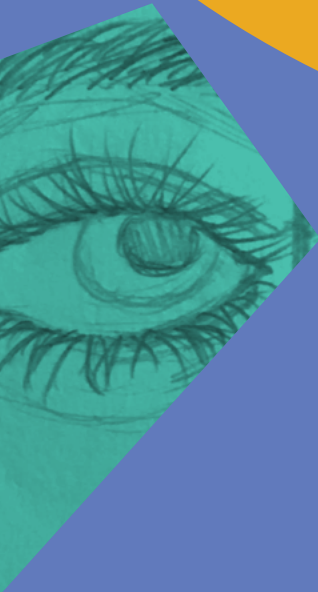# Striving to Thriving

Occupational identity formation among Black and Hispanic young people and young people from households with lower incomes

About the partners

BILL & MELINDA GATES *foundation*

gatesfoundation.org

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people's health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in Seattle, Washington, the foundation is led by CEO Mark Suzman and Co-chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett.

equitable futures
A PROJECT OF THE
BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION

equitablefutures.org

Equitable Futures Initiative
The goal of Equitable Futures, a project of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is to build stronger connections and alignment between K-12 schools and education, post-secondary institutions, and employers to improve labor market outcomes and promote paths to upward mobility and economic opportunity for Black, Latino, and low-income young people. A vital component of this effort is a structured research program supported by this Initiative that explores, by engaging directly with young people, how they believe their occupational identity is developed, and how that identity informs their career goals and aspirations.

GOODWIN SIMON
STRATEGIC RESEARCH

goodwinsimon.com
heartwiredforchange.com

Goodwin Simon Strategic Research
Goodwin Simon Strategic Research (GSSR) is a public opinion research firm with special expertise in conducting research on emotionally complex, socially sensitive issues. GSSR's cutting-edge approach, called Heartwired, is built on decades of experience in polling, social and political marketing, policy analysis and communications, and rooted in the latest research on neuroscience, emotion, psychology, cognitive linguistics, and narrative theory. This unique methodology is used to unpack underlying attitudes and emotional reactions that impact behavior and decision-making.

Photography by Annabelle Armstrong–Temple, age 12

Thank you.

At the core of this research are the nearly 4,000 youth who generously shared their lives, experiences, hopes, and challenges with the research team through their participation in focus groups and a national survey. We are deeply grateful for the genuine and heartfelt way these youth engaged in the research.

Table of Contents

Welcome.

We are pleased to share with you a new body of research in which we explore young people's experiences of education and work. In many ways, this research is a departure from the often-polarizing approach our fields take to listening to young people. Stories of individual youth are commonly collected without rigor and then feel anecdotal, while large scale surveys reach more youth, but sometimes fail to capture a depth that is meaningful. This research is unusual in that it enables us to hear and understand young people's voices within the contexts in which they live, learn, and grow. In that spirit, you will find that this report offers important insights from the research, while intentionally lifting up and centering young people's voices in the process.

At the outset of this project, some of us were critical of what could be achieved. As program designers, program providers, educators, researchers, technologists, and employers, we work to advance economic and social equity for students of color and students from households with lower incomes. The outcomes that we seek for young people demand systemic change. Knowing this, we must often hold important and sometimes competing truths. We have an obligation to better *equip* young people to adapt and thrive in an ever-changing workforce and economy, and we also have an obligation to *support* young people to see the larger systems at work in their lives, to be critical of these systems, and to feel empowered to change them. At the same time, as adults, we must commit ourselves to removing institutional barriers from young people's pathways. We must work collectively to dismantle white supremacy, institutionalized classism, and other systemic obstacles that young people encounter as they pursue their own vision for a *good life*.

At the outset, we worried that the research would inadvertently perpetuate some of the same stereotypes already projected onto young people in these communities. We each carried our own professional experience working with Black and Hispanic young people and young people from households with lower incomes and, for some of us, a lived experience of growing up as a member of these groups and communities. On top of that, we come from different sectors and academic disciplines and have varied approaches to thinking and talking about the subjects of youth identity, education, employment, and work. Many of us had never met when we agreed to work in partnership with one another.

With these factors in mind, we jumped in. Between June 2018 and October 2019, we reviewed and discussed research findings at monthly webinars led by the researchers, met in person for four different day-long convenings, and began to brainstorm and articulate potential research implications in phone calls and small group committees. As we sat in the observation rooms of focus groups, we were humbled by the honesty and emotions young people shared with each other, and with the researcher facilitators. At times we celebrated the young people's sense of agency, and at others we felt devastated by what we saw as immense gaps in the resources, support, and guidance available to them.

Sometimes the research insights reassured us that our programs are on the right path and that our strategies for impacting young people's lives make sense. Other times we were caught off guard by how disconnected our own practices are with what the young people are saying and feeling and living. We learned to appreciate—and gained new respect for—the diversity of young people's career aspirations and life goals and the creativity and ingenuity they display in conceiving multiple paths to accomplish their goals. We rediscovered that they are optimistic and full of excitement for what their futures may hold. It is when they engage with our under-resourced schools and our imperfect and often unjust systems, that they are deflated, derailed, and made to be unsure of their futures.

We grappled with these truths. How do we balance young people's agency to make decisions and act to determine their own life course with our sense of responsibility to share our life experience and knowledge of the unjust world with them? How can we prepare them to make the best decisions for themselves—not for us, not for the work world that we inhabit today, but for the world that they will ultimately enter, change, and create tomorrow.

We leave this process altered. We have been challenged emotionally and intellectually. We have worked together to grapple with and call out our own assumptions about the young people for whom we work. When and how do our own assumptions about young people conflict with or run counter to what we have learned young people care most about? In what ways do our current methods and approaches pressure young people from households with lower incomes to make choices about their career pathways and occupational goals prematurely—without supporting young people to learn about and explore more of their options? How can we examine our practices around co-creation so that our programs, curricula, research studies, and technologies are embedded with the lived experiences, voices, aspirations, and desires of youth?

Given that you are taking the time to engage with this research, you are probably like us in important ways. You may be deeply committed to working for Black and Hispanic young people and young people from households with lower incomes. You may be familiar with these young people's radiance, intelligence, and resourcefulness. You may be acutely aware of the unequal and unjust institutions and systems that too often fail to appropriately support and nurture these young people as they move through childhood and into adulthood.

Aware of our own journey in this work, we invite you to take this research as an opportunity to reflect on your own work and how you think about and measure success and impact. We invite you to consider what the outcome of our collective work should be.

Onwards,

Romero Brown

Nate Cadena

Mary Gatta

Noel Ginsburg

Michael Lee

Jane Margolis

Brandon Nicholson

Andrea M. O'Neal

Roz Pierson

Melissa Risteff

Ayele Shakur

Nathaniel Smith

About the advisory team

This research project is deeply informed and supported by an Advisory Team of 12 advocates, educators, social scientists, program designers, and subject matter experts. The Advisory Team was involved in each phase of this 16-month research project, including convening in person four times. This dynamic group served as authentic thought partners, problem solvers and contributors to the project. They provided rich insights that helped to refine the research approach, grappled with the potential implications of the findings, and served as insightful reviewers of this report.

Together this team holds decades of experience working to improve the education and work experiences of Black and Hispanic young people and young people from households with lower incomes across the United States. The Advisory Team also reflects the racial and ethnic diversity of the young people who participated in this research project. Its members are deeply knowledgeable about the communities in which Black and Hispanic young people and young people from households with lower incomes live, learn, and grow, and they are committed to transforming the systems with which young people interact.

Advisory team members

Romero Brown, Principal, Romero Brown Consulting

Nate Cadena, COO, Denver Scholarship Foundation

Mary Gatta, PhD, Associate Professor of Sociology, CUNY-Stella and Charles Guttman Community College

Noel Ginsburg, Founder and CEO, CareerWise Colorado

Michael Lee, Director of Programs, Destiny Arts

Jane Margolis, EdD, Senior Researcher, UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies

Brandon Nicholson, PhD, Founding Executive Director, The Hidden Genius Project

Andrea M. O'Neal, Senior Coach, Career Prep Program, Management Leadership for Tomorrow

Roz Pierson, PhD, Partner, Luminas LLC

Melissa Risteff, CEO and Co-Founder, Couragion

Ayele Shakur, CEO, BUILD

Nathaniel Smith, Founder and Chief Equity Officer, Partnership for Southern Equity

Collage by Jaedyn Nguyen, age 17

About the Research

Project goal

In partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), Goodwin Simon Strategic Research (GSSR) engaged in a 16-month research project that aimed to:

- Develop an in-depth psychological and emotional understanding of:
  - Black and Hispanic young people of all incomes and white young people from households with lower incomes (ages 15-21); and
  - Black and Hispanic parents of all incomes, white parents with lower incomes, and other adults who influence young people (ages 15-21).

- Conduct deep listening research on the impact of young people's own mindsets on the formation of their occupational identity, work, and life goals.
- Explore how young people's identities, values, beliefs, lived experiences, and emotions support or interfere with their educational and work success.

The researchers hypothesize that a deeper understanding of how these factors intersect with young people's behavior regarding education and work will better equip key stakeholders to identify opportunities and interventions that can support young people to make and reach their life goals.

Research approach and design

This research project employs a mixed-method approach. The research design allows for iteration and refinement of the research questions and hypotheses over the course of the research period. The initial research questions were formulated in partnership with the Foundation and the Advisory Team. They were informed and refined based on insights from the Landscape research described below, which helped to shape the initial areas of exploration in the early focus groups and in-depth interviews with young people. Then, young people's responses and language from the early qualitative research informed the design and content of the questions asked in subsequent qualitative research. Each phase of qualitative research is informed by insights from earlier rounds of research. Finally, the researchers used the qualitative research findings to shape the wording and content of the national youth survey that quantifies and validates the qualitative research findings. A brief description of the qualitative and quantitative methodologies employed in this research follows.

Landscape research

Polling/survey review and analysis: Researchers reviewed 49 surveys conducted from 1996–2018. Sample sizes varied from n176 to n165,000 and respondents varied by survey and included:

- High school students
- Teenagers generally
- High school graduates
- Incoming college freshmen
- Undergraduate college students
- Graduate students
- College graduates
- Young working people
- Middle school students

Qualitative research

In-person and online discussions with over 500 Black, Hispanic, and white people: In total, researchers moderated 57 in-person focus group discussions, seven in-person in-depth interviews, and two multi-day online focus group discussions.

In-person Focus Groups

A total of 57 in-person focus groups were conducted from November 2018 to June 2019 in 15 urban, suburban, and rural locations across the country. The two-hour discussions included six to nine participants per group. The focus groups included four types of research participants:

1. **Youth**: Black, Hispanic, and white youth ages 15 to 21: 42 focus groups total, with 35 among youth from households with lower incomes or a mix of income levels, and seven among youth from households with higher incomes
2. **Young adults**: Black, Hispanic, and white young adults ages 26 to 29: three focus groups
3. **Parents/Guardians:** Black, Hispanic, and white parents/guardians of youth ages 15 to 21: seven focus groups total, those from households with lower incomes or a mix of income levels, and three among those from households with higher income
4. **Adult influencers**: Black, Hispanic, and white adults who work and/or volunteer with youth ages 15 to 21: five focus groups

Each individual focus group was designed to be comprised of participants of the same race who did not know each other. Participants in youth groups (ages 15-21) were also of the same gender, but other groups were mixed-gender. There were generally six to nine participants in a group. Each group was moderated by an adult of the same race or ethnicity as the participants, and the conversations were always participant driven.

One exception to this approach described above were the two BUILD focus groups. They were mixed race/ethnicity and gender, included some young people who knew one another and different adults moderated different portions of the discussions.

Online focus groups

Online focus groups: Multi-day online discussions, one with 30 English-speaking participants and another with 24 Spanish-speaking participants

In-depth interviews

In-person in-depth interviews: Seven different 90-minute interviews in two locations, each with one moderator and one youth participant per interview

Quantitative research
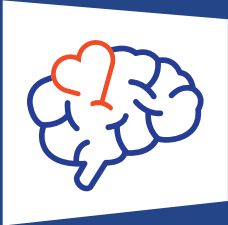
Youth identity formation survey: National online survey conducted among 3,545 young people ages 15 to 21. Young people were invited to participate in the online survey through several online national consumer panels. Parents or guardians of minors

gave permission for participation. Young people ages 18-21 opted-in on their own behalf. While these online national consumer panels are not considered to be nationally representative probability samples based on U.S. Census data, they are widely used and accepted by researchers and social scientists as valuable research tools. Survey respondents included:

- 495 white females and 583 white males
- 486 Black females and 451 Black males
- 499 Hispanic females and 398 Hispanic males
- 158 Asian-Pacific Islander females and 146 Asian-Pacific Islander males
- 26 Native American females and 23 Native American males
- 109 females and 46 males who identify with two or more racial or ethnic groups

A detailed description of the survey sample can be found in the *Methodology* section at the end of this report. A separate in-depth survey report will be available in 2020 that will include a full analysis of the national youth survey data.

Heartwired Approach

GSSR employs an intentionally youth-centered research design that draws from the heartwired approach to opinion research. The heartwired approach investigates the ways that the five heartwired factors—emotions, identity, lived experiences, values, and beliefs—combine, and often collide, to shape people's attitudes and behaviors.

The heartwired research approach is intentionally iterative, with research questions designed and revised at each phase of the work. [See Appendix for more information]

Explanation of terms

This report captures key insights and findings from qualitative and quantitative research conducted among Black and Hispanic youth of all income levels, as well as among white youth from households with lower incomes, in urban and rural areas across the nation. This report is designed to support those who work to improve the experience of and outcomes related to education and work for Black and Hispanic young people and young people from households with lower incomes. This includes program and curricula designers, educators, researchers, technologists, and others. The report is also a resource for funders of education and employment pathways, and those working in adjacent spaces, who wish to learn more about how young people's lived experiences inform their occupational identity.

Self-identification: Race and ethnicity

In this report, the researchers are intentional in their use of specific words to describe the race and ethnicity of the people who engaged in this research. How people choose to describe their race or ethnicity can vary from person to person based on many factors such as geography, age, education, political perspective, country of origin, language, history, and culture, as well as social influences from friends, peers, and family. Sometimes, both the words and the meaning of these words change over time and vary among communities and among individuals. The terms used in this report to describe people's race and ethnicity reflect the terms young people most often used to describe themselves in the focus groups, in-depth interviews, and in the online survey. For example, in our focus groups, young people of African descent most commonly referred to themselves as Black, followed by African-American. Similarly, young people of Latin American descent most commonly referred to themselves as Hispanic, followed by Latino or Latina. Young people of European descent most commonly described themselves as white. As such, throughout this report, young people are referred to as either Black, Hispanic, or white.

Defining Race Categories in the Survey

The survey asked three separate questions to determine respondents' race or ethnicity. The first question used an open-ended format to capture young people's description of their race or ethnicity in their own words:

Q1. How would you personally choose to describe your own race or ethnicity?

The second question used a multi-choice, closed-ended format in which respondents could select one or more ethnicity or race categories:

Q2. And what is your race or ethnicity? Please check all that apply.

- ☐ *White/Caucasian*
- ☐ *African-American/Black*
- ☐ *Hispanic*
- ☐ *Latino*
- ☐ *East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean, Taiwanese, etc.)*
- ☐ *South Asian (Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Nepalese, Sri Lankan, etc.)*
- ☐ *Other Asian (Thai, Cambodian, Laotian, Filipino, etc.)*
- ☐ *Pacific Islander*
- ☐ *Middle Eastern*
- ☐ *Native American*
- ☐ *[Other: please specify _____]*
- ☐ *Unsure*

If a respondent selected more than one item, they were asked the follow-up question below:

Q3. Which race or ethnicity do you identify with the MOST? If you identify with different races and ethnicities equally, please select the corresponding answer choice below.

- ☐ *White/Caucasian*
- ☐ *African-American/Black*
- ☐ *Hispanic*
- ☐ *Latino*
- ☐ *East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean, Taiwanese, etc.)*
- ☐ *South Asian (Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Nepalese, Sri Lankan, etc.)*
- ☐ *Other Asian (Thai, Cambodian, Laotian, Filipino, etc.)*
- ☐ *Pacific Islander*
- ☐ *Middle Eastern*
- ☐ *Native American*
- ☐ *[Other: please specify _____]*
- ☐ *I identify with my different races/ethnicities equally*
- ☐ *Unsure*

If a respondent checked only one item in question two, they were assigned that race or ethnicity for analysis. However, if they indicated that they identify with different races/ethnicities equally, they were categorized accordingly.

With this in mind, it becomes possible to examine how young people of a certain race or ethnicity describe their race or ethnicity in their own words. At the top of Figure 1, for example, are the most frequently cited terms Hispanic youth (according to the closed-ended questions) use to describe their race and ethnicity in the earlier open-ended question. In this case, *Hispanic*, *Mexican* and *Latino* dominate their open-ended responses. The bottom of Figure 1 shows the most frequently cited terms African-American or Black young people (according to the closed-ended questions) use to describe their race and ethnicity in the earlier open-ended question. In this case, *Black* and *African-American* dominate their open-ended responses. Notably there is an overlap in the ways some Black and Hispanic young people describe themselves. Also, young people do not limit their answers to questions about racial and ethnic identity to racial and ethnic categories.

FIGURE 1.

Black and Hispanic youth, self-reported race and ethnicity

Latin
Hispanic, Latino
0 / 10

Latina
0 / 21

Hispanic Latinx

Hispanic white

American Latino

White Hispanic
0 / 10

Chicano

Hispanic American

Hispanic white

Fine

Latino Hispanic

Hispanic Mexican American

Cultured

Proud Hispanic

Respectful

Spanish

Cuban

Hispanic, Black

Nice

Hispanic
0 / 259

Loud

White Mexican

Dominican

Hardworking
1 / 21

The best

Asian, Hispanic

Hispanic, Cuban

Hispanic Mexican

Puerto Rican
1 / 16

Half-Hispanic, Half-white

Confusing

Tan

Chicana

None

Mexicana

Latino
0 / 45

Mexican
0 / 62

Mexican American
0 / 33

Hispanic, Latina

Descriptions used more by **Hispanic** *youth*

White
3 / 13

Diverse

Native American

Brown

Fun

Amazing

Christian

Great

Multiracial

Outgoing

Afro American

Not sure

Beautiful

Proud

Circle size indicates number of times description was used…

Brown skin

Indian

American

No comment

Unique

/

…by **Black** *youth*

…by **Hispanic** *youth*

Descriptions used more by **Black** *youth*

Cool

Strong

Good

Mixed
33 / 13

Misunderstood

No

Black American

Underrated

Puerto Rican Half Black American

Don't know
12 / 2

Native American African American

Black
328 / 15

Haitian American

African American
188 / 5

Powerful

Mixed African American Caucasian

Black and proud

African American Native American

Black Mexican

Black Hispanic

Black Mixed

Mixed Black White

Ghetto

Okay

Black Puerto Rican

Biracial

Black Native American

Black Indian

Black African American
51 / 0

Black white

African American Black
13 / 0

African

Black Latino

Self-identification: sexual orientation and gender identity

During the recruitment process, young people, or their parents or guardians if they were minors, selected male or female gender and were assigned to focus group discussions based on that selection. Therefore, those who selected male were assigned to male focus group discussions, and those who selected female were assigned to female focus group discussions. Parents and other adults participated in mixed-gender groups.

In some focus group discussions, individual young people described their gender identity as transgender, gender non-conforming, or non-binary. For the purposes of this research, these individuals are included in insights and observations about the group to which they self-selected and to which they were assigned: male or female. For example, a Hispanic young person who discloses they are transgender and has also selected male on their focus group recruitment screener is considered Hispanic male for the purposes of analysis and reporting.

In focus groups, some young people also shared aspects of their sexual identity. Young people use a diversity of language to talk about sexual identity including describing themselves as members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community; gay; or queer. The focus of this research was not on young people who identify as sexual or gender minorities, and therefore does not draw insights about young people's experiences related to these aspects of their identities.

Capitalizing "B" in "Black"

Readers may note that the researchers choose to capitalize *Black* as a racial identity, while not doing so with *white*. This may conflict with style guides that you are familiar with, which suggest the use of a lowercase alternative. Language, like all living things, evolves. These decisions are reflected in a post from the *Columbia Journalism Review*, "Black and white: Why capitalization matters." In their post, CJR quotes Luke Visconti of DiversityInc: "[M]any Black people describe themselves simply as being 'Black,' and this reality is reflected in a body of literature, music and academic study."

Defining "youth"

This research intends to better understand young people's experiences in high school and in the transition leading up to young adulthood. This includes transitions and decisions related to education, work, and career. By choosing to focus on young people ages 15 to 21—the age of traditional students during this transitional period—the researchers are better able to surface insights and potential implications for educators, program designers, and others focusing on these spaces and populations.

Each sector describes *youth* slightly differently. Some draw distinctions between childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, and others do not. In this project, the researchers use the term *youth* to describe young people between the ages of 15 and 21. The terms *young people* and *youth* are used interchangeably throughout the report. The researchers use the term *young adult* to describe people between the ages of 26 and 29, another study population in this research.

Income level

Throughout this report, the researchers use the term *lower income* to describe young people who are growing up or who have grown up in households with lower incomes. Conversely, the term *higher income* refers to young people who are growing up in or have grown up in households with higher incomes. Importantly, the target populations for this research are Black and Hispanic young people of any income and white young people from households with lower incomes. When we refer to "Black, Hispanic, and white young people from households with lower incomes" throughout the remainder of this report, this means Black and Hispanic young people from any income and white young people from households with lower incomes.

Black and Hispanic youth of any income could participate in the Black and Hispanic youth focus groups. Focus groups with white youth were limited to those who were growing up in or had grown up in households with lower incomes. With the exception of four groups, all of the Black and Hispanic youth focus groups were made up of young people from households with lower incomes.

In the four focus groups for which this was not the case, Black and Hispanic participants included young people from both households with lower incomes and households with higher incomes. For reporting purposes, researchers refer to those focus groups as *mixed income*.

To qualify as *lower income*, young people had to meet one of three criteria established by the research team:
1. Their parent or guardian reported that their household income was less than $75,000 per year.
2. They reported that their household income is less than $75,000 per year.
3. They reported that your household was *very low-income* or *low-income*, not *middle-income*, *high-income*, or *very high-income*.

To qualify as *higher income* for this research, young people had to meet one of three criteria:
1. Their parent or guardian reported that their household income was $75,000 or more per year.
2. They reported that their household income was $75,000 or more per year.
3. They reported that their household was *high-income* or *very high-income*, not *very low-income* or *low-income*, not *middle-income*.

Sector-based terminology

This report also includes words and phrases to which different sectors may bring their own, sometimes conflicting, meanings. Below are some terms used in this report, accompanied by the way in which the researchers define them for the purposes of this project and this work.

