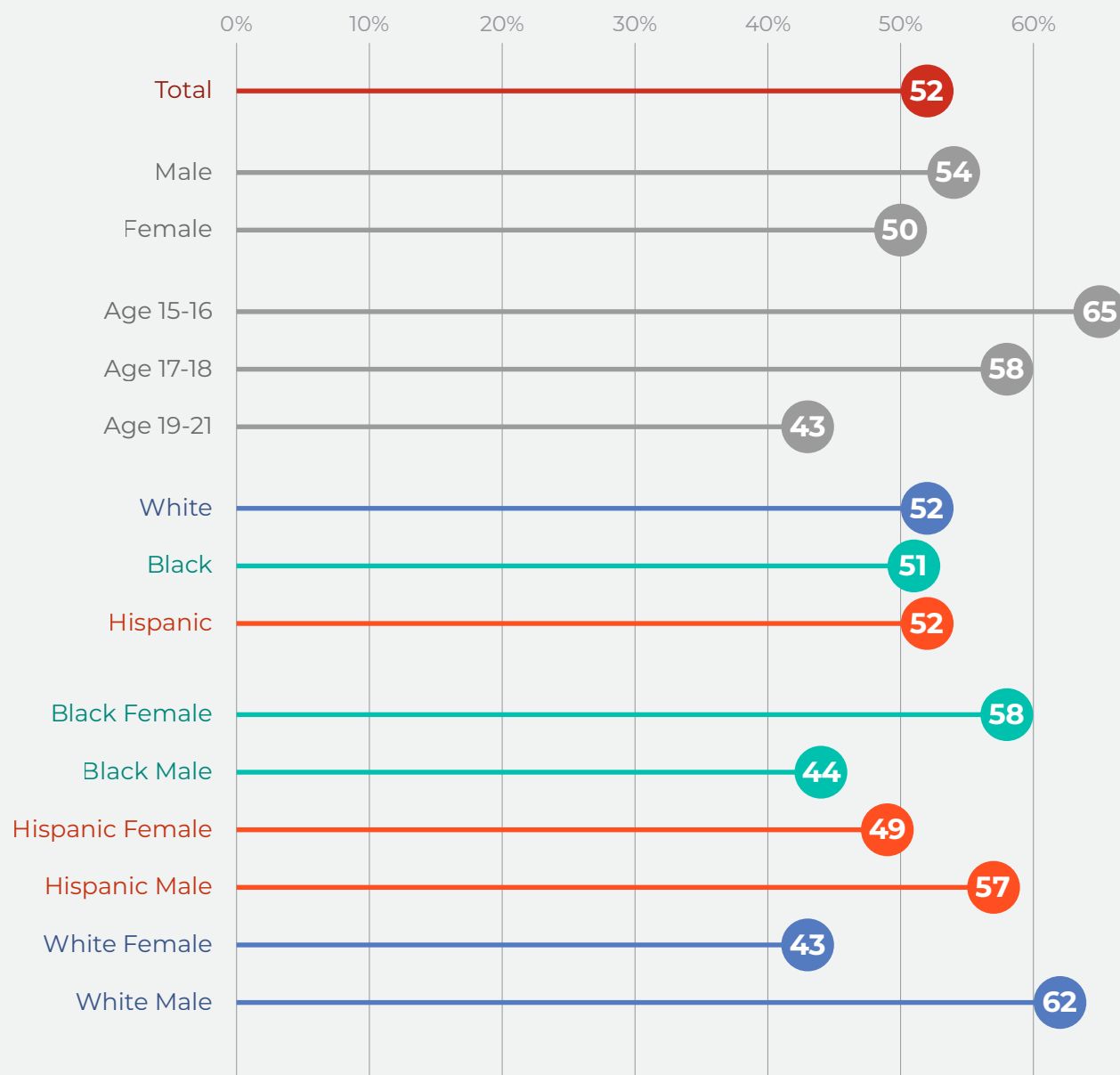
especially those experiencing poverty, reported feeling unsupported by their high school in terms of navigating the next steps in their career pathways. And, consistent with 2019 *Striving to Thriving* survey results, many young people in the 2020-21 National Youth Poll strongly believe that achieving their career goals will be “mostly up to them”.