- **Career and technical education (CTE):** The practice of teaching technical or career skills to young people in a middle school, high school, or post-secondary education setting. Some of the young people who participated in this research have attended CTE courses or attend schools where CTE courses are available. Young people refer to these courses as VOTECH or *pathways* courses or by the specific skills they are learning.
- **Mindset:** In this report, the word *mindset* refers to the way in which young people see, talk about and experience the world, which informs how they make decisions and how they behave.

The authors do not use *mindset* to specifically describe the underlying beliefs young people have about learning and intelligence.
- **Occupational identity:** How young people envision their future selves in the workforce—what they like to do, what they believe they are skilled at, and where they feel they belong related to work.
- **Occupational pathways:** The authors use the word *pathways* to mean the routes or paths that young people create and the choices they make as they journey from where they are now in their lives to where they want to be. These paths take them out of high school and towards the jobs, careers, and other life goals they want. The authors do not use *pathways* to mean an integrated collection of institutions and services intended to develop students' core academic, technical, and employability skills; to provide them with continuous education, training; or to place them in high-demand, high-opportunity jobs.
- ***Good job, career, work, job:*** In this research, young people understand the words *job*, *career*, and *work* to mean different things. *Job* alone is understood as mostly negative, but when modified by the word *good* it often becomes synonymous with *career*. Therefore, in this report, *good job* and *career* are used interchangeably. Additionally, young people in this research often understand *work* as the overall journey that includes *jobs* and *good jobs/careers*. We use *work* to describe the occupational pathway that young people are on. To learn more about the distinctions that youth make between these words and ideas, please see the [*Young People Aspire to Live a Good Life*](#) section.

Introduction

"I'm really inspired by all of you. I guess it is kind of taking a step back and looking at our lives; what have we been doing all this time; education, the future and just seeing that we are all very different but we have similar holistic goals and we all have our own individual path."

— ATLANTA, GA, BLACK FEMALE 16–18, MIXED INCOME

Throughout history, young people have been at the forefront of social innovation and cultural change. From voting rights to Black Lives Matter to climate change, they have consistently demonstrated their ability to identify the problems that most impact them and their futures and to contribute to—or create—solutions.

And yet, when it comes to designing interventions aimed at impacting young people's education and life outcomes, their own ideas, experiences, perspectives, and unique intelligences are often undervalued or ignored by adults tasked with leading these efforts. Further undervalued are the voices of Black and Hispanic young people and young people from households with lower incomes. In an environment of institutional racism, xenophobia, classism, and other biases, they are often incorrectly perceived as being less knowledgeable and having less agency than their white and more affluent peers.

This absence of youth voices can have profound consequences. When young people's experiences, aspirations, and goals are not taken into consideration, adults are more likely to produce tools and services that inadequately support young people as they work to reach the goals they set for themselves.

So, what would it look like to change this dynamic? What might we discover if we let young people drive the conversations about their education and work goals—to listen as they share with each other the opportunities and challenges they perceive or have experienced? That is precisely what the research conducted for this report intended to explore. Specifically, what does meaningful employment for a happy, productive life look like through the eyes of young people? Who are the people and what are the resources that help them along the way? What barriers do they experience that limit or divert them on the way to success? This body of research, developed and conducted in collaboration with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, seeks to answer these questions directly.

What emerges from the nearly 4,000 young people across the United States who participated in interviews, focus groups, and a national survey, is a story of hopes and goals, and the pathways these young people construct to reach those goals. This research, conducted over a 16-month period, flipped the sequence in which research is often conducted. It began with a qualitative inquiry and then used the national survey to test ideas that emerged in focus group discussions and interviews. This approach provided a counterpoint to the anecdotal way in which young people's words and experiences are typically included in research—it allowed young people's voices to lead the inquiry rather than including their voices secondarily as color for the quantitative survey.

This report shares a set of learnings and insights gained through rigorous, youth-centered research. Analyzing in-depth conversations with and among young people provided insights on how they think about and set their goals, the challenges and barriers they anticipate confronting, and

the manner in which they form and continually refine their occupational identities. The survey results validated much of what was learned in the interviews and focus groups and provide additional weight to the young people's own words.

By centering young people in this way, they are seen and understood as knowledgeable experts of their own experiences within the education and work sectors—ensuring this research can effectively inform interventions to guide young people's decision making and meet their specific needs and wants. Additionally, a new analytical framework emerged through this work—*Surviving, Striving, and Thriving*—that enables those in the field to tailor programs and curricula to consider young people's orientation to, and experience of, education and work—and how this impacts their perceptions of *thriving*. In doing so, the framework offers the potential to build upon markers like graduation rates or securing first jobs and move toward what goals look like to support *striving* and *thriving*.

The researchers invite readers to think about the way in which this research might inspire, enhance, or disrupt their current work. Ultimately, the authors hope that this research will encourage readers to more deeply consider the ways in which young people's perspectives, ideas, aspirations, and lived experiences can shift the field's understanding of what information is deemed important, what outcomes are desirable, and ultimately what an equitable future will look like.

Report at a Glance

This research report is structured around a set of eight key insights.

Young People See Themselves as Their Own Best Change Agents

- Young people are the most important change agents in their own lives.
- Young people from households with lower incomes see themselves as capable of reaching their goals. They are curious and resourceful, researching and pursuing education and career paths that interest them.

Young People Experience Work as *Surviving, Striving,* and *Thriving*

- *Surviving, Striving, and Thriving:* An emergent framework to understand the emotional and aspirational states young people pass through in their pursuit of the career and life goals they set for themselves.
- Most young people imagine futures in which they are *thriving*. For most, *thriving* means having a *good job* or career that is fulfilling—and enables them to live their personal version of a *good life*.

Young People Experience Identity as an Asset

- Regardless of race, ethnicity, and gender, young people experience identity as multifaceted.
- Without the context of education and work, Black and Hispanic young people experience racial, ethnic, and cultural aspects of their identities as mostly positive.
- Young people from households with lower incomes often describe themselves in positive terms, but struggle to connect individual-level positive characteristics of themselves to the notion of 'strengths.'
- Many young people believe that they can overcome discrimination through personal hard work and diligence—by being and doing better.

Young People Aspire To a *Good Life*

- Young people want to have enough (income, security, control over their schedule, personal satisfaction, and more) and feel that comes through having a good job or career that is fulfilling, that they find personally satisfying, or that they love or feel passionate about.
- Youth view a *good job* and career as an essential element of a *good life*. The question they are considering for themselves is not, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Instead it is, "What do you want your life to be like in the future?"
- Youth understand job, work, and career to mean different things.

Young People Try on Their Futures

- In forming an occupational identity, young people move through a process that has three iterative stages: *Exposure, Exploration,* and *Selection*.
- Young people of all socio-economic backgrounds value opportunities to explore and experiment with work.
- Young people from households with lower incomes may feel pressured to make premature occupational choices based on a narrative of scarcity and risk-aversion from parents and other adults.

Young People Envision Pathways to Thriving

- Most young people describe and demonstrate a great deal of optimism about their futures.
- Young people have varied capacities to set occupational and life goals and varied levels of confidence that they can find the information necessary to determine the best pathways to reach their goals. This variation can be described in five main pathway categories:
  1. Know what they want to do, and have a good idea of the steps to take to get there
  2. Not sure what they want to do, yet have a good idea of the steps to take to explore in order to get there
  3. Know what they want to do, but are unsure how to get there
  4. Not sure what they want to do and unsure of what steps to take to get there
  5. Know what they want to do, think they know how to get there, but their imagined pathway is inaccurate and/or unrealistic
- Young people understand the value of education through the lens of their own experience. Many believe college is "worth it," although worry about college debt looms large and non-college pathways are valued by some.
- Young people of all ages, races, and genders are likely to believe the biggest challenges/ barriers in their career pathways will be their own character flaws or weaknesses.
- Young women share concern about gender discrimination, with some Black and Hispanic female participants describing a 'double yoke' of race and gender discrimination.

Young People are Empowered by Connections

- For adults and youth alike, the quality of an interaction or relationship directly impacts the way it is perceived.
- Young people often feel they are making choices about their lives by themselves.
- Many young people don't know they will need support or don't know where to get it.
- Young people value mutuality and transparency in relationships with adults.
- Mentors are largely perceived as positive and beneficial relationships.
- Language matters:
  Connections is understood more positively.
  Network feels more negative and often is understood as transactional.
  Social capital often does not resonate or is distancing.

Young People See Opportunity in Conversation

- This research provided space for young people to engage in meaningful, transformational conversations in real time.
- The interviews and focus group conversations offered a rare opportunity for these young people to imagine and talk about their futures with their peers and near peers with little fear of judgment.
- Young people feel a genuine sense of gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the conversation and appreciate what they learned from their fellow participants.

Insights

As young people in the groups shared their lived experiences, emotions, and beliefs with the moderators and each other, researchers began to see that youth aspire to thrive—not merely to survive. This understanding undergirds the insight sections that follow, detailing how young people experience and articulate their own identities; the way they define the notion of a *good life*; and how they come to form their concepts of ideal work experiences. In the sections entitled *Young People Envision Pathways to Thriving* and *Young People are Empowered by Their Relationships*, the report describes the multiple ways participating young people understand the steps necessary to get where they want to go in their lives and the

pathways that they imagine will take them there. In *Young People See Opportunity in Conversation*, the report describes how some young participants emerged from the two-hour focus groups with new information and new thinking about their futures. For these youth, the focus group discussion itself provided an opportunity for them to contemplate and discuss their futures in a non-judgmental setting they rarely experience. These participants found the focus group conversations transformational—and departed feeling newly empowered to seek out additional sources of information and support as they envision and create their occupational pathways.

In this section each insight is supported by and illustrated with direct quotes from Black and Hispanic young people and white young people from households with lower incomes; parents; and adult influencers who participated in this research. The insights are presented in the following order:

Readers are invited to explore these research insights and consider how this body of research might support their own work toward positive, powerful, youth-centered educational and occupational interventions for young people. As you review, note that each insight section includes potential implications from the research for your consideration.
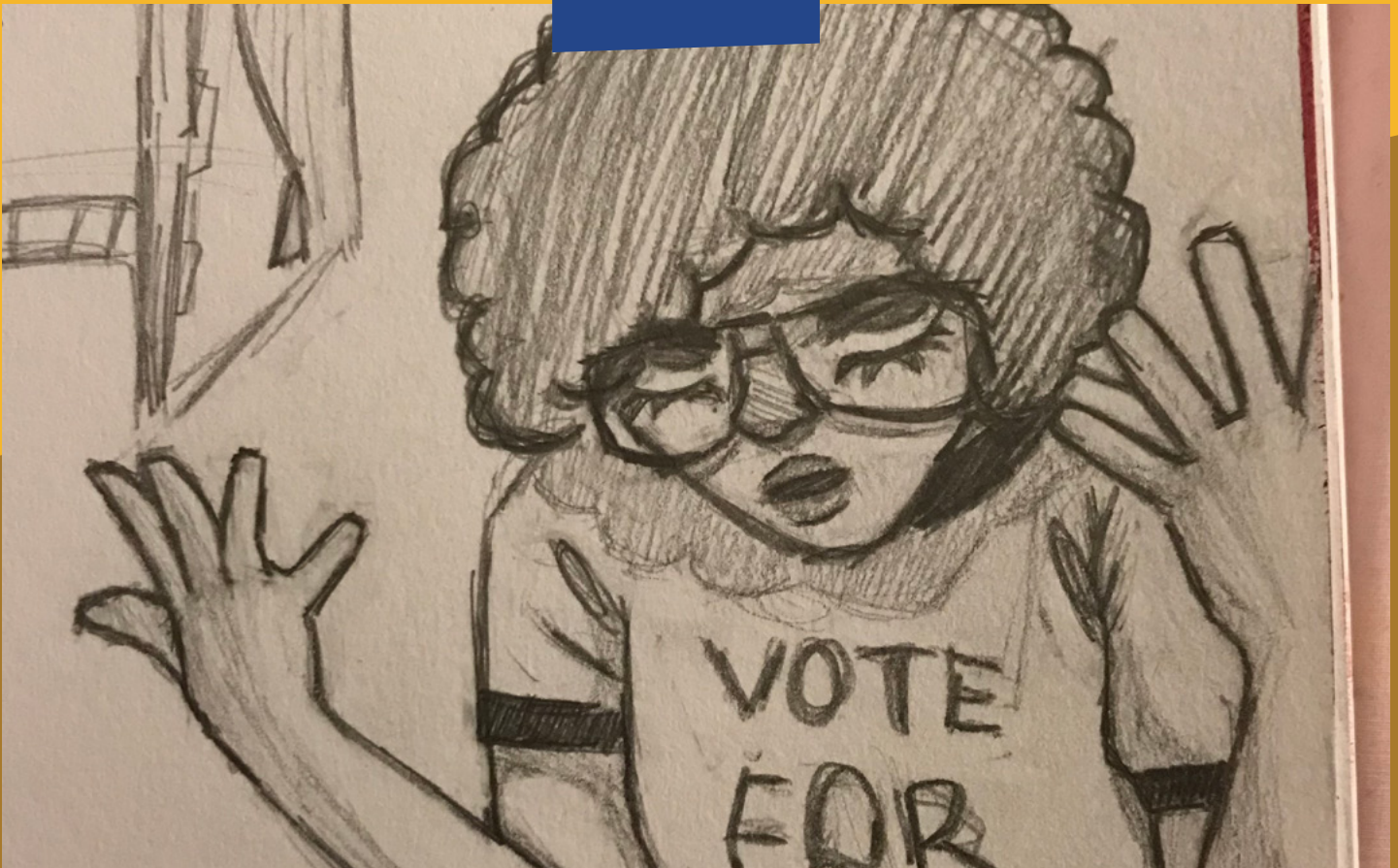
Illustration by Lonnie Allen, age 17

Young People See Themselves as Their Own Best Change Agents

Listening to young people describe themselves and their lived experiences is pivotal to this research. They are the experts on their own lives, needs, aspirations, struggles, and worldview. Understanding these perspectives directly informs this research and ensures that findings are relevant and on-target for the youth this project aims to serve.

In this section, researchers detail the ways in which youth participants see their own capacities for change, achievement, and reaching their self-determined goals.

Black, Hispanic, and young people from households with lower incomes see themselves as capable

These young people are curious and resourceful, researching and pursuing education and career paths that interest them.

> *"So, the first college degree I'm going for is the HVAC program, the heating and ventilation. And then I'm going to go back and get my automotive one because I like working on cars."*
>
> — YAKIMA, WA HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"As a nurse...I'm still helping people, and I can work wherever I want. I have the option to change whenever I want to. I don't have to just be in labor and delivery. I could be in oncology. I don't have to stay in one place. And that's really what appealed to me."*
>
> — BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

In addition, fully three quarters (75%) of young people surveyed say they feel very clear (42%) or somewhat clear (33%) about their job and career goals. Furthermore, nearly half (46%) say they both know what they want to do for their work or career and also know the specific steps they need to take to get there.

Young people value career exploration; parents expect a linear career trajectory

In this research, parents and guardians with lower incomes often describe linear education and career pathways that do not match the ways young people from households with lower incomes are thinking, planning, and acting in their own lives. For example, while parents value and often anticipate a singular and linear pathway from high school education to career goals, young people anticipate and value opportunities to explore and potentially pursue more than one career before making decisions about what path(s) to take.

> *"My next goal would be to get out of school with my associate's and then explore different interests and career potential. After that, I would just quit my job and force myself to find something I like, so I would have to look. Continue to explore hobbies and find something I am happy about..."*
>
> — PUEBLO, CO, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"Around here, you know, like, you go to school to be a welder. That's a career. You have to go get an education. You got to go to school. You have to perform certain training and stuff like that to get there."*
>
> — GREENVILLE, MS, BLACK PARENT/GUARDIAN, LOWER INCOME

FIGURE 2: FUTURE

Please think about your future and the kind of job or career you want. When you think about your goals and ideas for that job or career, how clear do those goals and ideas feel for you?

Racial breakdown: BLACK | HISPANIC | WHITE

Feel very clear
Overall: 42%
- FEMALE: White 36, Hispanic 44, Black 50
- MALE: Hispanic 42, White 46

Feel somewhat clear
33%
- FEMALE: Black 29, Hispanic 32, White 38
- MALE: 32

Feel a little clear
13%
- FEMALE: 1?, White 14, Hispanic 21
- MALE: White 11, Black 13, Hispanic 16

Do not feel clear at all
7%
- FEMALE: Black 5, White 10
- MALE: Black 4, White 7
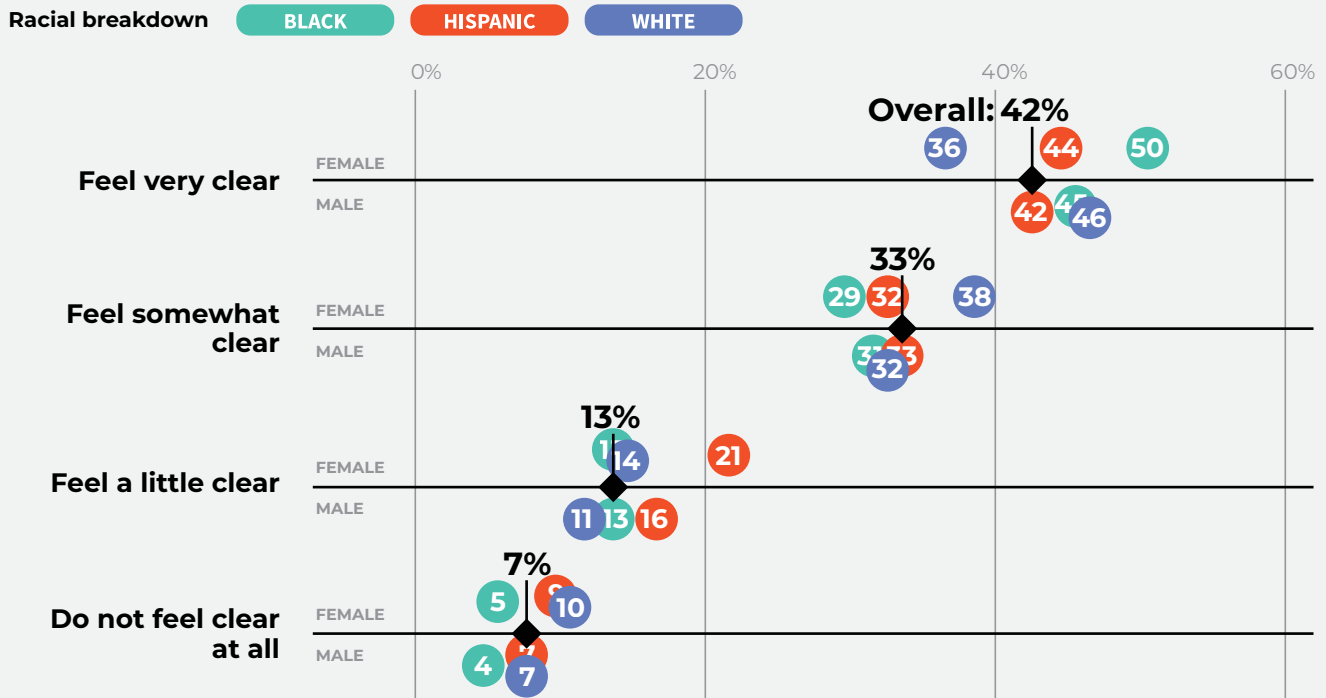
> *"Well, I have 'career' for me is something you want to do for the rest of your life. For career it takes quite a bit of steps to get there like schooling. And it's a long-term commitment, I think, to achieve what you want, what kind of career of what you want to be."*
>
> — YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC PARENT/GUARDIAN, LOWER INCOME

Correspondingly, a quarter of young people surveyed see themselves having one main job and also having some kind of side job or work. Over one-quarter (27%) of young people expect they will have a series of different careers over the course of their lives rather than just one main career. In the focus groups, parents from households with higher incomes are more likely to say they expect, or would support, their child in exploring their career options before making a decision about what they wanted to pursue.

> *"College…is going to be a time for him to really explore as to what he wants to do and what he wants to be."*
>
> — OAKLAND, CA, BLACK PARENT/GUARDIAN, HIGHER INCOME

Young people in this research described the way that parent and other adult perceptions of what a career pathway should look like intensify pressure on young people to make life decisions with a sense of certainty and finality. This experience of constraint may lead young people from households with lower incomes, in particular, to prematurely narrow the types of careers they will consider.

> *"I feel, yeah, it's an expectation because how they are, like, Mexican parents, they want to hear what it is. And then they want you to stick to it. Or they want to give you an insight, and then they want you to stick to it. And then when you have doubts, or you're not sure, then they don't really understand why."*
>
> — YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

Young people are the most important change agents in their own lives. They are making decisions every day that shape their futures. This research provides an in-depth understanding of the ways in which young people exercise agency in their own lives and surfaces an opportunity to incorporate and leverage youth agency in interventions aimed to impact them.

Young people express optimism about their futures. This optimism can be understood as an opportunity that can be built on rather than a misapprehension that needs to be corrected. There is an opportunity to support young people to develop the pragmatism they need to achieve their optimistic goals.

"I don't like the pressure. I think that is why I didn't go to college right after graduating because I had no idea what I wanted to do, and I didn't like being pressured by the school system and my parents and everyone that as soon as I graduated I have to know what I want to do the rest of my life. I have to know what school I'm going to go to. I have to have all of that planned out right when I graduate, and I was like no, too much pressure. I'd rather just let some time go, figure out what I want to do, and then go into it wholeheartedly without having it shoved down my throat, 'this is what you have to do.'"

— PUEBLO, CO, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"[She] didn't want anything to do with medical. I thought maybe I could start encouraging a nursing degree because I felt a little more comfortable that jobs are out there, good money, financially independent. She wanted nothing to do with it, wanted nothing to do with blood… medical, blood, deaths, sickness, didn't want to be in that environment."

— BALTIMORE, MD, WHITE PARENT/GUARDIAN, HIGHER INCOME

Young people are the most important change agents in their own lives

In every part of the country, young people are making decisions that impact their lives and their futures every day. These decisions are informed by their life experiences, values, and beliefs, which are in turn informed by the structural, emotional, and cultural environments in which they live, study, and grow. For example, this research found that many young people are deeply concerned about entering into education-related debt—33 percent are extremely concerned, 22 percent are very concerned, and 20 percent are somewhat concerned about college debt.

In some academic and design spaces, this concern has been attributed to young people being misinformed or lacking knowledge about certain kinds of debt as beneficial. This research found this perception is often untrue. Young people who grapple with whether to take on college debt are often making careful decisions that are informed by their own experiences of debt and their observations of family and peers who have taken on education debt.

"I think money is a big issue for a lot of people because, for example, for FAFSA, they didn't give me any money because my mom is a music teacher, and if your parent is a teacher, they think you are rich even though there is a whole strike going on. Money is a big issue for a lot of people. If you can't pay for your education, you end up with loans and in debt for the rest of your life…You are not happy with your life."

— PASADENA, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 16–18, HIGHER INCOME

FIGURE 3: COST OF COLLEGE

How concerned are you or have you been about having college debt?