It is clear that there is much to unpack from the poll’s findings on young people feeling it’s “mostly up to them” when it comes to achieving their career goals. Is this because young people have learned through past experience that they need to depend on themselves? Is it a lack of awareness of or access to supportive resources? Or is it part of the American cultural narrative having to do with individualism and self-determination?

Understanding why young people, particularly Black and Latino young people and white young people from households with lower incomes feel achieving their career goals is up to them needs to be understood both in relation to the structural inequalities that exist in our educational and employment systems and in relation to how much the pandemic might have worsened those inequalities. In addition to all of the research about the disproportionately high rates of COVID-19 among Black and Latino people¹, recent research shows that standardized testing results for Black, Latino, Native American, and Alaska Native

Now that you have changed your future education plans, do you feel:

Those answering: More optimistic about my future



students—who already experience a disproportionate number of structural barriers to their educational success—significantly declined during the pandemic.²

The opportunity to accelerate learning and career exploration for Black and Latino young people and white young people from households with lower incomes feels especially urgent as we face growing uncertainty about the duration and severity of the ongoing pandemic. The belief among many young people that their futures are mostly “up to them” should sound a warning bell that we need to prove them wrong, and that at every step of their respective pathways, adults and services will be there to help them access and explore new career opportunities, learn new skills, and make the jump from one step to the next.

HIGHLIGHTED FINDING

While many young people have maintained confidence and optimism throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic's impacts have also significantly disrupted their lives and how they think about the future.

In all four waves of the 2020-21 National Youth Poll (from August 2020 to May 2021), the respondents were asked about changes in their lives since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of the poll's questions focused on whether young people think differently about their futures, especially in relation to their education and career goals. However, some of the questions were about the physical, emotional and relational impacts of the pandemic: the effects it has had on their health and on their roles within their families.

For example, in the final wave of the poll, the respondents were asked if they either had experienced COVID-19 or know someone who has. The prevailing narratives about the risk COVID-19 poses for different groups of people—racial and ethnic groups and young people versus elderly—have been confusing and complex even though the evidence has become fairly clear that Black, Latino, and Indigenous people and people experiencing poverty are more likely to experience higher rates of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths.

While there is less data available about whether these same disparities persist among young people specifically (who are at less risk of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths), 55 percent of respondents in the final wave of the 2020-21 National Youth Poll reported that they either have contracted the virus themselves (13%) or know someone who has had it (48%). White female (56%) and Hispanic female (54%) respondents were the most likely to report knowing someone who has had COVID-19, while white male (19%) and Hispanic male (16%) respondents were the most likely to report having had COVID-19 themselves.