Racial breakdown **BLACK** **HISPANIC** **WHITE**
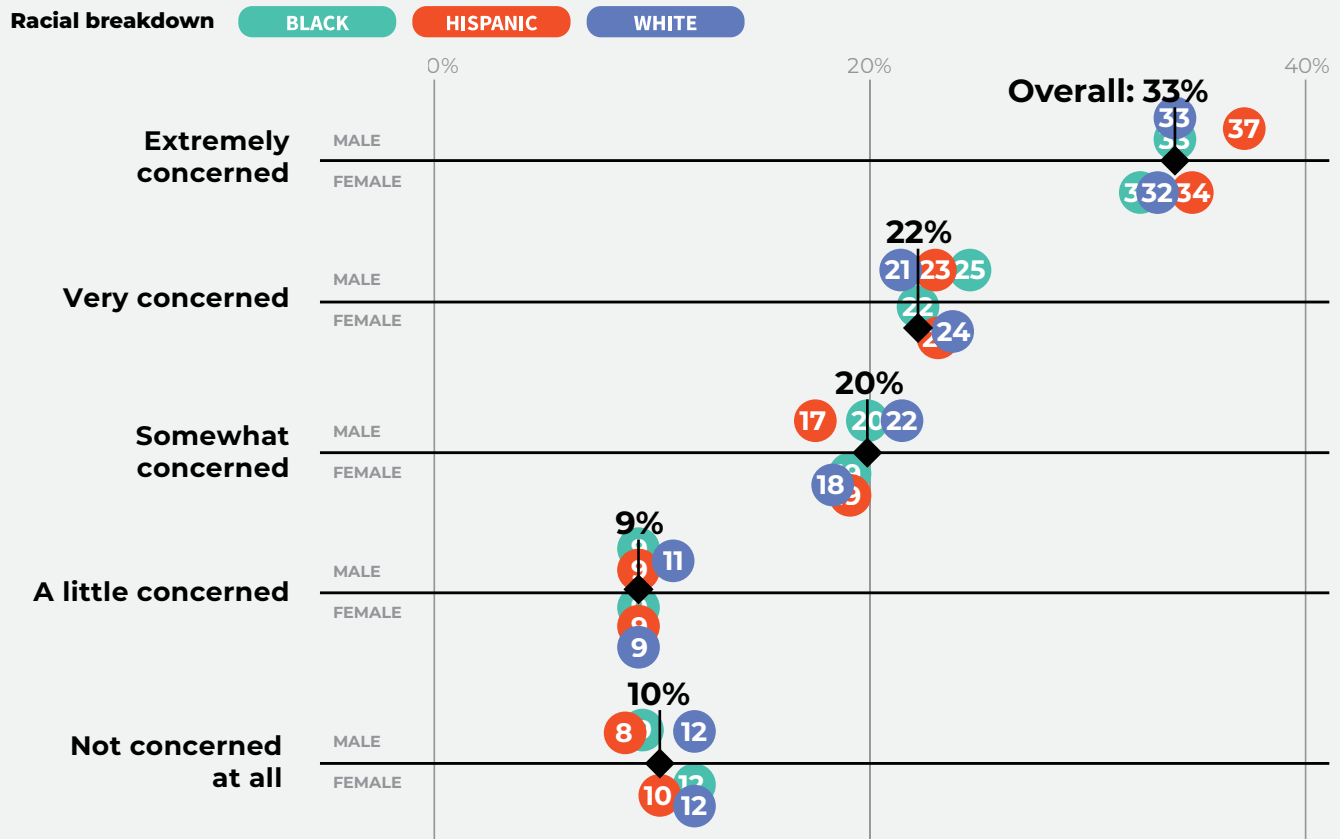
"I feel like there are many people out here who can't afford to go to college and the only way out to have money and to bring money to the table is [harvesting]. There is a lot of sugar cane...I am not in love, but it just pays the bills."

— BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"My current challenge is getting my loans for college. I have a shady income and shady credit because my mom doesn't have credit. More than likely I am going to be applying for my loans. I will probably have to take a private loan, which is going to be super high interest...If I do get loans, how much am I going to owe? Plus the interest. All of that."

— NEW YORK, NY, HISPANIC MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

Young people are optimistic about their goals. Even though some parents and adult influencers fear that the youth in their lives have unrealistic expectations for their own future work success, most young people who participated in this research feel optimistic about their own ability to set and reach their goals. For example, a majority of young people surveyed express optimism about their future, with approximately nine in ten (89%) respondents indicating they are generally optimistic about their futures. This figure includes 33 percent of respondents who say they are extremely optimistic they can achieve the kind of life they want, plus 33 percent of respondents who say they are very optimistic, and another 23 percent of respondents who say they are somewhat optimistic.

FIGURE 4: FUTURE OUTLOOK

Looking to the future, how optimistic are you that you can achieve the kind of life you want?

Racial breakdown **BLACK** **HISPANIC** **WHITE**

0%   20%   **Overall: 33%**   40%

Extremely optimistic
- FEMALE: 25 (White), 37 (Hispanic), 40 (Black)
- MALE: 32 (Hispanic), 35 (White), 42 (Black)

33%

Very optimistic
- FEMALE: 30 (Hispanic), 34 (Black), 38 (White)
- MALE: 31 (Black), 33, 35 (Hispanic)

23%

Somewhat optimistic
- FEMALE: 16 (Black), 22, 26 (White)
- MALE: 17 (Black), 22, 23 (White)

5%

A little optimistic
- FEMALE: 4 (Hispanic), 4, 7 (White)
- MALE: 4, 4 (White), 6 (Hispanic)

2%

Not optimistic at all
- FEMALE: 2, 3 (White)
- MALE: 2, 3 (White)
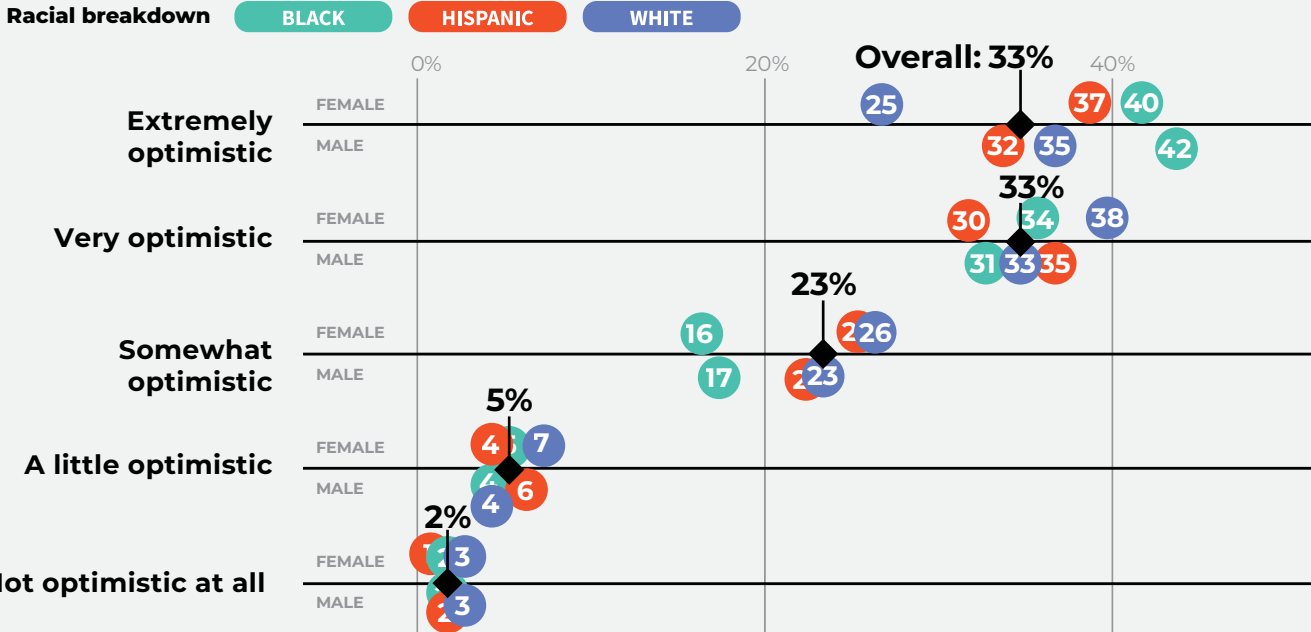
This general sense of optimism can be found among both male (89%) and female (90%) respondents, as well as among Black (90%), Hispanic (91%), and white (89%) respondents.

Notably, however, when we focus on the proportion of respondents who say they are extremely or very optimistic, optimism does appear to decrease along with their self-reported household income level. For example, among Black respondents from households with higher incomes, 82 percent say they are extremely or very optimistic that they can achieve the life they want, compared to 71 percent among Black respondents from households with lower incomes. Nevertheless, the results of both the quantitative and qualitative research clearly indicate that many young people, across race, gender, age, and income, feel quite confident in their ability to reach their goals.

The initial subgroup breakouts below show the proportion of extremely or very optimistic responses by race and gender:

FIGURE 5: FUTURE

Looking to the future, how optimistic are you that you can achieve the kind of life you want?
Those answering "extremely" or "very" optimistic:

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%

Black respondents
- FEMALE: 75
- MALE: 73

White respondents
- FEMALE: 63
- MALE: 67

Hispanic respondents
- FEMALE: 67
- MALE: 68

The results below, which show the proportions of young people who feel extremely or very optimistic by age level, show that young people ages 15 to 16 feel more optimistic than older youth:

Looking to the future, how optimistic are you that you can achieve the kind of life you want?
Those answering "extremely" or "very" optimistic:

	0%	20%	40%	60%	80%

Male respondents
AGE 15-16: 75
AGE 17-18: 73
AGE 19-21: 61

Female respondents
AGE 15-16: 72
AGE 17-18: 64
AGE 19-21: 64
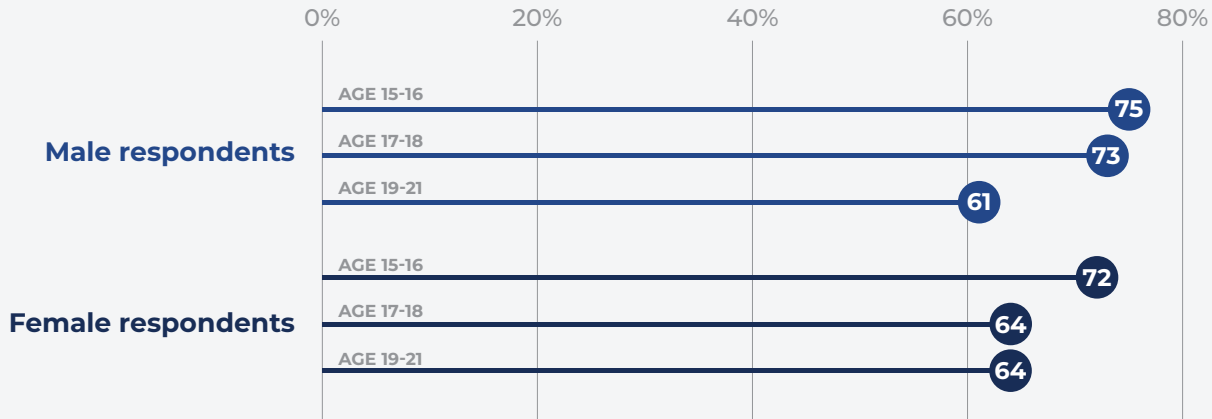
While these age results suggest that experiences later in their young lives might dull their hope for the future to some degree, it is notable that only nine percent of young people ages 19 to 21 indicate they are only a little optimistic (6%) or not optimistic at all (3%).

Additional subgroup breakouts below show the proportion of extremely or very optimistic responses by age and race (ranked by level of optimism within each age cohort):

Looking to the future, how optimistic are you that you can achieve the kind of life you want?
Those answering "extremely" or "very" optimistic:

	0%	20%	40%	60%	80%

Black respondents
AGE 15–16: 78
AGE 17–18: 75
AGE 19–21: 71

White respondents
AGE 15–16: 77
AGE 17–18: 66
AGE 19–21: 57

Hispanic respondents
AGE 15–16: 74
AGE 17–18: 69
AGE 19–21: 63
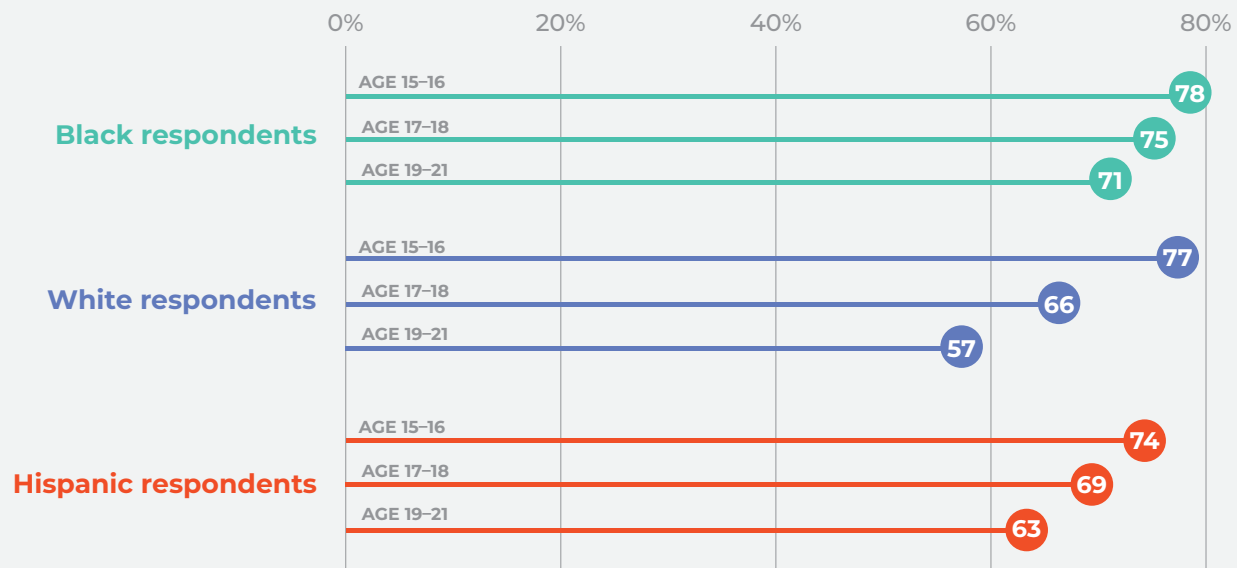
The final set of survey subgroup breakouts below, which are the proportion of extremely or very optimistic responses by race and income,[1] show a decrease in optimism by income level within each racial/ethnic group:

FIGURE 8: FUTURE
Looking to the future, how optimistic are you that you can achieve the kind of life you want?
Those answering "extremely" or "very" optimistic:

	0%	20%	40%	60%	80%
Black respondents					
LOWER INCOME					71
MIDDLE INCOME					74
HIGHER INCOME					82
White respondents					
LOWER INCOME			49		
MIDDLE INCOME				66	
HIGHER INCOME					83
Hispanic respondents					
LOWER INCOME				62	
MIDDLE INCOME				68	
HIGHER INCOME					78
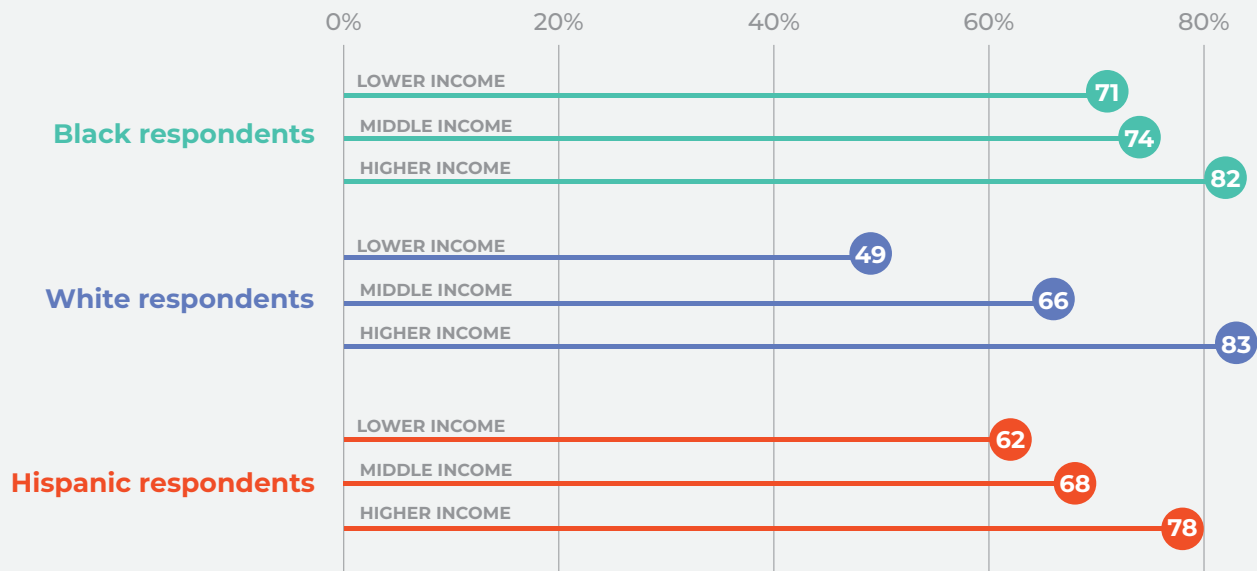
In addition, the results show that personal safety is highly correlated with young people's optimism about their futures (although income likely plays a role as well). For example, among young people who agree with the statement *I feel/felt safe when I am/was in my high school*, 71 percent feel extremely or very optimistic, compared to 49 percent among respondents who disagree with that statement. Similar patterns emerge around neighborhood safety.

FIGURE 9: FUTURE
Looking to the future, how optimistic are you that you can achieve the kind of life you want?
Those answering "extremely" or "very" optimistic:

	0%	20%	40%	60%	80%
Respondents who felt/ feel safe in high school					71
...those who did not			49		
Respondents who felt/feel safe in my neighborhood					69
...those who did not			53		
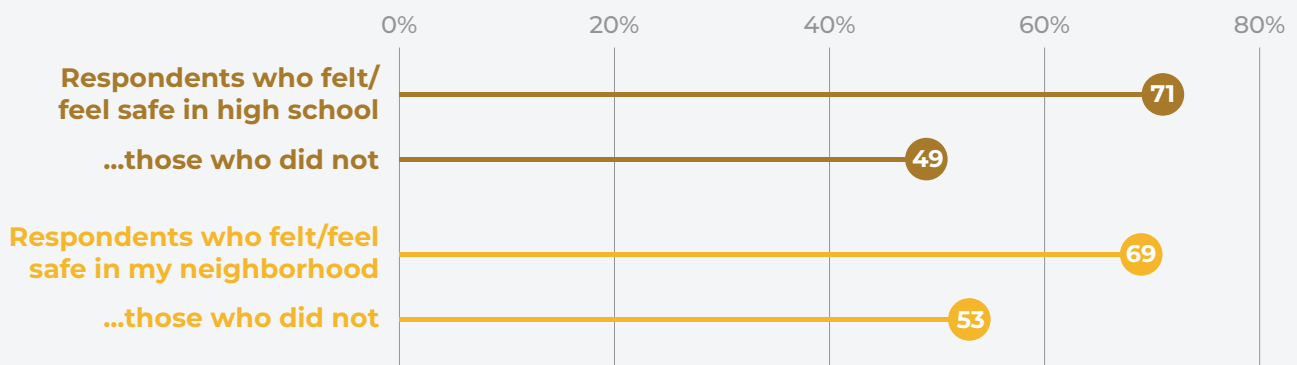
[1] Income levels in the survey are based on self-report. Survey respondents were asked describe their household income level growing up as either very low income, low income, middle income, high income, or very high income.

While a sense of personal safety is clearly correlated with optimism about their future, it is notable that only 15 percent of young people who did not feel safe in high school say they are only a little optimistic (9%) or not optimistic at all (5%) about their futures.[2] So, even many young people who report not feeling safe in their high school or neighborhood are optimistic about their futures.

These relatively high levels of optimism can feel uncomfortable for adults whose life and work at a community, local, or national level may lead them to believe there is little for these young people to feel optimistic about. To be sure, young people who express optimism about their futures are not blind to the social and economic realities of their lives, but they are not necessarily discouraged by these realities. They remain both aware and hopeful.

> *"I feel there are a lot more opportunities for Hispanics just because we were so neglected in the past, and now we are trying to fix all that stuff. We generally get more opportunities because of our Hispanic descent more than we would as white people. Say I went into a school, they are generally looking for people that are more diverse so they can relate to the diverse school culture."*
>
> — PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"Because, like, I know New Orleans got a lot of Black businesses. They got a lot of Black clothing lines. I see that motivates me. It's just a bunch of, that's a positive, like just starting to bring people like…someone said something earlier about like Black people starting to elevate."*
>
> — NEW ORLEANS, LA, BLACK MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

The shape and structure of the focus groups, in-depth interviews, and survey provide an opportunity to hear directly from young people about their desires, fears, challenges, self-identities, and imagined futures. By listening closely to the young people who participated in this research, it is clear that they aspire to live *good lives*. Some have more clarity about what that means for themselves, how to get there, or when and where to find help along the way, but there is a common desire to pursue work that is meaningful and that allows them to thrive.

The insights that follow outline how young people in this research come to form their ideas about what they want for their futures, the steps to get there, and how they are influenced along the way.

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[2]Please note that due to rounding, a sum may appear to be one point more or less than its parts.

Young People Experience Work as *Surviving, Striving,* and *Thriving*
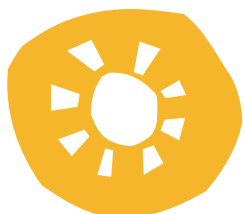
The researchers propose a new analytical framework for understanding the emotional and aspirational states young people pass through, and expect to pass through, in their pursuit of the career and life goals they set for themselves: *Surviving*, *Striving*, and *Thriving*. At a conceptual level this framework can be thought of as a continuum that describes:

- How young people think about and experience education and work;
- The emotional connections young people associate with different phases of their education and work pathways; and
- How young people think about desirable life outcomes and the occupational pathways to get there.

These states are not fixed points, but rather flow into each other, and sometimes back to each other, as young people learn personally or indirectly about occupational options, make occupational choices, and experience progress and setbacks in their occupational journeys.

TABLE 1.

Framework: *Surviving, Striving* and *Thriving*

SURVIVING	STRIVING	THRIVING
They are living paycheck to paycheck—or have no job—and they feel that they are struggling to make ends meet.	They feel that they have goals and are following steps that will help them advance toward *thriving*.	They feel that they have achieved their goals and attained their personal version of a *good life*.
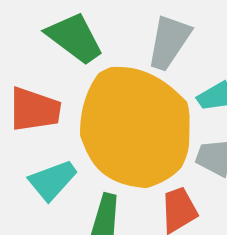
At one end of the continuum is the experience of *thriving*. For most young people, their life goals align with achieving some measure of *thriving*, including their stated goals of financial stability, home ownership, being able to give back, or not having to do work they do not enjoy. When *thriving*, young people are in careers they love or find fulfilling and that allow them to live their personal version of a *good life*.