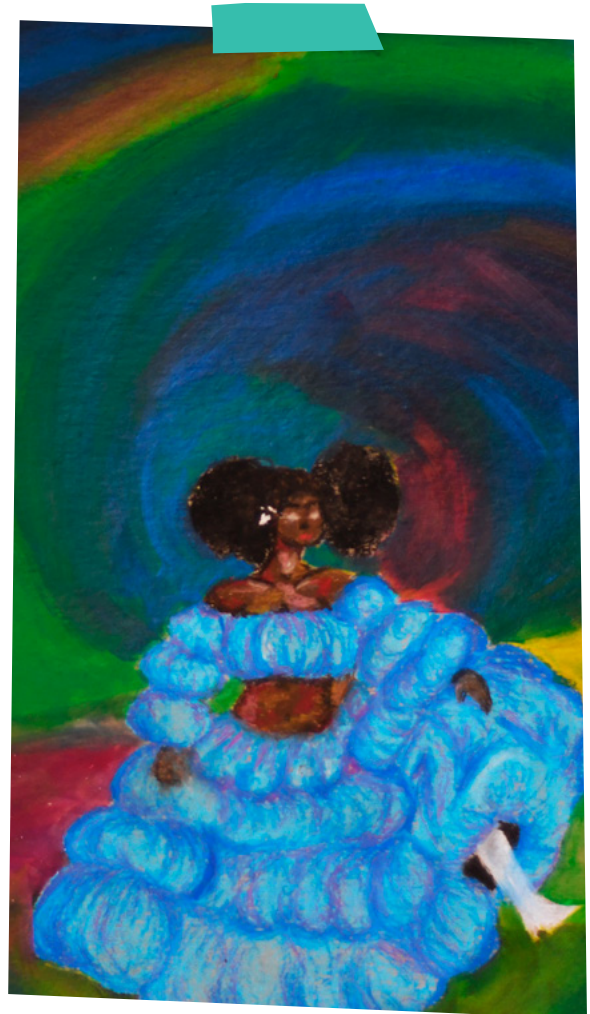


Illustration by LaDasia Bryant

Young people who have had COVID-19 or who know someone who did were more likely to report that the pandemic has impacted their thinking about both their future education plans and career goals—even after accounting for other factors and demographics, such as race, gender, and income. Having personal experience with COVID-19 made respondents more likely to evaluate, assess, and even change their future plans.

Comparisons to the 2019 *Striving to Thriving* poll and fluctuations within the four waves of the 2020-21 National Youth Poll reveal how the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the lives of Black and Latino young people and white young people from households with lower incomes.



First, in the 2019 poll, 23 percent reported working more than one job. Overall in the 2020-21 poll, a notably higher 37 percent gave this response. The proportion giving this response was higher in each wave of the study, but peaked during the third wave which was conducted in December 2020 and most likely reflects seasonal holiday work.



Second, in 2019, 75 percent of respondents said they felt very or somewhat clear about their job or career goals. That proportion fell to a low of 56 percent during the September 2020 wave of the 2020-21 poll. While it rose to 66 percent in the final wave in May 2021, it remains lower than what was seen in 2019.

The survey results also show fluctuations in optimism about the future—although it is particularly notable that optimism remains high despite the pandemic, turbulent political elections, and headlines about racial injustice, among other challenges. In the 2019 *Striving to Thriving* poll, 89 percent of all respondents reported feeling optimistic about the future. In Wave 1 of the 2020-21 survey, conducted in August 2020, six months into the pandemic, the overall number of young people who reported feeling “extremely,” “very,” or “somewhat” optimistic about the future was lower, but a still-high 77 percent. At that time, many young people likely still felt hope that the pandemic’s impacts would be limited in duration and scope. By Wave 4 of the 2020-21 poll, conducted in May 2021, the overall number of young people who were feeling “extremely,” “very,” or “somewhat” optimistic rose slightly to 80%.

The level of optimism about the future seen in Wave 4 of the 2020-21 National Youth Poll, against the backdrop of the many disruptions to their lives, is inspiring. However, some young people’s feelings of optimism may be shaped more by persistent socioeconomic factors than anything else. White young people from households with lower incomes consistently reported less optimism (measured by the proportion who said they were “extremely” or “very” optimistic) than other groups of young people in the 2019 *Striving to Thriving* survey (58%) and across all four waves of the 2020-21 National Youth Poll (48%). Interestingly enough, given all of the racial justice and policing issues in the news during 2020, Black young people (who were represented in the surveys across all income levels) consistently feel the highest levels of optimism during the same periods, although the decline overall is more significant (74% in the 2019 survey and 55% in the 2020-21 survey). A previous brief from Equitable Futures highlighted findings from an earlier wave of the poll that showed that in response to questions about whether racial justice and other social change headlines (such as climate change and immigration) made them feel more optimistic about the future, a majority of respondents said they felt more optimistic about their futures in response to such events.³

Overall, while the longer-term disruptive impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic may be studied (and experienced by people) for some time into the future, throughout the pandemic, significant numbers of young people have been able to hold on to feelings of optimism and confidence about their futures and their careers. While this may be an indication of their resourcefulness and their determination to achieve their educational and career goals, at the same time, it also raises the question of how supported they feel to achieve their goals, especially against the landscape of widening racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic gaps in education and employment outcomes.⁴

HIGHLIGHTED FINDING

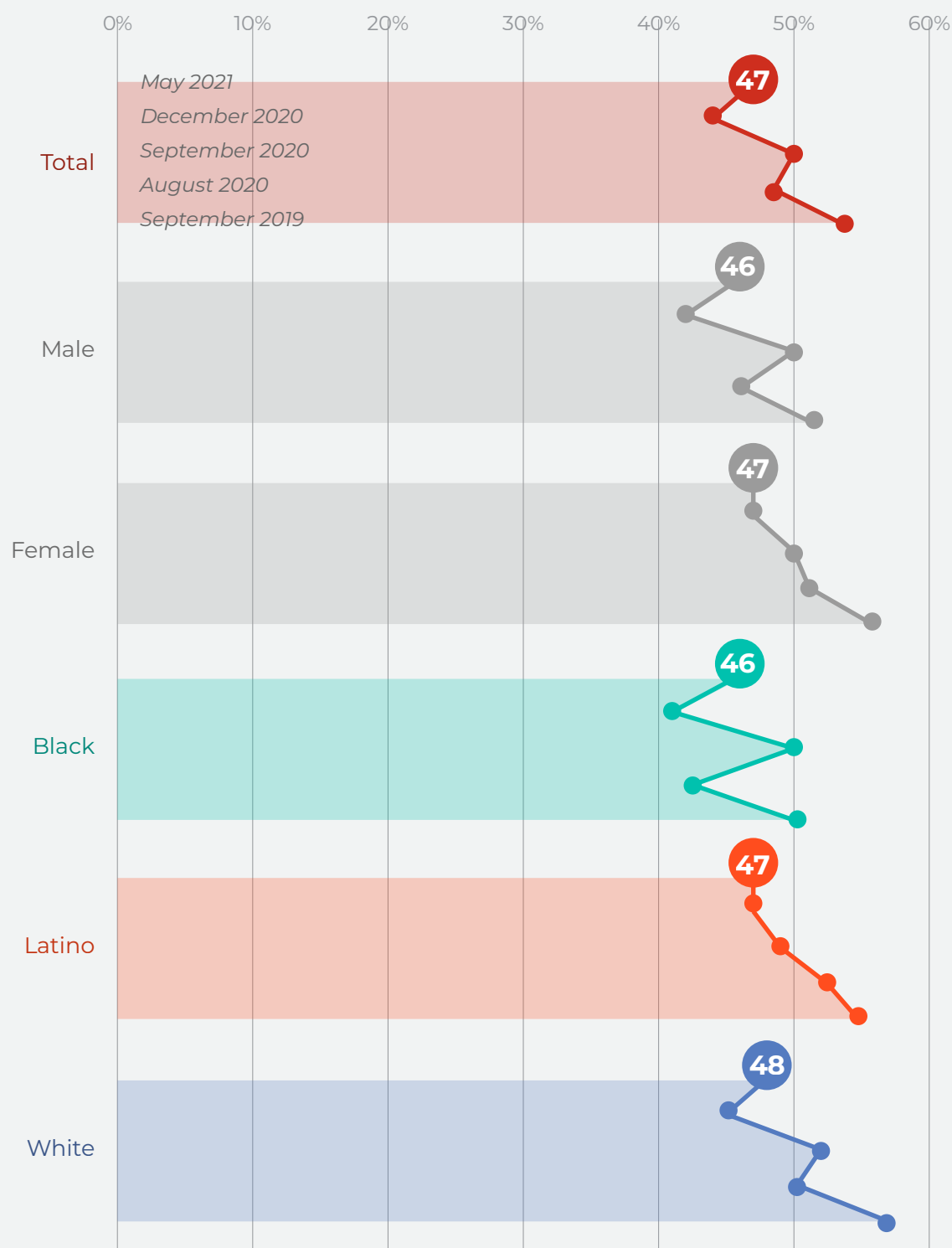
Most respondents have trusted adults to talk to and know where to look for guidance and information. However, almost half still feel like achieving their career goals is up to them.