At the other end of the continuum are young people who are themselves experiencing or are exposed to adults who are experiencing work through a lens of *surviving*. *Surviving* means having to struggle and work hard just to meet basic needs. When *surviving*, young people are working jobs they feel they have to do to make ends meet, and they are living paycheck to paycheck.

Striving is the middle state of the continuum and functions as a precursor to *thriving*. *Striving* means having and being committed to goals that will lead to better lives and working towards those goals. When *striving*, young people are following steppingstones; making decisions; and acquiring knowledge, skills, experiences, and connections that will help them advance toward *thriving*.

While many young people in this research are currently *surviving* or *striving*, some are already *thriving*. Many describe expecting to have to strive to reach one level of *thriving* and then needing to strive again to reach a new higher level of *thriving*. In that sense, they see *striving* as a regular part of their life pathways.

Surviving

The state of *surviving* is characterized by having a bad job (or no job when you need one to make ends meet). When thinking about themselves as *surviving*, participants are uninterested in and displeased with the kind of work they have to perform. Such negative emotions can lead participants to acknowledge the rift between their work experiences and what they personally value in a *good life*. They worry that their bad jobs limit them from being able to do more with their lives, such as giving back.

"I would love to [give back], but... if I can't take care of myself, how am I expected to help?"

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"I don't want to talk about my job right now. If I was an astronaut, maybe. I don't know what I would want to be, but if I was passionate about being an astronaut, I would probably want to share that with the world. But if I am working at a movie theater?"

— NEW YORK, NY, HISPANIC FEMALE, 26–29, MIXED INCOME[3]

Bad jobs are discussed in more detail in the *Young People Aspire to Live a Good Life* section.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

Implications: Young People Experience Work as *Surviving, Striving,* and *Thriving*

Young people understand the states of *striving* and *thriving* to be characterized by a mix of personal and work experiences. Interventions that reflect a more holistic understanding of what young people want to achieve may better match how young people think about their futures and how they determine the best pathways to reach their goals.

There is an opportunity to broaden the understanding and measurement of what success looks like and how young people are progressing toward their goals. Programs can demonstrate impact by supporting young people to move from *surviving* to *striving,* as well as supporting them to move from *striving* to *thriving*.

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[3] Participants in focus groups conducted among those ages 26 to 29 reported a range (mix) of current income levels, but most began life in households with lower incomes.

Striving

Participants largely accept *striving* as necessary to thrive instead of just survive. Nonetheless, they frequently struggle to envision the steps involved in *striving*. For those who can articulate the components of *striving*, it is a combination of personal effort and specific steps toward a career goal. Some kind of effort is necessary to work towards one's career, including showing commitment to and being focused on that career.

"[F]ind the thing...that you will like. At the end of the day, when you finish it, even though you had those problems, you know that because you did it, and now you're going to have something else better."

— NEW YORK, NY, BLACK MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"[At 25], I am planning on going to medical school, so I will probably be living wherever I can get into medical school. Maybe in an apartment with some classmates that I meet. Probably working as a tutor for undergraduate students to make some money while I am in medical school."

— PASADENA, CA, WHITE MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

While almost all participants recognize that *striving* is required to thrive, some do not consider that kind of effort to be unpleasant when they are pursuing careers doing what they love. When they are passionate about their work, *striving* is perceived as positive rather than burdensome.

Thriving

Participants see the *thriving* stage as when they achieve their goals and attain their personal version of a *good life*. Young people, regardless of race or gender, commonly articulate several attributes that they feel comprise a *good life*. Being well-connected socially, and also being respected by those connections, is one of these attributes.

"Respect is very important in life. Like, you know, you want to be respected."

— GREENVILLE, MS, BLACK FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"You want to be somewhere where you feel like, okay, I'm good here, I'm well respected."

— NEW YORK, NY, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Many young people also want to give back to their community and see having the time, money, and commitment to do that as attributes of a *good life*.

"Definitely go back to my old neighborhood and build stuff; build a community center over there. The people that are in need and give back to them, minister to the kids over there, so they know it is possible."

— ATLANTA, GA, BLACK MALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

"Mentorship and lifting others, I want to get to a point where I can give that back because I feel like, especially being Black, in the African-American community, we don't know about these opportunities...I just want to be a source for that. Establish ethics, process and create a style, making money, and then managing, advocating better for myself. And then the end would be taking the kind of work I want to take that's meaningful and beneficial for the world."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK FEMALE, 26–29, MIXED INCOME

Young people who are connected to their church or religious community often have a desire to be engaged with and participate in that community.

> *"At 25…I will be working, but I'm not sure where. Important people in my life: my family and spreading the Word of God. At 45, have a good life with a good job. Important people: still my family and still spreading the Word of God."*
>
> — DOWNEY, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 16–18, MIXED INCOME

Some young people want to be leaders and role models.

> *"If you want to do this, you got to network and meet people who do this and see if they can take you under their wing and teach you how to do it so when you are in the career, you can be a leader and show other people how to do it."*
>
> — CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

Parenthood is also important to most young people. They aspire to be a good parent in the future—it is not only a life goal but an important part of a *good life*.

> *"At 45, I can see myself living in Alabama for sure now, working in a healthcare facility, having maybe one or two kids, a dog, a husband. I see myself…being a good parent, nice vehicle, good credit."*
>
> — GREENVILLE, MS, BLACK FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

> *"At 45, living on my own or with a wife, helping my kids grow up to be successful; still working."*
>
> — PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"Living by the ocean by then; probably still working, but my kids are almost out of the house and relaxing and not having to work as much as when I was 25."*
>
> — ATLANTA, GA, WHITE FEMALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

Some young women and men are already parents or are pregnant/parents-to-be. While they recognize that early parenthood can be an obstacle, they do not see it as inherently in conflict with or stopping them from achieving a *good life*.

> *"So, I'm pregnant, right? It's said that most pregnant women won't succeed and stuff. So, I won't be a part of that statistic. That's why I wrote, 'I will get my degree,' because my baby don't stop nothing. And I just want to remain positive about that, so I'm going to overcome the statistic."*
>
> — GREENVILLE, MS, BLACK FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Young people believe that a career enables them to have a *good life* and thrive

Young people understand a *good life* to be *thriving*. Having a *good life* is accompanied by being successful in their careers and having health, wealth, stability, and control over their lives. They are able to travel or procure high-quality possessions, which goes far beyond meeting their basic needs. They have a clarity of purpose in their careers and lives, and they find fulfillment in having the ability to give back.

> *"At 25, I am a cop living in the Oakland area or the Bay Area. Life is good. I have money. I have health as well."*
>
> — OAKLAND, CA, HISPANIC MALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

"My goal is to feel like I really figured out my purpose and I had a really positive impact on some people's lives, to be surrounded by my family. I think that is really all I would care about at [70] is my family is happy and with me."

— NEW YORK, NY, WHITE FEMALE, 26–29, MIXED INCOME

"[Success at a job means] you continue to grow."

— PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Specifically, the participants talked about having a *good job* in order to have a *good life*—in essence, to thrive.[4]

"I wake up and want to do it. Like I wake up, and I'm not, there's no stress, no nothing. Like I'm motivated. I'm dedicated. I'm driven. Like and I'm completely in tune with just the feeling that I'm fulfilled."

— NEW YORK, NY, BLACK MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"Work-life balance…You don't want your work to consume your whole life, but you also don't want your life to take over what you are doing at work as well. You have to find a middle ground."

— PUEBLO, CO, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

When imagining themselves *thriving* in the future, many participants can see themselves owning a home and having a family. They see themselves helping to support their elderly parents and giving back to their community or family or both. They contemplate the idea of starting their own business and working for themselves. They can see themselves one day retiring comfortably.

"By the time I am 45, I am going to have three houses. I will have a business running and probably run for President."

— OAKLAND, CA, BLACK MALE, 16–18, MIXED INCOME

"At 45, I want to be secure in money and have a good house; still happily married and a good, well-paying job…At 70, still secure in money, still happily married, retired and happy home."

— PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

Young people who participated in this research imagine their futures as *thriving*. While *striving* may be necessary to get there, none articulated a desire to pursue a future in which they simply survive. In fact, the opposite is true: many give specific examples of *surviving* and are clear that they do not want to live that way in the future.

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[4] More on young people's understanding of the words good job, work, and career can be found in the section entitled Young People Aspire to Live a *Good Life*.

Young People Experience Identity as an Asset

While young people aim to thrive, how they imagine getting there is informed by their individual identities—and the personal, familial, and cultural assets they see themselves bringing to bear in pursuit of their own version of a desirable future.

The research suggests that participating young people experience identity in three primary ways: how they experience themselves; how they are perceived by others; and how they relate to their family, community, and culture. Within a personal, familial, and community context, many young people understand their identities as asset-rich, meaning that they believe these aspects of their personal identities are largely an asset and will be beneficial to their life success and quality of life. In the focus group research, as well as in the survey data, most Black and Hispanic young people of every socio-economic background broadly view the racial, ethnic, and cultural aspects of their identities as positive.

As young people grow, they accumulate lived experiences that inform their expectations of how race, ethnicity, and gender will impact their career pathways. While most Black and Hispanic young people expect to face racial bias in the workplace, and some young women believe they will face gender bias, these young people believe that they can overcome discrimination through personal hard work and diligence—by being and doing better. This perception is largely echoed by the advice they receive from some parents and adults in their lives that highlights the importance and perceived value of the individual overcoming an unjust system.

For example, 65 percent of Black female survey respondents report getting advice or guidance about how to be Black and female in the world. Sixty-one percent of Black male respondents report getting advice about how to be Black and male in the world. While notably lower, nearly half of Hispanic young people report getting guidance related to their race and gender (47% of Hispanic females and 45% of Hispanic males).

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

Implications: Young People Experience Identity as an Asset

Black and Hispanic young people experience their race, ethnicity, culture, and gender in positive ways. There is an opportunity to build on this positive sense of self and to design programs and other interventions that support this asset framing.

Young people describe themselves in mostly positive terms, but struggle to connect these positive descriptions to the notion of strengths. There is an opportunity for interventions to support young people to build connections between the positive ways in which they see themselves and the skills and capacities needed to succeed at specific careers

Young people experience their identities as multi-faceted

Regardless of race, ethnicity, and gender, most young people report seeing themselves as individuals first and members of a group or specific racial or ethnic category second. During the focus groups, each participant was asked to write down a list of words or phrases they would use to describe themselves. Across race and income differences, Black, Hispanic, and white young people wrote down individual-level attributes and characteristics. Virtually none of the young people included race, gender, or culture in their multifaceted lists.

> *"I put hardworking, bold, sometimes I'm a perfectionist, not all the time, and easily motivated. Like if it's something that I really want to do, and someone is like telling me, hey, I think you should go do it, I'm, okay, I'm going to try it. Like I'm going to test the waters a little bit. So that's what I mean by easily motivated to doing things, not bad things."*
>
> — BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

> *"Confident…introvert…hard-working…Sort of outgoing. Well, it's like I'm kind of—I like being around people. I like having conversation with them, but after a certain time, I kinda need to be by myself. And I will go on this—I like new stuff, trying out new things. I like new challenges."*
>
> — BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK MALE, 17–20, LOWER INCOME

> *"Ambitious, creative, limitless, caring, open-minded, family oriented, and shutterbug. I teach myself a lot of things. I feel I can learn new things."*
>
> — PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

> *"I'm open-minded, nice, caring, trustworthy, loyal, funny, brave. And I can take a punch… I'm only saying it, it sounds a little weird, but I'm also a Boy Scout, so I started saying like trustworthy, loyal."*
>
> — NEW ORLEANS, LA, WHITE MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

> *"I am anti-social with new people. I am a chunky…like big. I'm funny. I am a jokester. I [draw]; it depends on what kind of mood I am in. I like going out all the time. I have a great imagination."*
>
> — OAKLAND, CA, HISPANIC MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

Young people struggle to connect individual characteristics of themselves to strengths

Despite the mostly positive language young people from households with lower incomes use to describe themselves, when asked to reflect specifically on *strengths,* or things they are good at, many young people find it difficult to come up with a list—even a very short one. The notion of assessing their personal strengths may not be intuitive for young people from households with lower incomes, and they may not have as much exposure to adults who model it as young people from households with higher incomes (who listed their strengths much more readily). Young people from households with higher incomes were quicker to draw connections between the ways they described themselves early in the focus group discussion and their strengths when they were asked to share them later in the discussion. Even among young people who initially described themselves neutrally or more negatively, young people from households with higher incomes were more likely to be able to frame their descriptions as a potential asset when asked about strengths.

Photograph by Annabelle Armstrong-Temple, age 12

"My first word was procrastinator. I procrastinate a lot, like a lot. It's really bad. But that has also made me resourceful. So basically, once it's like the end, I have no other choice but to, you know, do it. Intelligent when I want to be, and seeking more…I just feel l like I want more in life. I don't want to just work and go to school and be at home with my parents. I want to, you know, just seek out what's out there for me, and what's for me will come."

— BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

"Truthful. I am always speaking the truth because there is no point in lying. Healthy, outgoing, creative, and I am kind of annoying in a nice kind of way because I motivate people because no one motivates themselves around me."

— NEW YORK, NY, HISPANIC MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

This difference between socio-economic backgrounds is notable. However, it is unclear if this way of speaking about oneself is the product of different educational settings, different exposures to recognizing and articulating personal strengths within their families, or other opportunities in which young people gain experience speaking about themselves or assessing themselves in intentionally positive terms.

Young people understand their race and ethnicity as multi-dimensional experiences

Young people in this research articulate their race, ethnicity, background, and culture in a diversity of ways. When asked to describe themselves in the focus groups, some young people understood the questions to be explicitly about race and ethnicity, while others focused on aspects such as family structure or their role in their families, community norms, or positive associations they have with their race or ethnicity.

> *"[Black people] are the strongest folks on earth."*
>
> — ATLANTA, GA, BLACK MALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"I put male. Race: I just put two or more, because I'm not going to sit here and list everything that runs through my blood. I'm mostly Russian and Scandinavian. Religion, Old Norse, which is also part of the Scandinavian background. Definitely, I grew up in a military background, and my family is very old-style culture."*
>
> — YAKIMA, WA, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"I'm African-American, female, Hispanic, Puerto Rican, and Christian."*
>
> — BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

> *"Atheist and white."*
>
> — PUEBLO, CO, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"I'm also the youngest in my family. I feel like I have a lot of people to look up to. At a younger age, I didn't really appreciate it because I always wanted someone to play with. My siblings were way older than me. But the older I got, the more I was able to kind of take from that and take like from their life experiences and take from their advice, so, yeah, really have grown to appreciate it..."*
>
> — DOWNEY, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

Young people experience race, ethnicity, and culture as interrelated

Importantly, for many young people, race, ethnicity, and culture overlap with one another. Therefore, young people talk about language, religion, food, history, nation of origin, music, and traditions as deeply connected to their experiences with and understanding of their racial and ethnic identities.

> *"I'm a female; Hispanic, Cuban culture. My family I guess they came to the United States to have a better life for their children and for themselves. My mom is not as strict—traditionally wise—but my grandma is...[My culture is] Cuban, I guess. I was born here in the United States. I describe myself American/Cuban, white, but I mean I don't blend in with Cubans necessarily. The majority of my friends are Mexican, so I am more them than Cuban. Cubans are...not quiet. [I identify more with Mexican culture] because I actually like their food better too."*
>
> — BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"I feel we are really strong people. I am very aggressive. I feel like my family—all my aunts and my mom, everybody, my cousins—they are all very aggressive and very outspoken, very strong. Even the men in my family are very strong-minded. They all do things...I think it is my family and that is what I grew up with. I think it is because my parents are very outspoken. The Latinos in my house are very outspoken, but they are like now you go and get your own shit."*
>
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Notably, when young people are probed on and speak about their race, ethnicity, and aspects of culture, they depart from the individual level characteristics—described earlier in this section—and begin to talk about and connect their identity to lived experiences as members of specific groups, families, neighborhoods, and communities.

Young people understand sexual and gender identity to be part of their culture

Some young people in the focus groups shared their sexual or gender identity. Among these young people, these aspects of their identity are characterized as either an individual-level characteristic or an aspect of their culture. Notably, these disclosures of sexual orientation or gender identity took place across lower- and higher-income focus groups and in every racial, ethnic, and gender category. Almost all young people who disclosed that they are transgender, queer, or gender non-conforming excluded this aspect of their identity from the initial list of words or phrases they might use to describe themselves, and they only included their queerness as part of their responses to the *race, ethnicity, gender, culture, or background* question.

"Black, gay Baptist, stylist. That's about it."

— NEW YORK, NY, BLACK MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"For gender I put transgender; for race I put Hispanic, Native American, and Irish. For religion, Buddhist. I am kind of equal everything, so I am not really more one than another. I embrace the whole."

— PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"I would consider myself an activist. So, typically, on my Instagram, I'm sharing feminist stuff, LGBTQ plus stuff, and stuff like that."

— BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20, LOWER INCOME

"I put female, Hispanic. For culture, I put, and I'm also from Guatemala, I consider myself Christian and a part of the LGBTQ community..."

— DOWNEY, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

"I am a white, bisexual, and polyamorous female."

— PUEBLO, CO, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"I am an atheist who comes from a Catholic family. I am also gay. And I am a, oh, a deaf cochlear. I have a cochlear implant that I use."

— NEW ORLEANS, LA, WHITE MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME
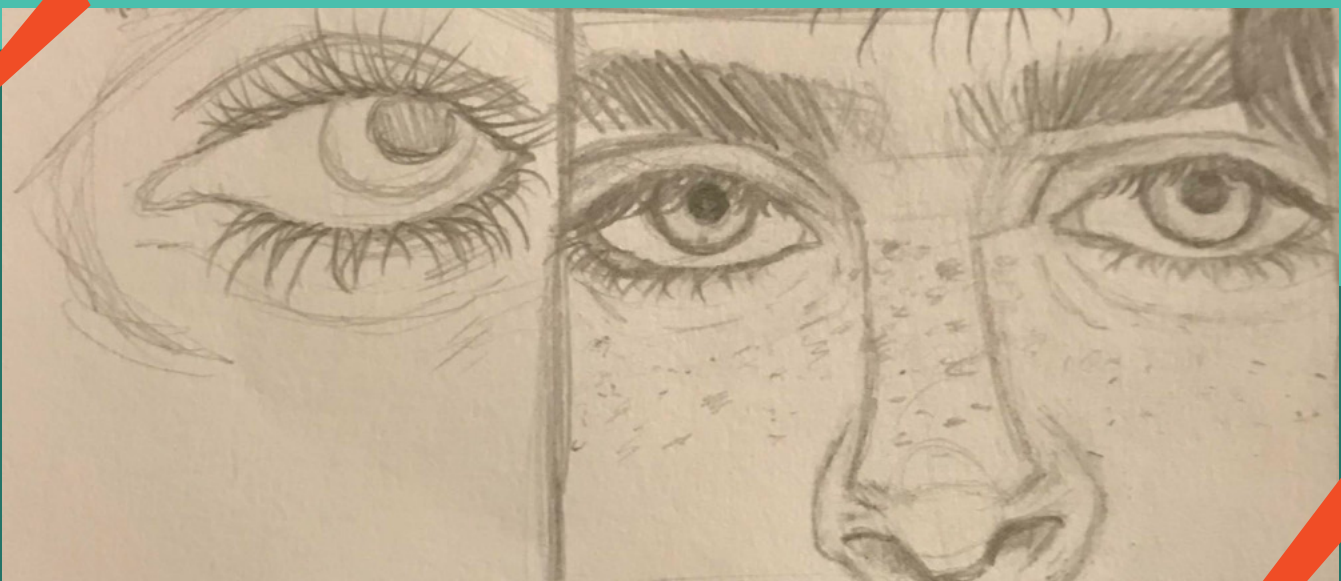
Illustration by Lonnie Allen, age 17

Some young people resist racial and ethnic categorization

"Our history isn't recorded right in the books, so I don't refer to myself as a Black male because it's called by people that don't refer to us as people."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

Some young people express frustration or fatigue when asked to list and share their race or background with the group. Black young people in particular expressed dissatisfaction with the racial category, with some expressing that these boxes do not adequately represent or reflect their experiences or the way they see themselves.

"It's like to me, there shouldn't be, like, five or certain different races, because we all are the human race. Like, it's not—a pigment of skin shouldn't be—oh, because they're this color, they act like this."

— BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK MALE, 17–20, LOWER INCOME

"I actually don't like to speak on these type of things. I'm fine with you guys [the researcher] having the paper...every time I fill out any job application, I ask as to why I even have to identify what I am to you guys, because I never, I actually never knew the point of it. Like, what part does it play in the—I know they say like, oh, this won't affect if we're going give you the job or not, but I never really knew...And me, personally, I don't know, just discussing gender, race, I personally feel like all of these—if the option is left up to the person...So, I just don't think these [categories] got to be like identifying you."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Young people understand *Hispanic* to mean different things

When Hispanic or Latino young people are asked to describe their race or ethnicity, most use the word *Hispanic* (Figure 10). However, when you remove the most commonly volunteered terms—*Hispanic*, *Mexican*, and *Latino* or *Latina*—you can see the diversity of other words these young people use to define their ethnic or racial identity (Figure 11).

FIGURE 10.

Here are the words young people use to describe their race and ethnicity in the survey. Results come from the quantitative survey in which 1,109 respondents identify as Hispanic, Latina, or Latino.

FIGURE 11.

In this figure the three largest categories from Figure 10 have been removed to reveal the remaining words young people use to describe their race and ethnicity in the survey. Results come from the quantitative survey in which 1,109 respondents identify as Hispanic, Latina, or Latino.

Survey questions related to race and ethnicity can be found in the _Explanation of Terms_ section.

Importantly, some young people employ the word _Hispanic_ differently in relationship to their racial and ethnic backgrounds. Some young people use _Hispanic_ as the sole description of their racial or ethnic identities, while others use the term as a shorthand for a specific mixture of ethnicities and cultures. Still others use the term _Hispanic_ in conjunction with other terms related to race (e.g., Brown or Black) or specific country of origin or language(s) (e.g., Spanish).

> _"I am Mexican-American, female…then I am Hispanic."_
> — BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

> _"Spanish is just an easier way of saying a list of 20 different types of Spanish. You just say oh I am Hispanic or half Hispanic."_
> — NEW YORK, NY, HISPANIC MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

> _"[I am] Mexican American plus Salvadoran, Hispanic, and then I go, I grew up Catholic, but I go to a Christian church right now."_
> — YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

> _"Well, I'm Guatemalan, but I don't really associate myself with Mexican, but…Hispanic."_
> — DOWNEY, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

> _"I correlate Hispanic with Mexican."_
> — DOWNEY, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

> _"My race, I'm Mexican-American. I'm a Chicano. My culture, I've got 2 cultures. I've got my Oakland culture, and I've got my culture from Mexico…The parts that really stand out to me: just being from Oakland, my background."_
> — OAKLAND, CA, HISPANIC MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"My race is weird because in Pueblo I am white, but I am not. My family is Hispanic. We eat Mexican food. Some of my family speaks Spanish. Some of them don't. I don't speak fluent Spanish, but I speak half and half, so it is kind of weird. I am a mixture of a lot of things."