Illustration by Daniel Patrick

Young people's responses about having trusted adult confidants, about talking to someone about their life goals, and about knowing where to look for information and guidance show that most respondents feel they need support in their career pathways, with many already having these conversations or reporting that they know where to look. During the fourth and final wave, 81 percent reported knowing where to look for information on how to achieve their future career goals; 79 percent of all respondents said they know where to look for guidance on their future career goals; 72 percent of all respondents reported that they have a trusted adult confidant; and 71 percent reported they talk to someone about their life goals (down slightly from 74% in 2019).

Those answering: It's going to be mostly up to you to achieve the kind of job or career you want in the future.



However, almost half (47%) of 2020-21 National Youth Poll respondents reported feeling that achieving the careers they want will be mostly up to them, with a similar response across race and gender and income groups. Even though many respondents reported the presence of trusted adults in their lives and knowing where to look for information and guidance about their future careers, whether these resources are sufficiently actionable for young people feels like a question worth exploring.

Why do young people feel like achieving their career goals is mostly up to them? Part of this feeling may have to do with prevailing and shifting American narratives about work and self-determination and individualism. Part of it may have to do with the lessons young people are internalizing about racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic divides in our society, and who can overcome which systemic barriers to economic stability and success. And, as always, there is a balance to consider between respecting young people's agency and autonomy and, at the same time, being proactive about helping them identify supports they may not know they need. Regardless of the multitude of factors that may be shaping their responses, that approximately half of survey respondents feel that achieving their career goals is mostly up to them, should be seen as both a challenge and an opportunity to the industries that exist solely to support young people through K-12 and post-secondary education, and beyond.

Additionally, a closer look into how young people search for information, and how and where they can access information, reveals some clues into why many young people feel as if achieving their career goals are mostly up to them. In the final two waves of the 2020-21 National Youth Poll, respondents were asked to list all of their sources for information about career goals, and Google and other search engines garnered the most answers (48% of overall respondents). Teachers (40%) and school counselors (36%) came in second and third, respectively. Overall, given the proven value of supportive relationships (beyond online information sources) to young people's success in achieving their career and life goals, it feels as if there's a great deal of space to fill in young people's lives when it comes to people, advice, and guidance on career pathways.

Again, this may be an example of young people knowing that they need support and guidance on their career pathways but not always being clear on how much support and guidance they need and where to get it. Research from the Christensen Institute shows that when asked about existing relationships between young people and adults, 86 percent of adults surveyed reported strong developmental relationships with young people, whereas 45 percent of young people reported strong developmental relationships with adults.⁵ While it is not uncommon for wide gaps to exist between the perceptions of one group of people versus another on the same topic, this feels like a huge opening for adults and young people to build on relationships in ways that not only advance young people's exploration of career pathways, but also feel more aligned.

HIGHLIGHTED FINDING

Household income levels are the most significant factor in whether young people feel supported in their career and life goals by their high schools or other outside programs.

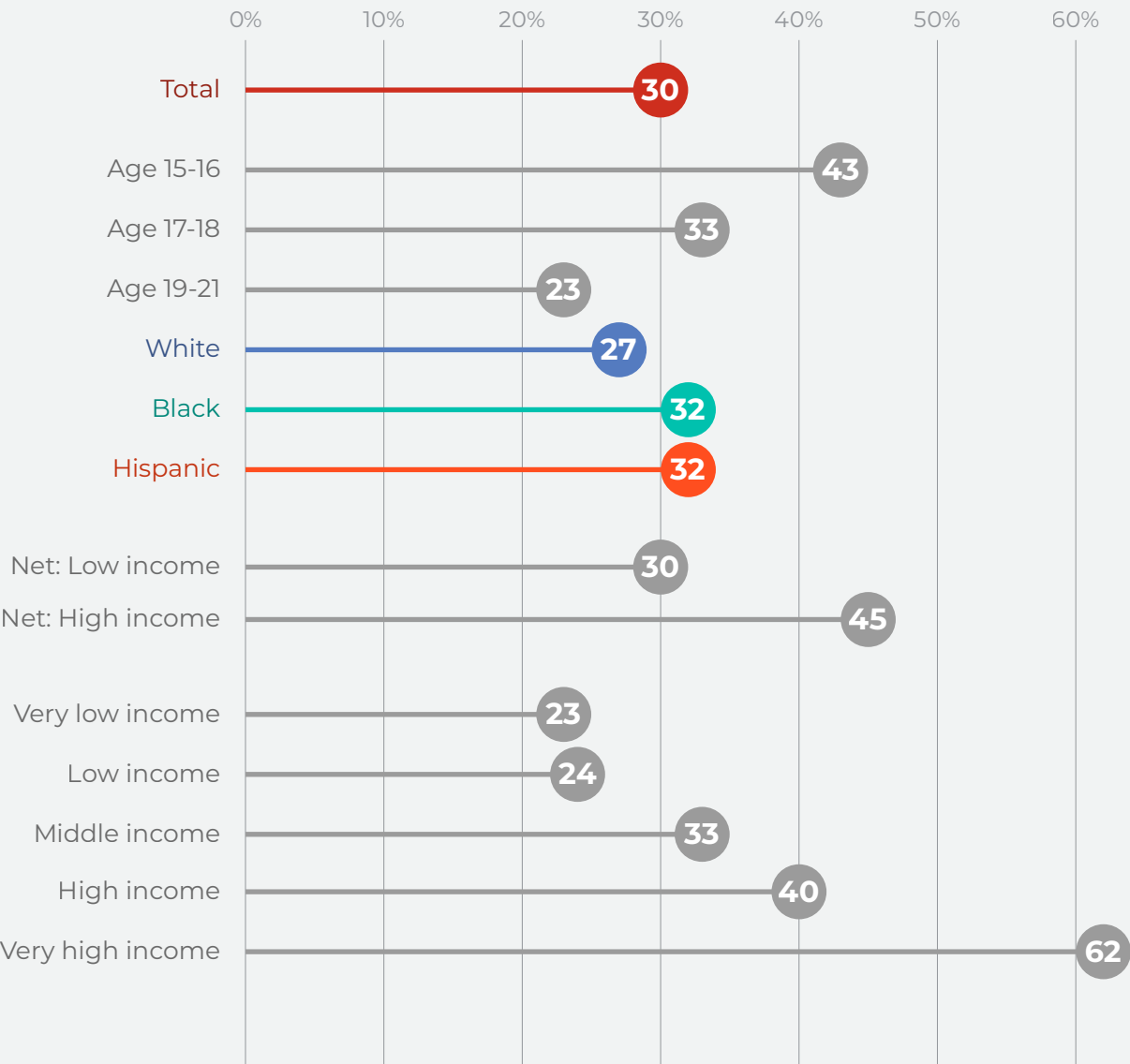
The COVID-19 pandemic completely upended in-person education. Many school systems were forced to rapidly transition to online learning and, eventually, hybrid approaches. Educational institutions not only had to adopt new technologies, they also had to develop new schedules and systems for how to deliver some form of educational content to students.