— PUEBLO, CO, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"For race, I put American but with Latin spices; and for ethnicity, I put Hispanic and proud."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

For young people born in the United States, we heard that it is often important for them to explain cultural differences that exist between themselves and family members born outside of the U.S. or those who have been in the U.S. for different lengths of time. For these young people, language often plays an important role in determining and distinguishing between facets of their identities.

"We're not really like a Spanish-typical family. I don't speak Spanish. My relatives all speak English to me. We don't eat Spanish food…I just am not in the Spanish culture. I am Spanish but I guess it is more American because I am here and my family doesn't really push that on me, Spanish."

— BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"I feel like being Latina means like you can speak Spanish, is what I feel like it means. Like, you can speak two languages. That's what I think it means. But I feel like Peru, like my Peru, I feel like it's just where I come from, like where my family is from. It's more like personal. And then Hispanic is just like what everyone describes like, oh, you're Hispanic? You can speak Spanish too."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"I look Spanish, but then I'm not because–and that is frustrating–because I wish I understood and I could speak it. My grandma used to talk it a lot but then my parents didn't really emphasize it to us. They can speak it but not very well either."

— PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"I'm Mexican, Hispanic male, Latin American…My mom was born in Mexico; dad was born in Mexico. I was born here so that is Mexican-American in a sense…I think I'm more Mexican because both my parents are Mexican…I feel Mexican more than I feel American…"

— OAKLAND, CA, HISPANIC MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"My grandparents won't speak English even though my mom was born here, actually. I am second generation Mexican-American, but she was born here, but she was raised in Mexico. Usually everything we speak Spanish; everything is more Mexican than American. [When I live on my own my house is going to be] Mexican-American. I want to raise my kids to speak Spanish, also. My siblings speak Spanish, but not as well as I do—like only a couple words. My little brothers they don't speak any Spanish."

— BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"I don't consider myself Mexican because I was born here. My first language is English. My parents came from Mexico. They taught me everything I know in Spanish, so I don't really consider myself Mexican. It is more Latino."

— OAKLAND, CA, HISPANIC MALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

The robust and complex nature of how young people think about their cultural, racial, and ethnic identities directly informs the ways they imagine their future lives and professional pursuits. Young people build their perception of what is possible and what they hope for themselves at the intersection of their identity, their life experiences, and their cultural experiences.

"…it's a nonprofit organization that I want to do more about, and my sister been working on it… Basically, my sister, like me and my sister, we don't have the same dad. But she's like—I don't know how we grew up in the same family—but she went this way, and I went this way….and it's just like we're trying to come back together to figure out what happened. Why did—what happened with her? Why did she go so left? And, you know, we were brought up in the same family. So she basically put something together…just something that we want to do together to, you know, bring people together in Baltimore."

— BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

In some cases, they are strongly influenced by their experience of the regional culture and the types of work that are visible and well-respected in their area. In New Orleans, young Black males in particular describe a sense of pride in their city and feel that they can be successful because of the diversity of ways in which they see Black people being successful around them. In this group, young people often express their own future careers in ways that embody the culture of the city. Young people describe becoming a chef who specializes in local cuisine, a fashion designer who collaborates with local musicians to make cutting-edge clothes, and a physician who follows in his family's tradition.

"Like my great grandfather, he just died, but his grandfather was a slave. His father was an indentured slave…Then he became a farmer, but he owned his farm. So, it's like you see that, and which led to his kids being children of doctors to their children being children of doctors. And then you have us."

— NEW ORLEANS, LA, BLACK MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Young people describe their experience of their race, ethnicity, culture, and community in complex and intersecting ways. This finding offers the field important opportunities to rethink assumptions about how young people experience and prioritize any single aspect of their identity. Future program and curricula design can benefit from the nuance and expansiveness young people articulate in this research.

Young People Aspire to live a *Good Life*

As mentioned earlier in this report, young people ultimately desire to have a *good life*; they aim to thrive. *Job*, *work*, and *career* are mechanisms to achieving that goal.

Young people see *job, work,* and *career* differently

In the focus groups, researchers explored the meanings and associations young people have with common language used to describe work. This language included the words: *job*, *work*, and *career*. For most young people, these words have different meanings, and researchers observed some consistent patterns in the way many young people understand them.

For most young people:
- *Job*, on its own, feels like something you have to do, and most young people have negative associations with the word when it is not modified
- *Work* is a broad category of activity that encompasses both job and career; associations can be positive, negative, or neutral (as in it is something everybody does)
- *Career* is something positive, it is a goal you want to achieve; many young people will modify the word *job* and use *good job* and *career* interchangeably

For most young people these words—and in particular the words *job* and *good job* or *career*—not only mean different things, but they are associated with specific experiences in the *Surviving/Striving/Thriving* analytical framework discussed previously.

When thinking about having a *good life*, young people are not focusing on any particular kind of profession or industry. Labor market data or income level are not key determinants of whether they feel that they have a *good job*. Rather, their emphasis is on how a *good job* enables them to have a good quality of life. Young people want to have enough and want to know how it feels to have enough. They want to have a career that they enjoy, that they find personally satisfying, or that they love or feel passionate about.

Young people view a *good job* or a career as a means to experience *thriving* and as an essential element of a *good life*.

Work

> *"I feel like work can be a very universal term. It can mean a lot of things."*
> — DOWNEY, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

Many young people understand *work* as something that encompasses *job* and *career*. At times, *work* is something you have to do or need to attain. At other times, *work* is something you choose to do or is associated with a goal you are trying to achieve. The manner in which young people understand the word affects their associations with it.

When *work* is associated with something you have to do or need to attain, most young people have negative associations with the word. It is akin to a chore, something you have to do to get by.

"For work I put exhausting. It can be at times, especially if you're full-time, so stressful. I also put important. It's important that you do some type of work...a man who don't work don't eat. So, you got to do something. Work is important to sustain life. I mean, my way of living, I've got to do something. Can't be broke...better work."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"Work is just something you do just to pay the bills and get by. Work is something you don't want to do."

— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

By contrast, most young people have a positive association with *work* when it is understood as something you choose to do or are trying to achieve. In this context, it is more like a journey, an evolution of self, a part of life, or even a calling. In this sense, *work* is something you *want* to do.

"To me, work is something where you want to do that for the rest of your life. You want to retire there...That is long term."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"I think of work as more like a...as something you are going to do for the rest of your life. It is what you are set on, your interest. That is why I put interesting because it is something that you want to actually do..."

— PASADENA, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

Job

For most young people, the word *job* generally conjures more negative associations than positives one.

"When I think of a job, I don't think of something that is going to last long. You are still going to make money; you are still going to get no sleep because of the hours; most jobs are super long like the 9 to 5. In my case, for my job I work with idiots."

— PUEBLO, CO, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Many young people perceive a job as something they have to do. It is how you get money to survive. Job is also how many young people describe their current experience in the workforce.

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

Young People Aspire to Live a *Good Life*

Young people say they aspire to live a *good life* and that a *good job* is a means to that end. The question young people are asking themselves is not, "What do I want to be?" but is instead, "How do I want to live?" There is an opportunity to shift messaging targeted at young people to reflect their understanding that a *good life* is the desired goal and a *good job* is one critical element of reaching that goal.

Young people bring their own understanding and meaning to the words *job, work,* and *career*. Young people have more negative associations with the word *job* and more positive associations with the word *career*. This finding can be leveraged to craft more intentional messaging aimed at young people that promotes and integrates their understanding of these words.

TABLE 2.

Connecting *Surviving/Striving/Thriving* to *Good Job/Bad Job*

	SURVIVING ALWAYS associated with a *bad job*, NEVER associated with a *good job*	**STRIVING** Associated with *good jobs* ONLY IF those jobs lead to *thriving*	**THRIVING** ALWAYS associated with a *good job*
GOOD JOB	Never	Sometimes	Always
BAD JOB	Always	Sometimes	Never

"Temporary. If I get a job, I want it to be temporary. I don't want to be there forever. I want something bigger than where I'm at right now. Stress and money."

— OAKLAND, CA, HISPANIC MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"When I think about a job, I think of something I need to do to get by. I need to pay my rent. I have things that I do while I am in school. It is not necessarily what I want to do with my life; it is something to help me in the moment. I am not planning on being a cashier at California Bedroom forever. That is not my life goal...The job I had before, God I hated it, but I had to put up with it...Sometimes you've got to put up with things just because you need a way to get by."

— PASADENA, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

"I don't know, whenever I hear the word job it just makes me think of McDonald's."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

Some young people have more neutral associations with the word *job* and sometimes use it to describe an entry point to their career. In these circumstances, a job is not the ultimate destination, but it is an early step on a particular career pathway and something you need to do for a certain but limited period of time as part of building a career.

"I feel you use a job as a steppingstone to get to your career."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"A job will help you build a career."

— GREENVILLE, MS, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"I feel job and career are all on the same path to whatever you choose it to be."

— PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Most young people who work while they are in school refer to that as *a job*, but their association with it is often dependent on the reason they have that job. When young people are working to support themselves and pay for school, they are more likely to have negative associations with *job*. This contrasts with a neutral- or even slightly-positive impressions of the term among those who see their job as a steppingstone to their preferred career.

Career

In contrast to job, young people generally have many positive associations with the word *career*. For many young people, a *career* is a passion and a lifelong commitment to something you love to do. For these young people, having a career that is built from their passion for or love of something is an important aspect of the happiness and fulfillment these young people will feel from their career.

Bad Job

In many cases, the characteristics of *bad jobs* are the opposite of *good jobs*. For example, *good jobs* are likely to be interesting while *bad jobs* are likely to be boring. This oppositional structure is not the only distinction, however. In some cases, the discussion about bad jobs focuses on elements that are unique and noteworthy, especially the ways in which bad jobs sap people's emotional and physical well-being. The state of *surviving* is characterized by having a bad job.

Young people describe *bad jobs* as:

✗ Something they have to do to make money to live and make ends meet

✗ Jobs that pay poorly and typically offer few to no benefits

✗ Poor or unsafe working environments

✗ Jobs that demand a lot of time, whether because the places of work are located far from where the participants live or because the participants have to work long hours

✗ Jobs in which you have no control over your schedule or have to work overnight shifts

✗ Jobs that lack the opportunity for career growth, which leads the participants to feel like they are stuck

[Characteristics of a Bad Job] "Usually low income."
— YAKIMA, WA, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

[Characteristics of a Bad Job] "No benefits and no insurance."
— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

"[Jobs] that didn't let you sleep. Night shifts."
— BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"Not a lot of like growth, like growing opportunities."
— BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

"If you get this weird vibe before you even clock in, then that's a bad job. Like before you even clock in, because some people I know in my job, they've been there for 10, 11 years. And I'm like, 'How you do that?'"
— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME
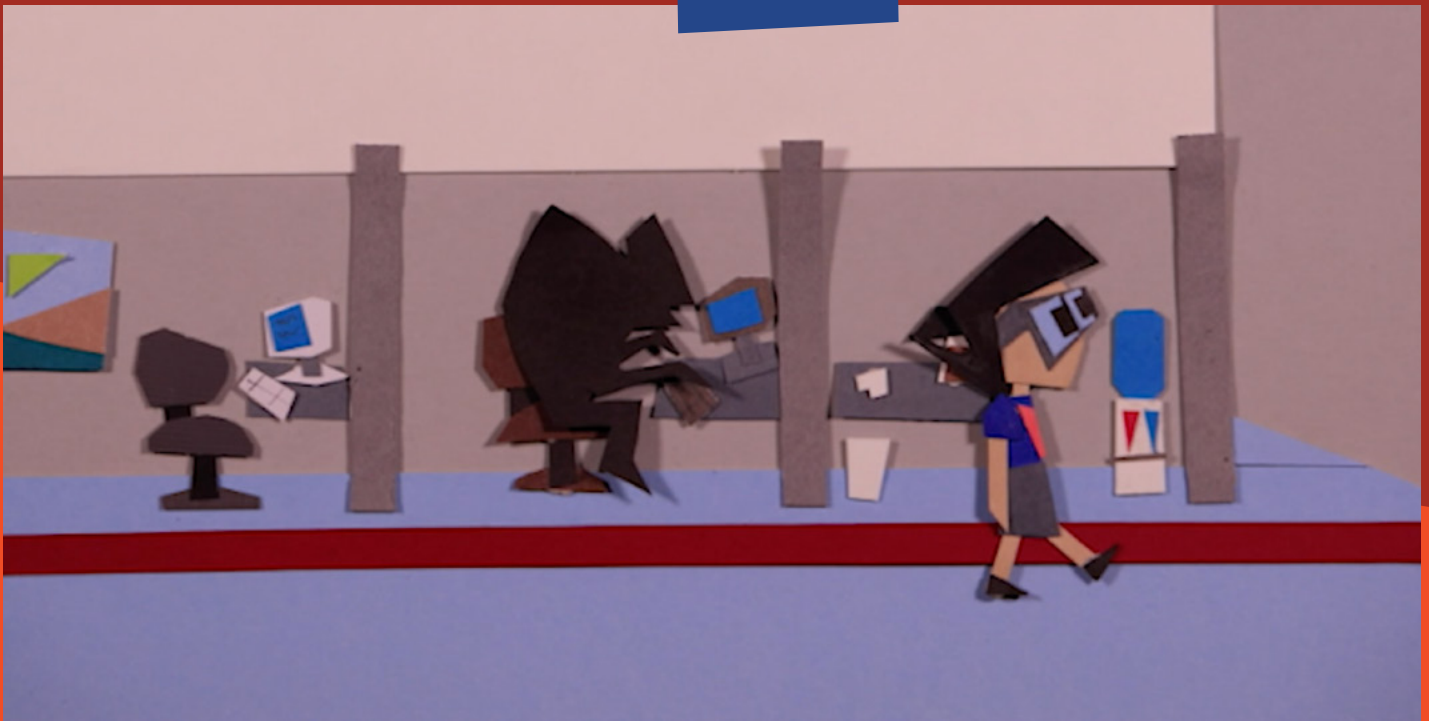
Illustration by August Smith, age group 18–21

"You make a career out of your passion in life and what you want to do."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"Career is your passion."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"It is something that you are passionate about as a career. It is your life's goal. As a kid, oh I want to be a firefighter and you achieve that goal of being a firefighter. That was your career and you built it up to that...it is usually your life's goal that you want to do this long term for as long as you can compared to a job or work where it is just momentarily."

— NEW YORK, NY, HISPANIC MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

Although many young people define their career as being built from their passion for or love of something, a significant segment do *not* define their hoped-for career as stemming from a lifelong love. These young people still look forward to and think positively about their future career. They believe they will feel satisfaction and fulfilment from the type of work they do and from doing it well. They neither need nor expect to feel a passion for their career. They do not feel they are making compromises. They simply do not feel the same drive to be passionate about their career that others may express.

"I think career is something that you are happy doing...Career is something that you are happy doing and probably set for life because a career is something that obviously pays good. It is not just a job. They call it a career for a reason."

— OAKLAND, CA, HISPANIC MALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

"I put end goal, long term, something you got your degree in, something you are an expert at, makes you happy and money. When I think about what I want to do when I am older and

what career I am looking for, hopefully it makes me happy. I like doing it for a long time. I am really good at it, so it is my goal I guess."

"I look at my career as more so a means to an end, because I'm very big on life. I want to live life, not just, oh, I got to get that promotion, you know. Of course, I'm going to get that promotion, just because that's just who I am. But it's not, that's not my absolute goal in life. So, I just think it's just kind of necessary."

Importantly, many young people often understand *career* as a process, something that will unfold over time. These young people allow for the possibility—and some even expect—that their career will change over time.

"I think a career is not just one thing a lot of the time—especially now—so it is really flexible...I think in the past it has been a lot of picking a career and that is it, but I think now it is a lot more flexible and you are able to incorporate a lot more things into what your career is and you can find yourself in a lot of different places."

"Yeah, so I pick a career, and then I have an arrow going back to the military, in case I choose a career that doesn't suit me right away. I choose another career and then move on."

However, some young people feel their career needs to be—and some want it to be—something they will do for the rest of their lives.

"It feels like once you chose your career, and you're working towards it, or if you got your career already, you can't even change it."

"A career is something you think about over your entire life span. You can end up in one career and figure out 10, 20 years down the road that it's not for you. So, the way I look at a career is it takes a lot of thinking on what you actually want to do."

"If I choose a career, I want it to be something that I want to do for the rest of my life not just for that moment."

"I can do this until I retire. Once you make it to your career that is it. You can do it for the rest of your life, just make a living off of it."

Career decisions are emotional and complex

The career preferences of young people are amazingly diverse. Asked to select their first choice for the main type of job or career they want to do in the future, only one category—health care (12%)—was selected by more than ten percent of the survey respondents.

While young people's career selections are generally diverse across demographic subgroups, some key demographic differences emerge. For example, female respondents are significantly more likely to choose a

health care career (18%) compared to males (6%). These diverging gender preferences for a career in health care are consistent across Black, Hispanic, and white respondents, although Black and white respondents differ significantly in the health care career preferences by age. Specifically, Black respondents ages 15 to 16 are significantly more likely to choose health care (18%) than are Black respondents ages 19 to 21 (8%).

FIGURE 12: CAREER CHOICE

Thinking about your future, which of the following do you think you are MOST likely to do...

Racial breakdown   BLACK   HISPANIC   WHITE
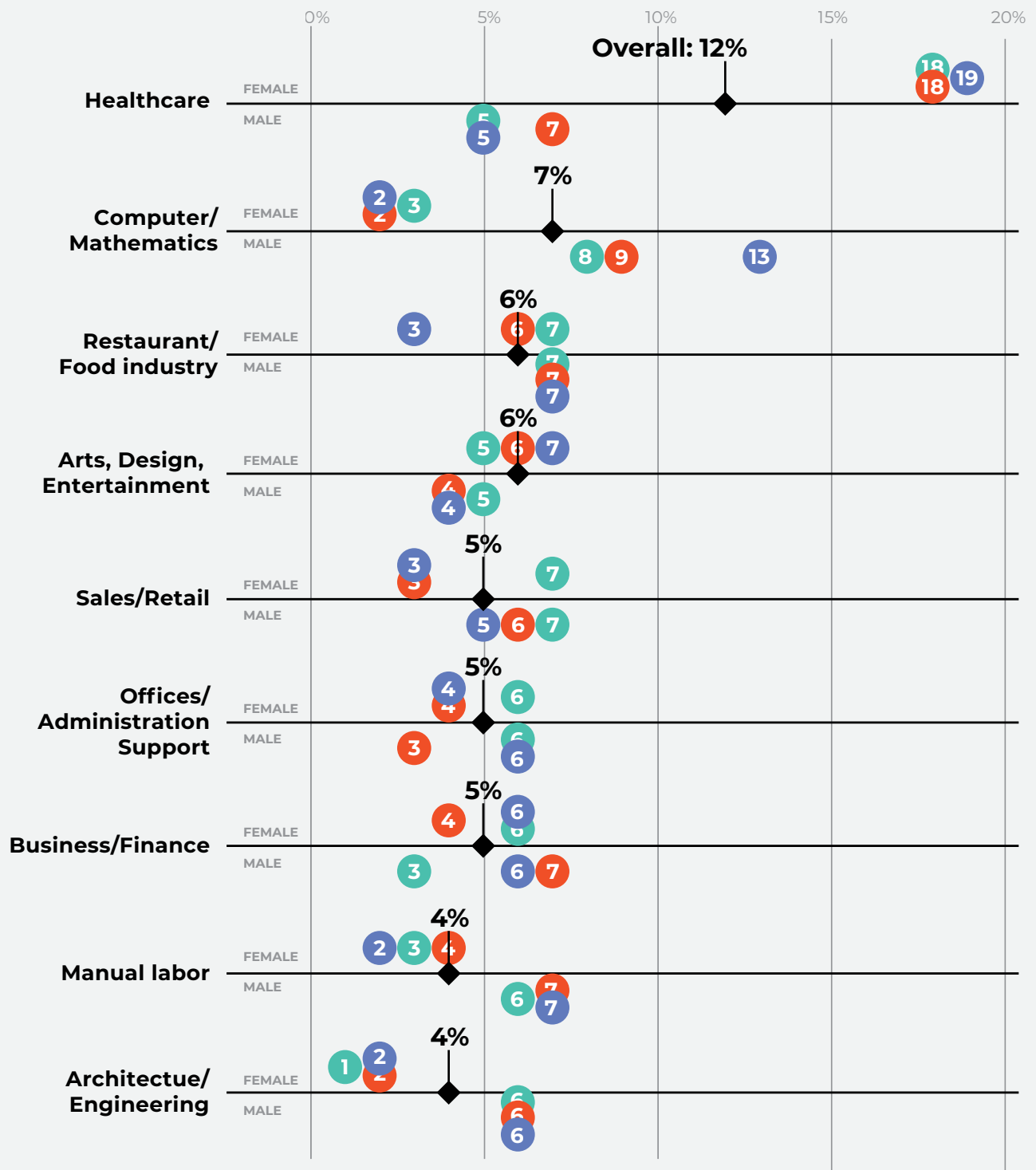
Thinking about your future, which of the following do you think you are MOST likely to do…
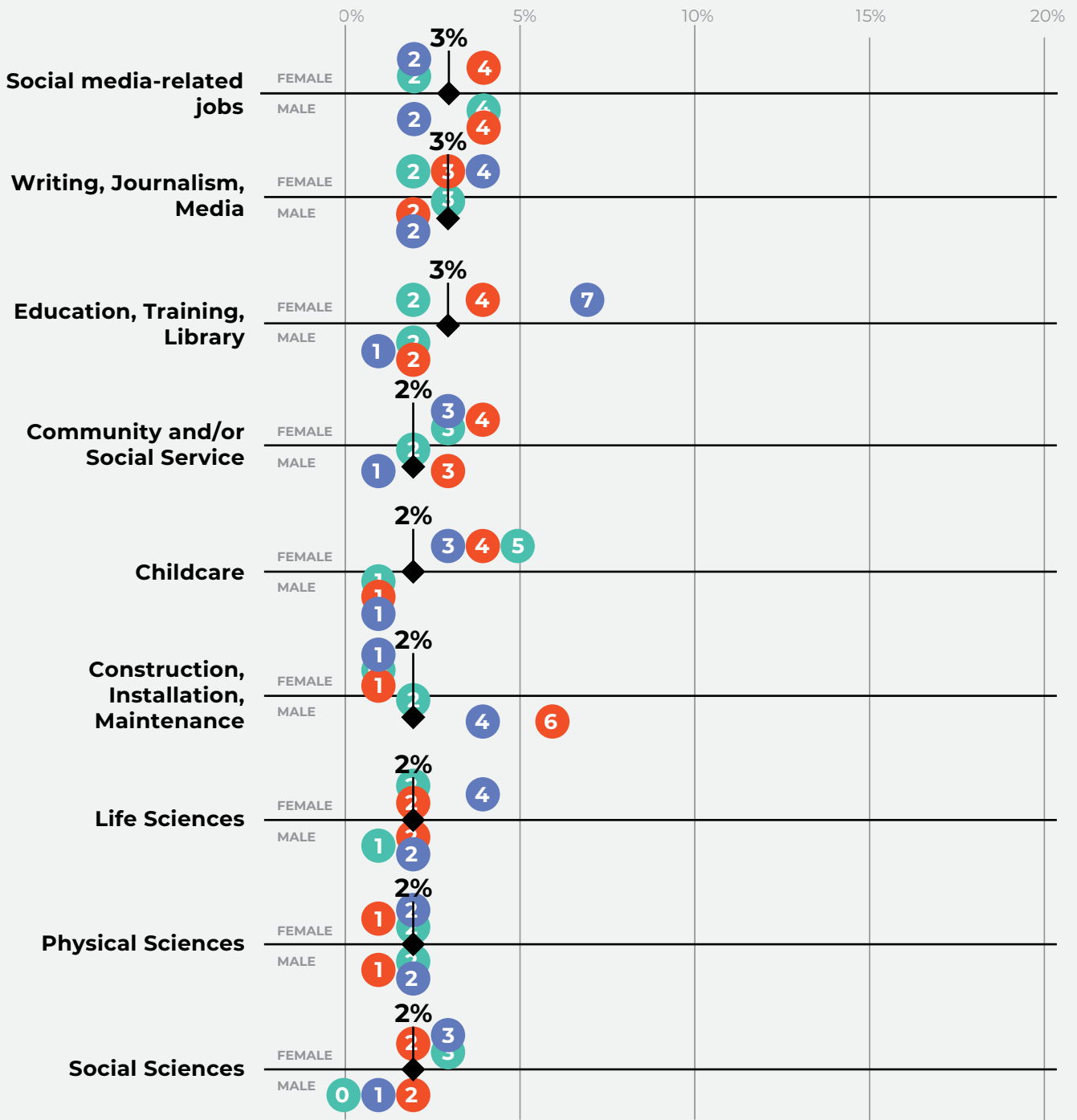
Conversely, white respondents ages 19 to 21 are significantly more likely to choose health care (12%) than are younger white respondents age 15 to 16 (6%).

Importantly, however, career choice is not strongly correlated with income levels. For example, 12 percent of Black youth from households with lower or middle incomes select health care as their first career choice, compared to nine percent among Black youth from households with higher incomes. Similarly, small differences can be found among Hispanics: 11 percent of Hispanic youth from households with lower incomes select health care as their first career choice, compared to 14 percent and 13 percent among Hispanic youth from households with middle and higher incomes, respectively.

When it comes to making decisions about their future careers, young people often report that there are many aspects that they consider in their decisions. Some young people feel called to their careers and see it as a lifelong commitment that leads to happiness and fulfillment.

> *"I already know what I want to do. I went to college right out of high school...I went to school for cosmetology and business management."*
> — ATLANTA, GA, WHITE FEMALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"I know my career; I know what I want to do. That is what I am pursuing."*
> — PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

Other young people report that a career is something they are searching for, and they may or may not be considering different careers that are connected or related in some manner.

> *"There are three different careers that have my attention: nursing, social service, and psychology. I need to have experience, something that is going to get me to go, 'Wow this is something I want to do. This is something I want to continue doing.'"*
> — BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"It is definitely one of my options, being a business owner or whatever else. There are so many things out there to do."*
> — ATLANTA, GA, WHITE FEMALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"I have three because I don't know which career I want to be in yet. For number one, I put athletic trainer. For two, oncologist, which is a doctor that studies cancer, and three is a surgeon. I don't know what type of surgeon yet."*
> — YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

Many young people also report feeling stress and anxiety because of what they perceive to be the high stakes of choosing a career and making that decision. They feel the need to choose wisely and make the right choice. They feel that making the wrong career choice will negatively affect every aspect of their future life.

> *"I think it makes people anxious or stressful because...you feel like you are forced to come up with your career right when you go into college. I think it is stressful."*
> — ATLANTA, GA, BLACK FEMALE, 16–18, MIXED INCOME

> *"A career isn't something you want to mess up; career is pretty much going to help you for the rest of your life, not something that can be taken so lightly that you can just quit like a normal job."*
> — PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

As mentioned in a previous section, young people also report that the expectations of adults in their lives affect their feelings and decision-making around work and career. These young people feel the desire—and in some cases, the need—to make career decisions of which their families will be proud. Young people also consider the emotional and financial investments their families, and especially their parents, have made in them and report feeling pressure to avoid disappointing their families or pressure to justify their investment.

> *"The upside for me of owning my own business would be kind of like an achievement, make my dad proud."*
> — YAKIMA, WA, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Photograph by Ava Victoriano, age 12

"Sometimes your family may not agree with your career, and you have to worry about them."

— DOWNEY, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

"I wanted to do nursing for my mom, because no one in my family was a nursing major...So I just wanted to do that for her."

— BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

"I was self-driven to go to school. So, I'm just doing this to make my family proud, to take advantage of everything they've given me and not put it to waste."

— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

Good job

Critically, most young people understand *job* and *good job* in immensely different ways. While many young people largely understand the word *job* as something negative, they perceive a *good job* as something associated with *career* and will often use the terms interchangeably. For a large number of young people, a *job* is something they need to survive, but a *good job* is integral to their idea of *thriving*.

"[At 25] I'll just have a normal job just to keep myself good, and I'll still be alone...Just get money to help me pay bills and get food. That's it. Like I said, I have no friends. And I'll probably just end up alone...I'll probably be by myself, like it would be like a hotel or something."

— NEW ORLEANS, LA, WHITE MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"A good job is one where you can take care of yourself, and you don't need no help, and you can live comfortably."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"My mom wants me to go to college, get a good job, and be able to be content."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

However, among younger working participants (ages 15-17), a *good job* was sometimes also understood as one that pays well for their stage in life and has a good work environment.

"I think for being a young adult I think a server is a good job. You make a lot of money; you work on your people skills; you meet a lot of people. That is where I met my boss, actually. I was a server, and I left that job and I went and started working with her...Yeah, opportunities open up."

Good job and *career* are means to having a *good life*

"Family, home, happiness, money, goals, no stress...To have that continuity of going to a career every day and a stable job with a set salary or hours, knowing what you are going to be getting."

For most young people, a *good job* is not about any single attribute. Rather, it is about a collection of experiences and qualities. These young people want to know what it will feel like to do a job and what their life may be like if they have a certain job.

It is notable that the qualities of a *good job* and a *bad job* are very top of mind for many young people when asked. They already have these impressions in their mind and have formed opinions about what makes a job good or bad. When they hear *job*, they tend to think of the qualities of a *bad job* first. When they are asked about a *good job* (as a complete phrase) it brings to mind the qualities of *career* and *good life* they are already holding.

For many young people, especially those from households with lower incomes, what is paramount to their future career and living a *good life* is economic security; they will be happy and fulfilled if their career enables them to be financially secure and stable. Being financially secure is about more than just being paid well. It also paves a path of independence for young people, enabling them to give back to their families and communities and making them feel they are a full-fledged and successful adult.

"I feel like if you find, by the time you get to your career, your life should be full...So it's just a fulfillment that you can kind of say, 'I'm here. I made it. It's done, so I'm just full.'"

"You can take care of yourself, and you don't need any help, and you can live comfortably."

"Financially stable. I feel like that means not only myself but giving back to my parents, having the extra money to give. You don't have to worry about bills."

Across racial and economic categories, many young people share a great deal in common when it comes to perceptions about what constitutes a *good job*. Young people from households with lower incomes more often express that a *good job* enables them to take care of younger siblings and their parents.

"Oh, yeah, and my family, my mom, my sister, and my brothers, and my wife and kids by then, don't need anything or nothing, or they don't have to ever worry about anything again, no bills, no food, none of that. I already do that. Whatever they need I just, I can buy it for them...I've already lived my life to the fullest and leaving my family set for years to come and generations after that, I've done all that."

TABLE 3.

Qualities Young People Describe as Being Part of a *Good Job*

A *good job* pays well and offers benefits	*"Stable income. You have enough to support yourself and your family and your wants."* — BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME
A *good job* has a steady income and enables you to live debt free	*"You're not living paycheck to paycheck. You're not struggling to pay off all your bills, and then…"* — YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME
A *good job* has good benefits	*"Paid time off."* — BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME *"Medical benefits, stock, 401K, things that help set you up for after your career."* — ATLANTA, GA, WHITE FEMALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME
A *good job* is one that matches your strengths and your passion or interests	*"For mine I also said being passionate. I said something you love to do because nowadays I feel like that's a really big thing. No matter how much you get paid, you should want to do it."* — NEW YORK, NY, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME
A *good job* is one that you enjoy	*"You can sit there and enjoy your job instead of…clock watching and saying, 'ten more minutes to go.'"* — CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME
A *good job* has amiable coworkers	*"Good coworkers. It would have to be fun."* — NEW ORLEANS, LA, WHITE MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME *"Great coworkers."* — BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME
You have a good boss at a *good job*	*"I think it's a good work environment, income that you're okay with, and having a good boss."* — NEW YORK, NY, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME
You are respected at a *good job*	*"Respect from your coworkers."* — ATLANTA, GA, BLACK MALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME *"Being at a place where you feel respected; being well respected, that's a good job."* — NEW YORK, NY, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

TABLE 3. (CONTINUED)

A *good job* has opportunities for growth	*"It's your way out by any means. But you can also see growth and elevation. A wise man changes, but a fool stays the same."* — CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME *"I put stable income…ability to progress, exchange of ideas with other individuals at the same level or above you, stable schedule, more hours, and love to do it."* — NEW YORK, NY, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME
A *good job* comes with control and predictability	*"Flexible where you can have your own schedule, or if something comes up and you need to take time off work, that's okay."* — ATLANTA, GA, WHITE FEMALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME *"You don't have to worry about coming into work and getting fired one day."* — ATLANTA, GA, BLACK MALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME
A *good job* enables you to have space for both your work and your family	*"Work/life balance…You don't want your work to consume your whole life, but you also don't want your life to take over what you are doing at work as well. You have to find a middle ground where you don't hate your job; you are not focused on what is going on outside of work while you are at work. When you are at home, you also don't want to be doing work or thinking about work, so something where you are in the middle and balanced between both of them."* — PUEBLO, CO, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME *"My goal is just to live a full, happy life. I guess that includes the career and family, just kind of balance the two and accomplish something."* — ATLANTA, GA, BLACK FEMALE, 16–18, MIXED INCOME *"Permanent job to pursue what you wanted to be when you grow up, family, and happiness. Happiness is when you grow up and you've got your own things rolling."* — PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"My mom is my number one support. She is always there, and I just want to make her happy. I want to give her things that she wants, like buy her a house or a car and stuff. I want to have two to four kids…and build my dream home. Then I want to build my parents their dream home."

— ATLANTA, GA BLACK FEMALE, 16–18, MIXED INCOME

Some young people from households with higher incomes want to be able to take care of aging parents later in life, but they do not express feeling a pressure to do so. Youth from households with lower incomes are more likely to describe caring for parents as an obligation as well as a goal for themselves to be able to provide to their parents.

"And then at age 45, I'll be traveling again, trying new foods, saving up for retirement, taking in my parents, enjoying life because you're still young."

— DOWNEY, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

For many young people, their career and *good life* aspirations are developed as a rejection of what others around them have chosen.

"As far as family and adults that I'm cool with, everybody is really just working to get by. They're working in a job that they don't like. They're just working just to work, but nobody is really following their passions. Nobody is doing what they're supposed to do. People see life, I guess like work. And it's just not…I just feel like I'm around nothing."

— NEW YORK, NY, BLACK MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"My friend became an EMT. You could be working 24-hour shifts, but she makes $12 an hour. That does not equate in my mind…"

Illustration by Ladasia Bryant, age 19

How Parents Define A *Good Job*

Like young people, many parents associate a *good job* with career and often use the terms interchangeably. Across parents with both higher and lower incomes, a *good job* represents the merging between what you are good at and what you love or enjoy, with the ability to be self-sufficient.

"I always tell him, as long as you're supporting yourself, if you're out working in the fields, it doesn't matter what you do. You just have to support yourself. You can't be dependent on other people to support you. So, if he's happy doing that, then I'm happy with that, as long as he can support himself."

— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC PARENT/GUARDIAN, LOWER INCOME

"We talk careers. I try not to put any parameters because it is just so open for them, so I don't want them to follow my footstep. Follow their passion, so to speak."

— OAKLAND, CA, BLACK PARENT/GUARDIAN, HIGHER INCOME

"All I want for her to do is be happy and not struggle so much."

— BELLE GLADE, FL, WHITE PARENT/GUARDIAN, LOWER INCOME

Many parents with lower and higher incomes anticipate different timelines for their children in obtaining a *good job* or a career. Sometimes these differing expectations are because of the type of job or career (e.g., being a doctor requires more formal education than being a human resources director), but many Black and Hispanic parents, as well as some white parents with lower incomes, generally report expecting a shorter timeline/ramp-up to the *good job* they want their children to have.

"The people who go into debt for jobs that there is no market for and so it sets them up for failure. Then they think they are going for success because they are going to college and they went to college…My brother-in-law went to college. He started off in construction and then went into engineering and then he went to architect or something. He just now—it has been 15 year since he got out of college…He literally sees people that come in and do what he does—you bring them in with no knowledge and you train them on the job…"

— BELLE GLADE, FL, WHITE PARENT/GUARDIAN, LOWER INCOME

"For my brother…He got a full ride for eight years. He's planning to be a surgeon…He came home, and he was here for his birthday and Thanksgiving…And he was like crying to me, and he was just mad because he said that every time he comes home, everyone just gives him faces and like looks at him with disgust and stuff…They think you go for a couple of years, you're going to get all of this money. They don't understand…"

— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

By contrast, white parents from households with higher incomes often expect a longer timeline because a *good job* is, by definition, one that requires an accumulation of knowledge through other jobs and experiences that a young person has.

"I started with his major, chemistry, and it turns out, after all this, he doesn't really like chemistry. So now he's taking a minor to sort of, with a new field in hydrology, I believe it is. So, you kind of start the whole process again with internships. He also, he did an overseas semester abroad, which I thought helped him with his personal development because we weren't there to run his life. He had to be on his own."

— BALTIMORE, MD, WHITE PARENT/GUARDIAN, HIGHER INCOME

The military is a good job for some

The military satisfies some young people's hope for a *good job*. It has security and career advancement, comes with a free education and comradery, has numerous job openings (and you can find one that fits your passion), offers retirement benefits, and has a clear entry point (like ROTC).

> *"But when I was talking with my military recruiter about it, he's like go in for four years or so, discover if you like it or not. And if you love it, then stay in the military. But if I don't, I can retire from or leave the military, and they'll pay for me to go to college, doing what I love to do."*
> — YAKIMA, WA, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

A job that leads to a career is good

For many young people, the associations they have with *job*, *work*, and *career* are dependent on the extent to which they understand those words to further their pursuit of a *good life*.

Many young people can and do have a positive association with the term *job* when they understand it as being a steppingstone or building block to a career they ultimately want to have—and a career that will enable them to live a *good life*. By contrast, most young people typically do not have a positive association with *job* when it is not part of a pathway towards a career they want.

The vast majority of young people have positive associations with and connect a *good job* and *career* to a *good life*. Some young people see their future career as a lifelong commitment to a passion, as something they will love to do. For other young people, their future career is about satisfaction: they intend to pursue a career that will give them the financial ability to explore a passion outside of work or to get themselves in a better position to take on a riskier endeavor. Importantly, they are *not* making a compromise; they just do not feel the need to have a career based on a passion. In both of these visions, career is directly related to happiness and a *good life*.

Young people also have different visions about the permanency of a career. Some youth are more likely to feel pressure to pick a career they will have to stay with for their entire life, even if it something they end up hating. They feel this pressure both internally and externally from parents, family, and sometimes friends. The choice of a career is stressful because these youth feel it needs to enable a *good life*, make their family proud, and be permanent. Youth from households with lower incomes are more likely to express feeling these kinds of pressure around career than are youth from households with higher incomes.

Other young people experience career as something that will evolve and take shape over time. They do not feel the need to have all the answers at this point in their lives or even in the near future, and choosing a career is a much less stressful decision. Young people from households with higher incomes are more likely to express feeling this way than are youth from households with lower incomes.

Although young people express different associations with and visions about their future jobs and careers, the vast majority envision a future in which they are living a *good life*.

Young People Try on Their Futures

In order to determine which version of a *good life* and *good job* is right for them, young people need to experiment during adolescence—a period during which they display an openness and desire to engage in trying on behaviors and appearances in search of their own unique identity. During this time, young people may explore, create, and cycle through a series of identities before finding the one that suits them best. This research shows that young people engage in a similar process as they develop their occupational identities, that is how young people envision their future selves in the workforce—what they like to do, what they believe they are skilled at, and where they feel they belong.

In adolescence, young people begin to connect perceptions of the kind of life they want to live as an adult with the types of jobs, work, and career that will enable or hinder them from obtaining that life. To understand what jobs, work, or career might be a good fit for them, young people engage in an iterative assessment process that can be understood as three distinct and interconnected stages: *Exposure*, *Exploration*, and *Selection*.

As they move in and out of these stages, young people learn about and refine their sense of the desirable qualities they would like to have in a job or career; identify and better understand which careers match their own distinct *good job* qualities; and identify the steps, experiences, or knowledge they will need to work in a specific occupational context. Young people continue to develop and refine their occupational identity as they pass through each stage. Young people are likely to return to the Exploration and Selection stages multiple times in their early working lives. For example, a young person may make an initial career pathway selection and then, in the process of working, gain exposure to other opportunities better suited to their burgeoning skills and interests. This awareness of a new possibility may lead them back to an Exploration stage before making a new pathway selection.

Exposure

In the *Exposure* stage, young people are absorbing (consciously and subconsciously) information about the world of work and the emotional and lived experience of working. They report that their understanding of what types of jobs or careers are available to them and what types of futures they aspire to are informed by the people and the occupations they see—what they're exposed to in their lives. Principally, this exposure takes place in the context of their home communities where they intimately observe adult or near-peer (e.g., cousins or older siblings) experiences of work and emotions related to working.

> *"My mom is a real estate agent. She has her own company; she is her own broker. Seeing her have her own business, one day I want to have my own business."*
>
> — ATLANTA, GA, BLACK MALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"My brother is a barber—you have to have a passion for any job that you choose to do. I am like how are you touching people's hair? He loves it."*
>
> — PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

FIGURE 13.

Stages of Occupational Identity Formation

EXPOSURE
Who they know, what they see, and what/who they have access to

EXPLORATION
Trying on different aspects of career and work

SELECTION
Determining the first steps of a chosen career pathway

EXPLORATION
As young people gain life and work experience, some will deepen their commitment to the career pathway they are pursuing. Others will try on new career directions.

SELECTION
Equipped with new knowledge about themselves and the career path they've chosen, young people refine their occupational identity and sometimes select new career pathways.

"[My dad is a] farmer...My dad likes farming a lot. It is his favorite thing. He likes that, but he doesn't like the other job that he does. [His other job is being a] lawyer. He likes farming.

— BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Through these exposures, young people are learning about the diversity of jobs and careers that exist. They are also seeing these jobs and careers in the context of everyday life realities.

"Every day I come home [I tell my children], 'Don't be like me. Do something better. My back hurts. I am tired. A, B and C happened today. You guys have so much potential. You have to do better. Maybe they get to stay home. I have to cut expenses for you to do better than this, so you are free not to work so hard...Even though I see myself as fairly successful for someone who didn't go to college...I am like you guys...Don't be like me.'"

— OAKLAND, CA, BLACK PARENT/GUARDIAN, HIGHER INCOME

Non-family adults may also influence youth in a more indirect, but important, way simply by the youth observing their experience of work and the impact these adults' jobs or careers have had on their lives.

"Journeyman...I know a few actually. That's what got me into the journeyman for an electrician. There's one for carpentry, one for construction, and...a journeyman is like the top of the line, most experienced. They make, like, a lot of money...But if I become a journeyman, I actually want to open up my own business on the side like my own electrician company."

— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

"Corrections officer and restaurant delivery driver are the only people that I know that have jobs."

— PUEBLO, CO, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"I have two actually—family friends that are both women—and one is like the head of marketing at (—) corporate, and then the other one is like she was the head of something at (—). And for me, I'm really interested in like fashion business, the business of fashion and stuff like that. So, to look at them and to kind of take from their experiences for me is really interesting."

— NEW YORK, NY, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Young people are particularly curious about and look for information that helps them to learn more about the qualitative experience of a given job or career. For example, what does it look and feel like to be a forensic scientist, a nurse, an electrician, or insurance broker? What does this person say about their job? What do they like and dislike? What are their hours? What type of education did they need to have? How do they feel about that education? Do they believe their education was 'worth it?

Young people's exposure to career pathways and people's lived experiences of those pathways helps them to build an understanding of the guardrails or edges of what they can imagine for themselves. In a sense, in the *Exposure* stage, young people draw the boundaries around their imagined future selves—producing an early shape into which they begin to add detail.

At the same time, young people are piecing together the universe of job, work, and career possibilities that they feel exist for them. They are also learning more about themselves. They are actively identifying their likes and dislikes, interests and strengths, and trying on, or experimenting with, different identities and ways of being.

Young people are also learning more about how adults in their lives and the broader society value specific types of work and educational pursuits and achievements over others. Young people are becoming knowledgeable about how education and family decisions impact career pathways and momentum. This includes learning about the impacts of making the decision to attend post-secondary education, the timing of having children, family obligations, debt, and the perceptions of the value of post-secondary education. Furthermore, individuals close to young people, in particular parents, can expand or constrain how young people perceive their futures—intentionally or unintentionally.