Many of the activities that expose students to new ideas for career pathways—like mentoring, clubs, and sports—take place during and around an in-person school day. Less attention was paid to what happened to these activities during the pandemic than to the curtailment of academic instruction. In the final wave of the 2020-21 National Youth Poll, many young people reported that they were receiving some support (19%) from their high schools or outside programs with respect to their plans after high school.

What is concerning, however, is how few reported that they were receiving a great deal of support from their high school or from outside programs about their future plans. Only three in ten (30%) respondents reported they were receiving (or received) a great deal of support from their high school about what they wanted to do and how to achieve it. Even more concerning, young people from households with lower incomes were much less likely to report feeling a great deal of support from their high school (30% lower income versus 45% higher income).

How much support do you feel you are receiving/received from your high school about your plans after high school?

Those answering: A great deal of support



How much support do you feel you are receiving/receive from places or programs outside your high school about your plans after high school?

Those answering: A great deal of support



There is also an income gap in the proportion who reported getting support from outside programs, with 22 percent of respondents from households with lower incomes getting this support compared to 37 percent from households with higher incomes. In other words, not only does the 2020-21 National Youth Poll show that only some young people feel they are receiving a great deal of support from their high school or from outside programs for their future plans, the proportion who does is even lower for young people from households with lower incomes across race, ethnicity, or gender.

Services and programs where young people can engage in discussions and experiences related to their future education and career pathways are critical to adolescent development. Many respondents from the final wave of the 2020-21 National Youth Poll who reported they have received support from their high school specifically mentioned teachers, and many also reported having support from career-related activities like job fairs and career counseling. Others mentioned receiving help finding a job. Some respondents reported that their high school offers “college-level classes,” and they feel being able to take these classes is helping to prepare them for their post-high school plan of attending college. A few respondents also mentioned they feel support through ROTC.

“Certain teachers visit me at home, or we have virtual chats.”

– HISPANIC FEMALE SURVEY RESPONDENT, AGE 17, LOWER INCOME

“My high school provides me with a very strong education as well as a schedule that helps prepare for a college level schedule.”

– WHITE MALE SURVEY RESPONDENT, AGE 18, LOWER INCOME

“My high school is trying to prepare us for the real world after we graduate. They always have speakers and job fairs so we can kind of see what we want to do with our lives.”

– WHITE FEMALE SURVEY RESPONDENT, AGE 16, LOWER INCOME

“The school counselors gave me material and resources to look up for a career path I want to take. They also gave me information on people that I could talk to about my career.”

– BLACK FEMALE SURVEY RESPONDENT, AGE 18, LOWER INCOME



By contrast, young people who reported receiving little or no support from their high school said that the teachers and administration are not engaged with or not interested in their students, focus only on graduation or helping “high achievers,” or that high school does not teach them anything valuable.

“They literally didn’t care unless you were an athlete or top of the class.”

– WHITE SURVEY RESPONDENT WHO IDENTIFIES DIFFERENTLY, AGE 20, LOWER INCOME

“They only cared about you graduating; they didn’t talk about life after high school or careers.”

– HISPANIC FEMALE SURVEY RESPONDENT, AGE 20, LOWER INCOME

“I never had anyone ask me about my plans. The only time I meet my assigned counselor, she doubted my ability to take AP classes. I had no one to ask questions of.”

– HISPANIC MALE SURVEY RESPONDENT, AGE 20, LOWER INCOME

“Nobody ever talked to me about what I wanted to do and insisted I had to go to college.”

– WHITE FEMALE SURVEY RESPONDENT, AGE 20, LOWER INCOME

And for young people who reported receiving support from outside programs, the range of guidance and support they are able to access and find helpful is varied and diverse, like young people themselves. Some young people, when asked for examples of outside support, mentioned churches or church programs, ROTC/military groups, career tech/guidance programs, or college prep/dual enrollment programs. A few mentioned volunteering opportunities, internships, opportunities to shadow someone during a workday, programs at their local libraries, or mentors and leadership programs. Although not programs per se, many respondents noted they feel support from family, friends, coworkers, or activities such as sports and clubs.