> *"So, like my dad, he always pushed us towards like technology because he's like, you know, this is what's coming up. That's where all the money is going to be, eventually, is in like just working on phones or, you know, something electronic or whatever. And, you know, him being a diesel mechanic, he's only 40 years old, and, well, 42, and he's pretty beat up. He's got a broken back. He, his hands hurt all the time. He's got tennis elbow, if anyone knows what that is...And, you know, he's just, he's always hurting and stuff, and he's like, you just need to do something easy that will make you a lot of money, which most technological things do. So, that's kind of where he's always pushed, like that, or for me, it was mainly to be like a service writer at a diesel shop or something because all I would do is all the computer work..."*
>
> — YAKIMA, WA, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"Our son gets it from us. His dad goes to work every day. I own my own business. We push ownership. My husband works the job he works so that I can own my business. He worked every day, had that steady paycheck while we built the business, and my son has watched that. Now we're at a place where we're expanding our business. My husband can start doing some of his own entrepreneurial work, and our goal is to give each of our children a business of their own because we want them to have their own. Because of our history in this country, we don't get born with generational love. We don't get an inheritance, and so we are working to provide that for our children so they can compete because we all started with a late start. We want to provide for our children a head start. They see us hustling; they see us working but it is our stuff. When my kids are out of school, they come to my work. You guys, this is your job."*
>
> — OAKLAND, CA, BLACK PARENT/GUARDIAN, HIGHER INCOME

As young people are exposed to various jobs and careers, they continually assess what aspects of work and life match what they want for themselves and which do not. Assessment enables young people to do one, or a combination of, the following:

Accept: Young people see a job or career that they feel matches the life that they want for themselves and provides a minimum of the *good job* qualities they are seeking. Acceptance can be positive where a young person embraces a job or career that matches their interests, strengths, likes and dislikes, and personal

goals. Acceptance can also be a type of settling when a young person does not have access to a diversity of examples of jobs and careers, and so believes what they see is all there is. They lack access to other options or cannot envision those other options as relevant or accessible for them.

"My sister is a dentist, and I want to work with her."

— ATLANTA, GA, WHITE FEMALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

"Well, I mean, like doing diesel mechanics and just regular car mechanics sounds like something I could create my own business with. Like, my mom knows some people up the street that, all right, so I'm going [to] call, I don't know, Britany that's what I'm going to call her Britany. And Britany's dad owns a little lot right next to it. And so, he'll put like broken down cars in there. And he'll fix them one by one and get paid for that, so, yeah."

— NEW ORLEANS, LA, WHITE MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"He sees, like, also what family does, like, what their jobs are. Like, I forgot that he did tell me recently that he wants to go into social work—the same thing, because he wants to help kids that are having—through the same thing that he has been through. And so, he's talking to, like, different family members that are in social work and asking them how they got there and what kind of, what they did to get there, and what the pay is too."

— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC PARENT/GUARDIAN, LOWER INCOME

"...I'll probably be working with my uncle as a real estate agent, because, yeah, he has his own business. So, yeah, I'll probably be working with him as a real estate agent, still in Chicago, because that's where his business is based off of. [Later,] I'll probably take over my uncle's business with the realtor stuff, probably open up some new locations with the business."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

Reject: Young people determine that they do not want the life that they see around them or determine that they do not want the jobs, work, or career that they see, know about, or have access to. Importantly, many young people in this research are developing their occupational identity in rejection to the work experiences they see around them.

"My dad is a construction worker and it is really hard. It takes a lot of your body, like injuries. I just don't think I could do that."

"My aunt works for HR and that's, like, a lot of work. She's never home really. People are always calling her."

"They work 9:00 to 5:00 regular jobs. And they let fear rule their life...But, like, that's the difference between these different generations, like my generation and the older generation."

Modify: Young people determine that the jobs or careers they see have some of the qualities that they want for themselves. For example, young people may see jobs that provide stability, enough money, control, or time with family, but do not align with their interests, strengths, likes, or their personal disposition/character. In this case, young people decide to modify their selection of the occupations they see by exploring other options.

When young people reject the occupations that they see around them, they move into an *Exploration* stage—a stage where they are open to or actively seeking out experiences, information, and knowledge that will expand their universe of what jobs and careers exist and which might be a fit for them.

Exploration

Across socio-economic backgrounds, young people value opportunities to learn about and experiment with or try on new jobs, work, careers, and educational pathways. They understand that exploration can help them to identify what they like and are good at and also expand their understanding of what work can look like in their lives.

"Right now, I'm in a program called Girls Inc., just down the street from here. I have been in it for a really, really long time. They go through stages, and now I'm at the stage where they will set you up with internships and really work on helping you figure out what type of career you think would be best for you—even if it is not what you ultimately end up in, just, like, having an idea or at least having some type of experience. They set girls up with different internships."

"I think that with school, my school especially has like 28 different AP classes or something like that, which means that we have lots of teachers who teach lots of diverse subjects and a lot of different choices you can make...Because of that, having a great palette of different kinds of courses and different kinds of subjects I got to try out in high school, has allowed me to decide what kind of path I want to pursue in college and what I am mostly interested in...I got to explore things intellectually, and sort of decide what I want to do based on that being in a place with my peers, less so than explicitly learning how to do something in class and deciding that is what I'm going to do. I think I am going to do that more in college."

Many parents also value exploration as an important stage of young people's development.

"I should actually give [my son] more credit because he gets, he had this big book from the library, the government publication where they do the job outlooks, and he's going through that. And he's putting a lot of crazy things, but he was making the effort of trying to explore different types of jobs because, like I said, we have a totally different path because he's a math-science guy."

However, socio-economic background may impact the extent to which parents feel they can support exploration. Parents with lower incomes may feel less able to absorb the perceived financial risks associated with longer periods of education and career exploration.

> *"Right now, she [stepdaughter] and my son both have this mindset that they are going to go to college, and they don't need a job. I guess I am just going to have to let them figure it out on their own because that is their mindset. They think that mom and dad are going to pay for everything, but they are going to have a rude awakening."*
>
> — BELLE GLADE, FL, WHITE PARENT/GUARDIAN, LOWER INCOME

Parents with higher incomes, some of whom feel that they themselves prematurely committed to a career pathway, are more likely to express that they want their children to explore and experiment with a diversity of jobs and careers before making decisions about what they will pursue.

> *"They are still young. You want them to explore at this point because I think if they decide I want to do this, they may actually do it and realize I don't want to do that. I went to college, and I graduated, and I didn't want to be a social worker."*
>
> — OAKLAND, CA, BLACK PARENT/GUARDIAN, HIGHER INCOME

Geography can expand or constrain perceptions of career possibilities

For some young people, geography acts as an additional input to the assessment process. When young people feel deeply connected to a specific place, they may decide to limit or constrain their *Exploration* stage to jobs and careers that enable them to remain close to family or in a familiar community.

> *"My whole family is from here...there are a lot of opportunities here for Black people...It is a nice environment to be in, but I still want to travel. I definitely want to travel a lot, but I think this is a good place to have a foundation."*
>
> — ATLANTA, GA, BLACK FEMALE, 16–18, MIXED INCOME

> *"I'll most likely [go] somewhere like within the city, so probably like DePaul, because my parents went there also. So, yeah, so go there. As I'm going there, try to take care of my family, help with the things they can't do, like take my sister to school or, like, taking care of my grandparents...then, when...I get time off like a long period of time, [I will] try to get my realtor license...Then be a realtor with my uncle and stay in Chicago."*
>
> — CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

> *"I gained information from dentists, knowing what I should do, where I should go. They told me you should go to UCLA. You should go to USC. You should go here...Some said go out of state, but I don't have the guts to do that...Hopefully USC because I heard that is a good place from two dentists already. I hear that is good."*
>
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

For other young people, geography and the challenges of a specific place drive them to seek opportunities elsewhere.

> *"I love Mexico more than I do here...It's just you're more free, the culture, everything. Like, everything, everyone there is just more humble. They're more hardworking. I actually went to go live there for a whole year just to see what it was like to actually work. Working here in the fields ain't anything compared to working in Mexico."*
>
> — YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

"Baltimore City is not the most uplifting environment in the world. And I think that a lot of us, especially as, you know, Black youth, we really kind of fall victim to all of the distractions that are around us, you know, drugs, just violence, gangs, just things like that."

Some parents are supportive of a young person's desire to stay close to home, while others fear that such a decision will negatively impact their quality of life.

"Don't be afraid to leave here to go do, don't sacrifice what you love, or what you want to do, to stay around here, just to, so you can say, I want to be close to mom. No, we can come see you. If you want to go to art school, what, go find you somewhere to allow them to go to art school. You shouldn't have to sacrifice your gift because they don't offer art anymore in school...And so you have to push them because sometimes the circumstances around here will kill them. It will kill them. They don't even want to do what they love anymore, have a passion for."

Exploration takes place through exposure to occupations, engagement in occupational practices, and participation in occupational communities. Through these varying degrees of saturation, young people develop mental templates, or a set of images and associations, about career pathways; acquire skills and knowledge relevant to specific careers and work; and potentially develop relationships with adult professionals who can provide them with support later on their life and career journeys.

The emphasis in the *Exploration* stage is on experimentation, and young people typically demonstrate greater agency than in the *Exposure* stage by intentionally selecting or seeking out information and experiences. Below are examples of how, and where, young people in this research engaged in exploration:

- **Online:** Joining online occupational communities that allow meaningful participation from members with varying levels of skill in order to learn more about a job or career; following and engaging with Instagram accounts of individuals, organizations, or events connected to a type of work, work experience, identity, lifestyle, or geography.
- **Entertainment:** Intentionally selecting media content (television, film, commercials) that shares information about jobs or careers through character-driven stories.
- **Institutional:** Participating in programs, schools, or other institutions that provide young people with opportunities to experiment with different technical and occupational skills.
- **Working:** Part-time or summer employment that give young people an opportunity to earn money while learning more about a specific job or career in a real-world setting.

Young people value opportunities to engage in practices relevant to the occupations they are considering. This engagement or participation offers young people critical moments when they can gain hands-on experience with occupations of interest to assess how good a fit they are for them. High schools that include a focus on occupational preparation facilitate young people's ability to connect what they learn in the classroom to careers, which satisfies their need to try on different versions of their future selves. For young people enrolled in VOTECH high schools (Gary and Greenville), academy schools (Chicago), and college prep schools (Belle Glade), the connections between high school and career was described by young people as more intentional, explicit, and pronounced.

"I want to be an obstetrician gynecologist. And the class I take now in VOTECH is the new two-year program and, like, my teacher be explaining to us this is how it's going to be when you all are, like, in nursing school going to college, you know, trying to balance a job and everything. And also, like, we get the full experience of wearing your scrubs on certain days."

In some communities, vocational and technical education is a means to meet more immediate basic needs, or a way to motivate students who are unsure about their academic and professional futures.

> *"I think the biggest thing with us at the high school that I [work at] is the socio-economic, low income to middle class. A lot of the students their biggest thing is how difficult is it going to be to get a career? They are looking for something fast, something quick because they are living on a day; they need a meal today. They can't think a year, two years. If I do this work for two or three years, this is going to be my reward. They can't afford that. They are living day by day. The lights could go out tomorrow. They don't have water. Short term for them so getting them to understand you can have that if you get a career. Yeah, but I need it now. That is where the talking comes in and getting them to understand you can do both. In order for you to get to this far you have to sacrifice, and that is where they are at...'well, I am already sacrificing. How much more do I have to sacrifice?'"*
>
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, HISPANIC ADULT INFLUENCER, LOWER INCOME

> *"[M]y son...said he didn't mind going to trade school...He was already kind of struggling in school with his grades and things like that."*
>
> — GREENVILLE, MS, BLACK PARENT/GUARDIAN, LOWER INCOME

In the survey, over half of Black (56%), Hispanic (54%), and white (55%) young people say their high schools have (or had) career, vocational, technical, or internship programs where they could get hands-on experience with different jobs or industries. While young people from higher-income schools are somewhat more likely to report these programs in their high school, still over half (53%) of young people from households with lower incomes report their high schools having these programs.

A majority of students (57%) say that they take advantage of these programs, but two in five (40%) do not. Reported participation rates are similar for Black, Hispanic, and white young people, although young people from households with lower incomes participate at lower rates than young people from households with higher incomes.

FIGURE 14: PARTICIPATION

Did you participate in career preparation programs at your high school?
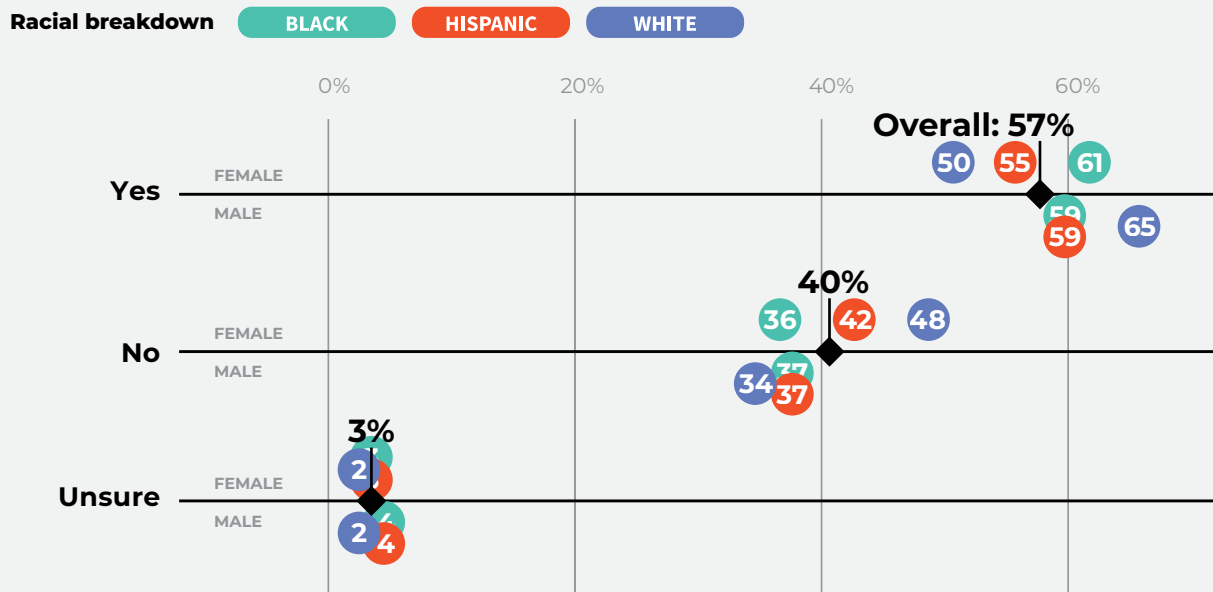
Importantly, these programs appear to make a major difference in the career trajectories of young people. Among young people who had participated in career, vocational, technical, or internship programs, 81 percent feel they were extremely helpful (52%) or very helpful (29%) in terms of helping them choose their career path or learn more about careers they would or would not want to pursue.

"I thought that these programs gave me insight and a sense of direction. I also like that these programs were available 24 hours a day 7 days a week."

— SURVEY, BLACK FEMALE, 16

"I have learned good skills and how to work with others."

— SURVEY, BLACK MALE, 16

"I got to shadow a veterinarian and observe surgeries and other animal healthcare procedures."

— SURVEY, WHITE FEMALE, 17

"I got to see how the real business world works. I got to talk with people who do what I want to do as a career, and it inspired me."

— SURVEY, HISPANIC MALE, 17

FIGURE 15: PARTICIPATION

How helpful do you feel it [is/was] to participate in those programs, in terms of helping you choose your career path or learn more about careers you would or would not want to pursue?
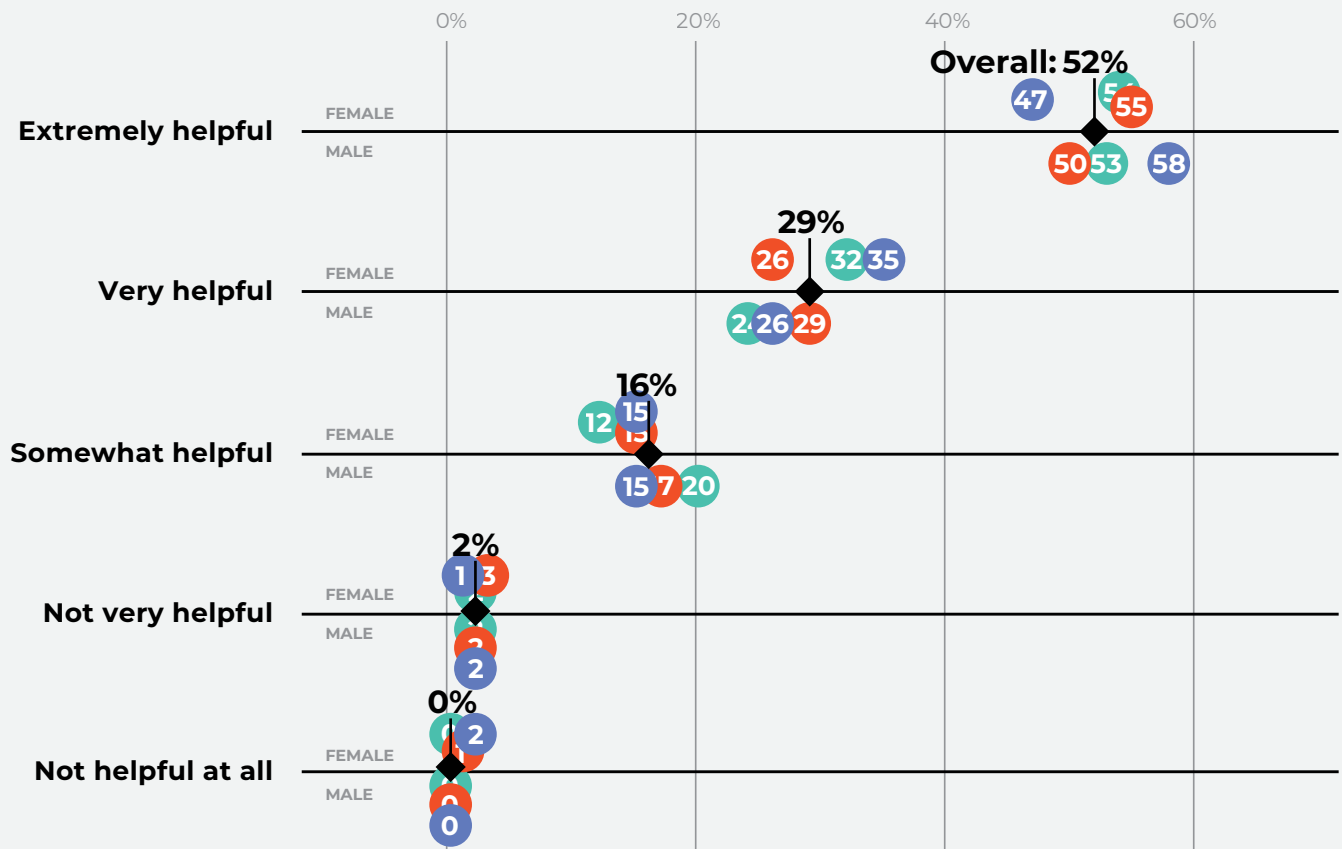
Participating in these career, vocational, technical, or internship programs not only causes young people to feel these programs help them choose their career path, they also impact young people's sense of optimism and confidence that they will ultimately achieve their goals. For example, well over half (58%) of VOTECH participants indicate that their job or career goals feel very clear to them, whereas just 39 percent of young people who attended a high school with these programs—but who did not participate in them—feel this way. Likewise, nearly two thirds of program participants (65%) know what they want to do for their work or career—and also know the specific steps they need to take to get there—while less than half (46%) of non-participants possess the same level of clarity. Finally, young people who participated in VOTECH programs are significantly more likely to feel extremely optimistic about achieving the kind of life they want (45%), compared to only 32 percent among young people who did not participate.
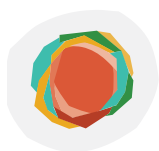
Selection

In the *Selection* stage, young people are now equipped with more information about themselves, more knowledge about a specific kind of job or career, and a growing sense of the kind of life they want to lead. This new information and experience help them to determine the short-and medium-term goals they want to work towards and embark on the initial steps towards those goals.

First steps for a high school student may include:

- Decision to pursue post-secondary education, including two-year college, four-year college, vocational or technical education, or a certificate.
- Connecting with mentors, coaches, or other adults that can facilitate additional exposure or access to a specific educational/career pathway or a community of practitioners.
- Decision to break away from friends that they see as a distraction or impediment to the life course they want to pursue.
- Decision to make new friends, join clubs, or otherwise change and expand their social circles.

Young people worry about making the right choice

Young people in the focus groups described feelings of worry and anxiety as they worked to decide what career(s) to pursue. They worry that they may not 'get it right' and so will spend the rest of their lives unhappy or regretting the decision. Young people from households with lower incomes were more likely to be especially concerned about honoring their parents' sacrifices through their occupational choices.

"I think sometimes people are pushed to go to school. Like, you know, if your parents push you to go to school…and then you go to school for something you don't want to do, but you went because they told you to go, so now you are in debt thousands of dollars, and it's not what you want to do. And don't you feel like sometimes, like, the parents be like—since they didn't do that, they want you to be like that. It's like they trying to live their life through you or something like that."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"For me, it's, like, my father's side of the family, they're the doctors and stuff. And my mother's side, they got little work jobs, but they're still doing good in life. And it's just, like, every time my cousin does something, the doctor, it's like, 'Oh, my God. She got into this school. Oh, my God, she got into college.' And I don't care. All right. Just go sit down somewhere. And they're like, 'Oh, what are you doing in your life?' I'm in high school. What do you mean, what am I doing? But it's like my mother, she wants me to be successful. And my father told me to be better than he is."

— BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

"Because my personal opinion, I wouldn't want to do something for 20 years and then figure out I don't like it."

— YAKIMA, WA, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

This research suggests that young people from a diversity of backgrounds value and benefit from each of these stages, but young people from households with lower incomes are less likely to have the time or parent encouragement to participate fully in the *Exploration* stage in low-risk settings. Young people from households with lower incomes who report having time to explore, experiment, and try on different occupations, describe feeling less anxious because they perceive exploration as critical to their career choices instead of something that is just nice to have. Reflections from young adults 26-29, who describe themselves as *thriving*, emphasize this finding.

"I was doing a job, and I was just, like, this feels like work. I hate coming here every day. I wake up and I am miserable. I am not going to live my life like this. That is how I knew accounting wasn't for me...I tried being a teacher. I was working in a daycare. Teaching four- and five-year-olds is not for me all day...I think once I realized, I found a job. I had some internship experience. I was counseling and I was like, this doesn't feel like work. I love it. I love being here. When I get up in the morning, I am excited to see what clients they are going to have next; what is their story and to learn about it. That is how I knew that was the career for me."

— NEW YORK, NY, HISPANIC FEMALE, 26–29, MIXED INCOME

"I went through maybe four different career paths...Now I am doing calculus off the top of my head and planning on how this machine can be more flat and not even noticing it was not flat. I was redoing digitizers, which are just scanners, cameras under [tents], but it is just things I never knew I would be able to do. After that, I just put that in every job I ever did. I mean every production line, everything manufacturing. I ran a restaurant in Manhattan that sold fast-paced Italian food. We would get a whole bowl of spaghetti out in five to eight minutes and send you on your way, and I made a production line for that. It was great, and I love every ounce of that... Making someone else's idea pass and work and see it through was really what I love."

— NEW YORK, NY, HISPANIC MALE, 26–29, MIXED INCOME

Importantly, the behaviors young people engage in during the *Selection* stage may take place at many points over their lifetime. As young people engage in a job or career, they continually refine their ideas about what constitutes a *good job*. As they acquire more work experience as working adults, they may return to a period of exploration where they will once again grapple with what job or career will most enable them to live a *good life*.