"My church and my friend group. They constantly prayed for my success and my friends gave me guidance."

- BLACK FEMALE SURVEY RESPONDENT, AGE 20, HIGHER INCOME

"My robotics club and my family helped give an idea for my future career and college."

- HISPANIC MALE SURVEY RESPONDENT, AGE 21, LOWER INCOME

"I believe FFA [Future Farmers of America], 4-H, and sports have helped me because I was able to interact and socialize with people."

- WHITE MALE SURVEY RESPONDENT, AGE 19, LOWER INCOME

"I am a part of an organization, My Brother's Keeper, which helps me prepare for my future."

- BLACK MALE SURVEY RESPONDENT, AGE 18, LOWER INCOME

Among young people who reported feeling little or no support from these outside programs, many said they do not know about programs that can provide support or where to look for them. Some also reported that these programs do not exist around them. Others said they are not (or were not) interested in participating in programs outside of high school, while some mentioned they are (or were) working when not in school and do not (or did not) have the time to participate in any program like this. A few mentioned they do not feel like anyone actually wants (or wanted) to help them.

"There weren't any programs outside of school in my community."

- WHITE FEMALE SURVEY RESPONDENT, AGE 21, LOWER INCOME

"I wasn't aware of any programs that could help or aid in that process."

- BLACK FEMALE SURVEY RESPONDENT, AGE 21, LOWER INCOME

"I'm not really in contact with any organizations outside of my school."

- BLACK MALE SURVEY RESPONDENT, AGE 18, LOWER INCOME

"When I wasn't in school I was typically working."

- HISPANIC MALE SURVEY RESPONDENT, AGE 21, LOWER INCOME



Conclusion

By and large, one can conclude that there is much to celebrate about the determination and the resilience of young people when it comes to weathering global events like the COVID-19 pandemic and having their lives transformed with respect to education, familial responsibilities, and other areas. There is always much to celebrate about the resources young people see in themselves—how much they believe in themselves and their own abilities even when the systems and structures that theoretically exist to support them in navigating their educational and career pathways almost always work better for young people from households with higher incomes or who inherit generational privileges (like educational and career connections).

Narratives that only highlight challenges facing young people—particularly young people of color and young people experiencing poverty—often dominate efforts to support young people, with frequently harmful consequences.



The research from Equitable Futures shows us that many young people's own lived experiences and perspectives often run counter to more crisis-centered narratives. Adults have a responsibility to refine our solutions to better respond to young people's needs as they express and understand them.

It is, of course, complicated for the adults who support young people in their career pathways to balance thoughtful listening to young people with the other needs that our own life experience tells us are just as urgent. But when young people tell us that they have the wherewithal and the resources to achieve their career and life goals, despite what they've experienced during the pandemic and despite the barriers they already encounter in non-pandemic times, we should believe them. The onus is always on the adults who support young people, pandemic or no pandemic, to meet them where they are, on whatever pathway they choose, and help them to feel more supported in their goals.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/09/23/914427907/as-pandemic-deaths-add-up-racial-disparities-persist-and-in-some-cases-worsen>
- 2 <https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2021/07/Learning-during-COVID-19-Reading-and-math-achievement-in-the-2020-2021-school-year.research-brief-1.pdf>
- 3 Equitable Futures. “Staying Engaged: Many young people remain hopeful on racial justice in 2020.” Equitable Futures Dec. 2020, www.equitablefutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/EF-National-Youth-Poll_StayingEngaged-Racial-Justice.pdf
- 4 <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help>
- 5 Search Institute (2020). The Intersection of Developmental Relationships, Equitable Environments, and SEL [Insights & Evidence Series]. Minneapolis, MN.

Data visualization by Andrew Garcia Phillips