"[Y]ou know, like, losing my job, having some other family issues with their health, just moving people, and not really having a community to fall back on, and just sort of have a, moving from that...so I did go to school. I got a degree in industrial design. Then, I went back to a trade school to get...a certificate in another part of design. So, losing my job and kind of being forced to sort of pivot in that way shaped me too. Now, the realization in my career is I'm at a point where I'm like this whole shit is like a scam. Now...get to that point where you...it's like, wow, like that's just been such a waste. But that's really what it is. So being there, and then the next step from that is working and climbing ahead. So, accepting that, and then move forward, yeah."

— BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 26–29, MIXED INCOME

Young people thrive when they feel equipped and supported to identify, explore, and assess information and experiences related to education and career in a low-risk setting. When young people experience robust *Exposure* and *Exploration*—where they have access to and experience in a diversity of jobs and careers—they experience the *Selection* stage as potentially more meaningful and less fraught. The quality of their decision-making is enhanced by the diversity of choices that they have been exposed to, thus enabling them to make decisions that will better support their pursuit of a *good life*.

Young People Envision Pathways to *Thriving*

It is an important finding in this research to underscore: across race, ethnicity, and gender differences, most young people describe and demonstrate a great deal of optimism about their futures. While some imagine their career pathways to be more linear, others anticipate feedback loops, roundabouts, or other unexpected occurrences that may prompt them to change course as they acquire more life experiences, learn, and grow.

Future goals and the approaches by which they attempt to reach these goals may be more alike than different. Young people describe a diversity of life goals to which they aspire, and they believe a variety of careers or occupations will enable them to live a *good life*.

Young people's perceptions of the types of jobs and careers that are within reach—or are accessible to them—is informed by their lived experience. In turn, lived experience includes: occupational exposure through observing and experiencing working and non-working adults and near-peers in their communities; intentional exploration through social media, school, or other institutions; and their own relationship to the geography in which they live (or have lived).

Young people demonstrate varied capacities to set occupational and life goals and varied levels of confidence that they can find the information necessary to determine the best pathways to reach their goals.

Imagining a bright future

When asked in the focus groups to share how they imagined their lives at ages 25 and 45, many young people describe imagining that they will feel fulfilled with their choices—that they will have enough money, resources, and power to take care of themselves, their parents, and their families, and a sense that they have control over their own destinies.

> *"At 45, I can see myself living in Alabama for sure now, working in a healthcare facility, having maybe one or two kids, a dog, a husband. I see myself being an obstetrician and gynecologist and, you know, being a good parent, nice vehicle, good credit."*
>
> — GREENVILLE, MS, BLACK FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

> *"I just got that movie deal. I'm in LA. You know what I'm saying? Life is great. You know what I'm saying? I'm about to do a TV show. So, yeah, that's me at 25."*
>
> — NEW YORK, NY, BLACK MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"[At 45], I live in a nice house with a decently sized yard. I work in a high position in some tech company and have a good pay. The most important things in my life would still be my job and family."*
>
> — ONLINE, WHITE MALE, 15–21, LOWER INCOME

"At 25, I am a cop living in the Oakland area or the Bay Area. Life is good. I have money; I have health as well; currently dating different chicks."

— OAKLAND, CA, HISPANIC MALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

Younger participants tend to be more idealistic about their futures, while older participants, in particular those who are transitioning out of high school and into the workforce or post-secondary education, may be more anxious or less sure that their futures will be as they hoped. It seems possible that younger people's idealism is tempered by their expanded life experience as they grow older.

"I'm an ophthalmologist, so I'm checking out eyes. Yeah. I'm my own boss. So, I'll be working four to five hours a day, but I'm still getting paid, paying my bills, taking care of my kids, getting them through school, and living a good life."

— GREENVILLE, MS, BLACK FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"I'm going to go to college, try to get into some major in computer science, and then move to California where most of that community is, and start a company with a group of my college friends. Hopefully, get picked up by some pretty good investors."

— NEW ORLEANS, LA, WHITE MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"I do worry about the volatility of the real estate market. I also worry that there may not be enough positions in school counseling that are flexible for me to find a good one."

— ONLINE, WHITE FEMALE, 26–29, MIXED INCOME

"It's a long ways out and there are so many unknowns or things that could change in my life."

— ONLINE, WHITE MALE, 26–29, MIXED INCOME

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

Young People Envision Pathways to Thriving

Most young people express optimism about their futures. This openness to the future and belief that their goals are attainable may be in part a function of youth; because this optimism can feel inaccessible to adults, it is often interpreted as immaturity or ignorance. For young people, optimism is particularly powerful. As such, there is an opportunity to build programming that leverages and builds on this optimism.

Many young people have set goals to which they aspire, however they report varied levels of preparation and knowledge to meet these goals. This research categorizes young people's goal setting and how prepared they feel to envision their pathways into five categories. This new framework offers an important tool to better assess how prepared young people feel to reach their goals—and to then identify the specific interventions that may best support them.

Young people from households with lower incomes, and in particular young people from more rural geographies and Black young men, express varying degrees of confidence that they will live into their 70s. When asked to imagine their lives at this age, many of these young people question whether they will still be alive. Young people in rural settings describe experiences watching adults in their lives live with the physical toll of agricultural and other manual labor. Black young males are more likely to say that they worry that their lives will be cut short by violence or illness.

"Black male youths...we get a lot of doubt and hatred because we're Black males. And usually like, the stereotype is like, you either dead or in jail."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"[By ago 70], I'd probably have cancer or something like that...I'm probably dying, I'm not gonna lie."

— BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK MALE, 17–20, LOWER INCOME

"[By age 70], probably dead because a lot of my family is dead."

— OAKLAND, CA, BLACK FEMALE, 15–18, MIXED INCOME

"[70 seems old.] None of my grandparents made it past 65, so I don't think I will either honestly."

— PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"I honestly don't know if I am going to live that long [70]."

— PUEBLO, CO, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Steps to the future

In each focus group, youth participants were asked to complete an exercise in which they articulated a job, work, or career goal and then wrote down, in sequential order, the steps, stages, experiences, or opportunities they imagined they would need to pass through in order to reach their goal. This exercise was duplicated in the young adult groups (mixed-gender groups with participants ages 26-29). In these groups, participants were asked to both reflect on their past pathways to the present and also to imagine their future pathways. Parents, guardians, and adult influencers also completed pathways in which they were asked to imagine the goals and pathways they would want for their own children (ages 15-21) or for those with whom they work.

How young people from households with lower incomes plan for their futures

This research suggests that young people across race, age, and gender form their occupational identities in similar ways. Given the wide distribution of career and life outcomes across and at the intersections of these demographic groups, it becomes increasingly important to consider other ways that the field might assess and understand the diversity of young people's mindsets —and thus needs—in connection to education and work.

Young people's differences may more readily lie in how equipped they feel to set goals for themselves and how confident they are that they have or can locate the information, resources, and people they need to reach those goals.

Young people's occupational pathways can be categorized in five ways

Young people's ability to conceptualize their goals and make a plan to achieve their goals can be characterized as five different types or states. Examples of completed pathway worksheets follow.

1. Know what they want to do, and have a good idea of the steps to take to get there
2. Not sure what they want to do, yet have a good idea of the steps to take to explore in order to get there
3. Know what they want to do, but are unsure how to get there
4. Not sure what they want to do and unsure of what steps to take to get there
5. Know what they want to do, think they know how to get there, but their imagined pathway is inaccurate and/or unrealistic

In the survey, nearly half (46%) of young people say they know what they want to do for their work or career *and* also know the specific steps they need to take to get there, while another 28 percent say they know what they want to do for their work or career, but are not sure about the specific steps they need to take to get there. Less than a quarter (22%) are not sure about what they want to do for their work or career, with 15 percent saying they have a good idea about the steps they can take to explore and learn about different options that would be a good fit and another seven percent who are *not* sure about the steps they can take to explore and learn about different options that would be a good fit.

Note that the survey could not explore young people's placement in the fourth pathway category, because that category requires subjective and external judgments about whether someone's plans are realistic.

Focusing in the survey data on those who say they know what they want to do for their work *and* also know the specific steps they need to take to get there, clear demographic differences emerge in the data. For example, this belief tends to be higher among male respondents (49%) than female respondents (43%). In addition, 64 percent of respondents from households with higher incomes share this belief, compared to 45 percent and 40 percent of those from households with middle and lower incomes, respectively. Examples of completed pathway worksheets follow. The worksheets have been annotated with research insights and transcribed (when necessary) to enhance readability.
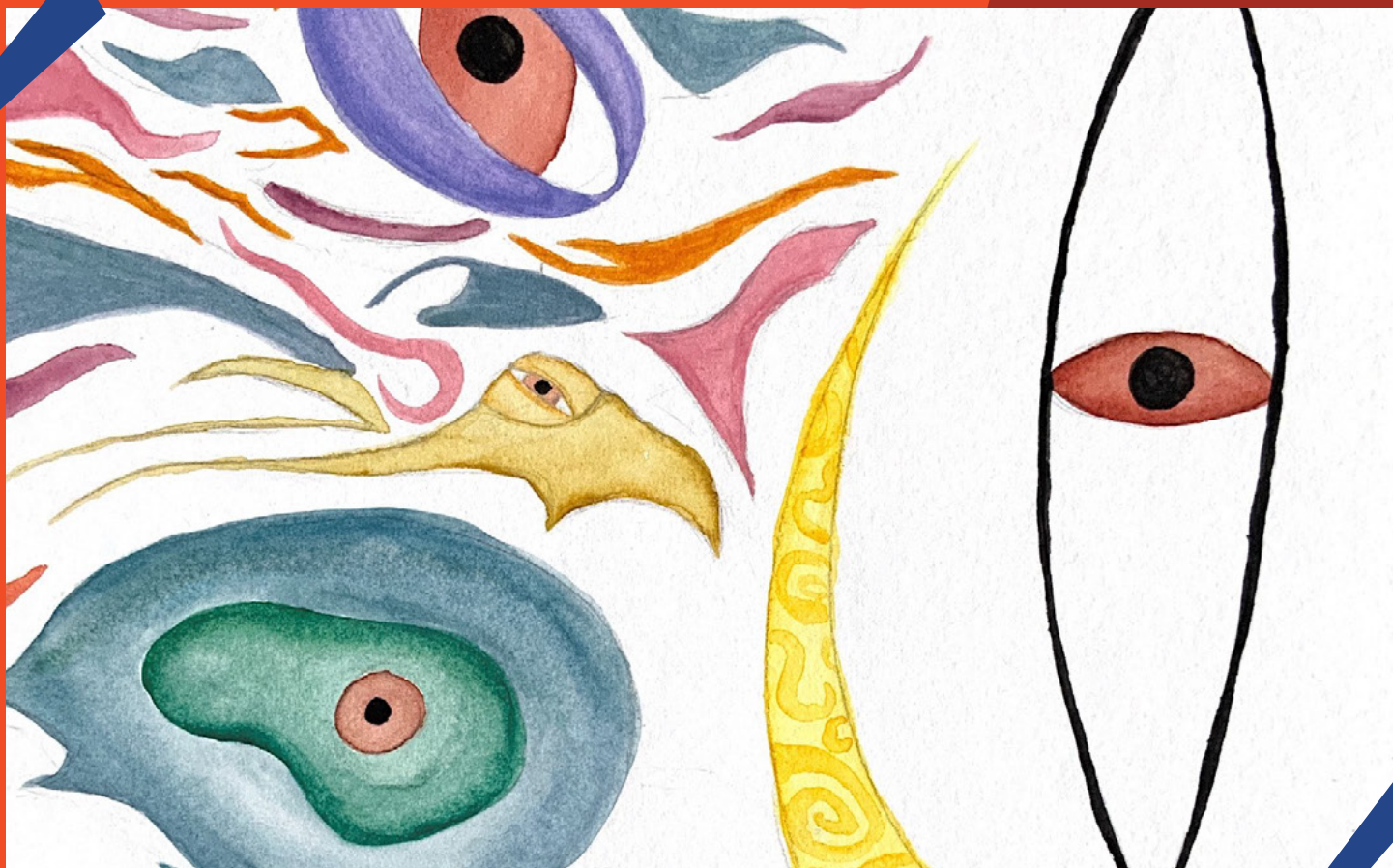
Illustration by Bianca Vazquez, age 17

FIGURE 16.

CATEGORY

1

Know what they want to do, and have a good idea of the steps to take to get there

"I will take the FE exam, which would be like the first part of like to get my engineering license and then like go back to school and still work and then take like the PE exam, which is your professional engineering license. And hopefully, in the long run, have like a good paying job."

—NEW YORK, NY, WHITE FEMALE, AGE 17–21, LOWER INCOME

FIGURE 15.

Mentors are viewed positively and experiential learning is valued.

Values exposure and experimentation.

She builds relationships with peers who have similar interests. Learning more about her field from peers and near peers.

Recognizes distinct steps on pathway: study in field, find mentors and internships, graduate, get a job, take licensing exams.

Takes Fundamentals of Engineering (F.E.) exam; aware of specific requirements in her field.

Young people ages 17+ seem more aware than 15 & 16 year olds of the steps necessary to reach their goals.

Sees personal character as a potential challenge.

Lack of money is also seen as a potential barrier or challenge.

Female participants sometimes see relationships and children as potential barriers to their career pathways.

Has an idea of the qualities she would like to have in a job. She wants to work on site instead of in an office.

talk to mentors and have internships

undergrad engineering student

join clubs and get more educated in my specific field

graduate college w/ Bachelors in engineering

being lazy money relationships children

get a job when I graduate from college

take my F.E. Exam

continue working and get my master's degree. take my P.E. Exam

have a high paying job in the engineering field/work on site

She is currently in college and studying engineering. Although she is confident she wants to be an engineer, she is not sure what type of engineering she wants to go into, and she still feels that she could go in any direction. While in college, she plans to participate in internships and talk to people in different engineering fields so that she can feel more confident about the direction she chooses. She hopes that when she graduates she will be able to get a job and that she will be financially independent from her parents, but knows that this might not be possible.

After college, she plans to work for a while and then pursue her engineering license. Her goal is to have a job that is hands-on and isn't limited to working in an office.

She knows what she wants to do in her future and is confident that she can find opportunities to explore and learn that will help her to refine her career goal and ultimately reach it.

FIGURE 17.

1

Know what they want to do, and have a good idea of the steps to take to get there

"Yeah. I want to have scholarships, so I don't have student loans. So when I graduate, I won't have debt weighing me or debt money. Then when I get older, I don't want to, let's say I get old and get sick, and I pass away, I don't want to leave my family with paying money that I have. I want to have that covered."

—GREENVILLE, MS, BLACK FEMALE, AGE 15–18, LOWER INCOME

Aware of burden of debt and plans to have high GPA to be able to get scholarships to help avoid debt.

Career pathway begins with a college degree in education and also a cosmetology license to earn money to minimize debt while she gets education.

She plans to work in her chosen career, earn additional income in a salon, and also study for her master's degree.

For her, striving and thriving includes marriage, travel, saving money, and investing in stocks.

Ownership is an important part of thriving, along with having a family of her own.

Giving back to parents is important. She does this by taking care of aging parents and building them a dream home.

Thriving is also characterized by having no debt, being wealthy, having the ability to retire and the ability to enjoy retirement (health).
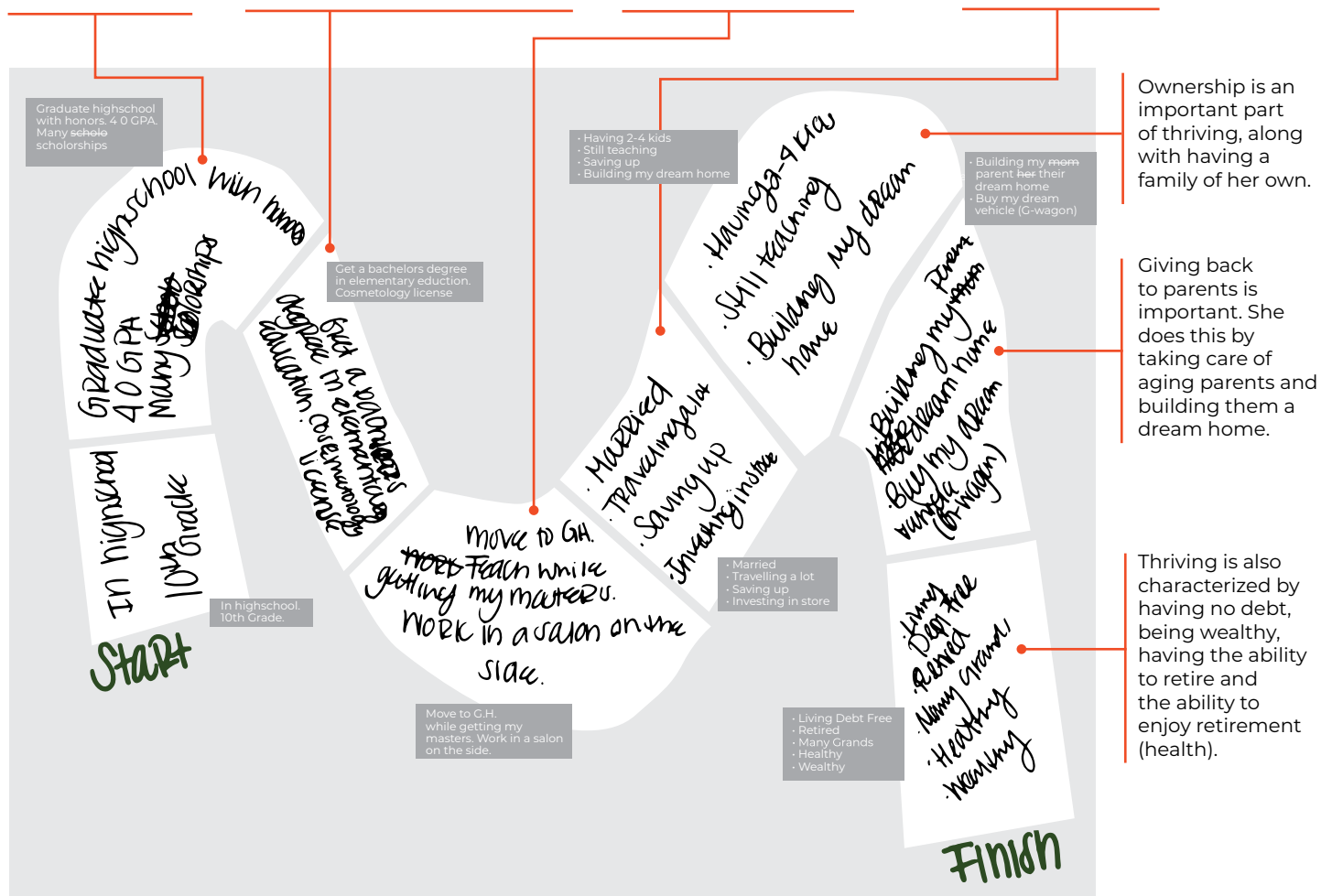
She has just begun 10th grade. In ninth grade, she didn't want to go to school and started messing up, but after talking it over with herself she began her 10th grade year committed to doing whatever it takes to be successful and graduate. She plans to graduate high school with a 4.0 GPA and receive scholarships that enable her to get a bachelor's degree in elementary education. While in college, she will also get a cosmetology license so that she can earn extra income while she is working as a teacher and attending graduate school. She hopes to get married, save money, and travel before having four children and building a dream home for herself and then one for her parents. She hopes to retire wealthy and healthy with many grandchildren and no debt. Throughout her pathway, she is very conscious of debt and determining steps she can take to avoid burdening herself or her family with debt.

She knows what she wants to do and has a sense of what steps she might take to pursue her goals. She wants to avoid debt and provide for her parents, so she plans to earn a trade license that will enable her to earn income while going to school.

FIGURE 18.

1

Know what they want to do, and have a good idea of the steps to take to get there

[I'll be supported by] *"professors that I meet at school or bosses or people I work with because they are contacts. They can know people. Friends because I'm going to be going to school classes, and friends that I make in those classes could know people as well. And then family…My parents aren't going to be able to put any money towards my school. And they never really pushed me to do good in school. Well, not that they didn't push me to do good in school. They just, it was their, they didn't really have, they didn't say anything about school. So it was like I was self-driven to go to school. So I'm just doing this to make them proud, to not, to take advantage of everything they've given me and not put it to waste."*

—YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, AGE 16–21, LOWER INCOME

He has already taken one step on his career journey by taking Running Start classes.

Sees college classes and internships as an opportunity to explore career pathways.

Supports: relationships and connections. "Professors that I meet at school or bosses or people I work with… they can know people."

Realistic about the first step out of college: entry level chemistry job. Expects to do experiential learning to 'try on' chemical engineering. After exploring his career options in college and participating in an apprenticeship, he will spend some time out of school before committing to chemical engineering school.

This box is empty because he knows he will need experience and connections, but he is not sure where or how to acquire them.

He understands his pathway as made up of instructional steps (e.g. get a degree, do an apprenticeship, go to engineering school).

Clear goal.

Barrier: Money for school
Barrier: Time to accomplish his pathway.
Feels unexpected events may be a barrier to his pathway. "If I have a kid during my four years in college…I feel like its going to set me back."

He is taking college prerequisites through the Running Start program while still in high school and feels like he is already taking his first steps toward completing his work journey. Although he feels confident that he knows the steps to move from college to chemical engineering school, he says it could be difficult if the apprenticeships and internships that he takes along the way ultimately take him in a different direction than the one he has planned for himself. "I feel like that's going to be the hardest part seeing whether doing these internships takes me into like another route, or it takes me to the chemical engineering one….right now, I just finished the chemistry series at our college here. And it's put

a lot of thought into my head of whether I want to continue chemistry or not." He feels that it will be important to get real life experience working in the chemistry field before committing to chemical engineering school, and so he plans to take a break from school after completing his apprenticeship.

He has a sense of what he wants to do and also has a clear idea of what steps he might take to learn more about chemical engineering and to explore other interests. He is unsure how he will gain the experience he will need to move from school to the career he hopes to have.

FIGURE 19.

CATEGORY 1

Know what they want to do, and have a good idea of the steps to take to get there

"With my job, to become a leadman or foreman, [it's] basically, how fast you can pick up stuff and your years, your experience. It's all about experience. Say, you know, I went to the Moorhead—community college—and I took welding trade class. Well, I passed that. I'm certified. Well, I go to Mississippi Marine and tell them, you know, I'm first class. No, you're not. You got to take their pipe test. [I] have tried to have stuff paid off."

—GREENVILLE, MS, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

21 years old and has a union job in Mississippi, earning more than his peers.

He believes on the job learning is important for his success.

He can foresee a career progression that takes him from welder to leadman to foreman.

Planning for retirement with a 401(k) at age 65.

He hopes to build his mother a brick house.

Barrier: Manual labor. If he gets sick, he can't work.
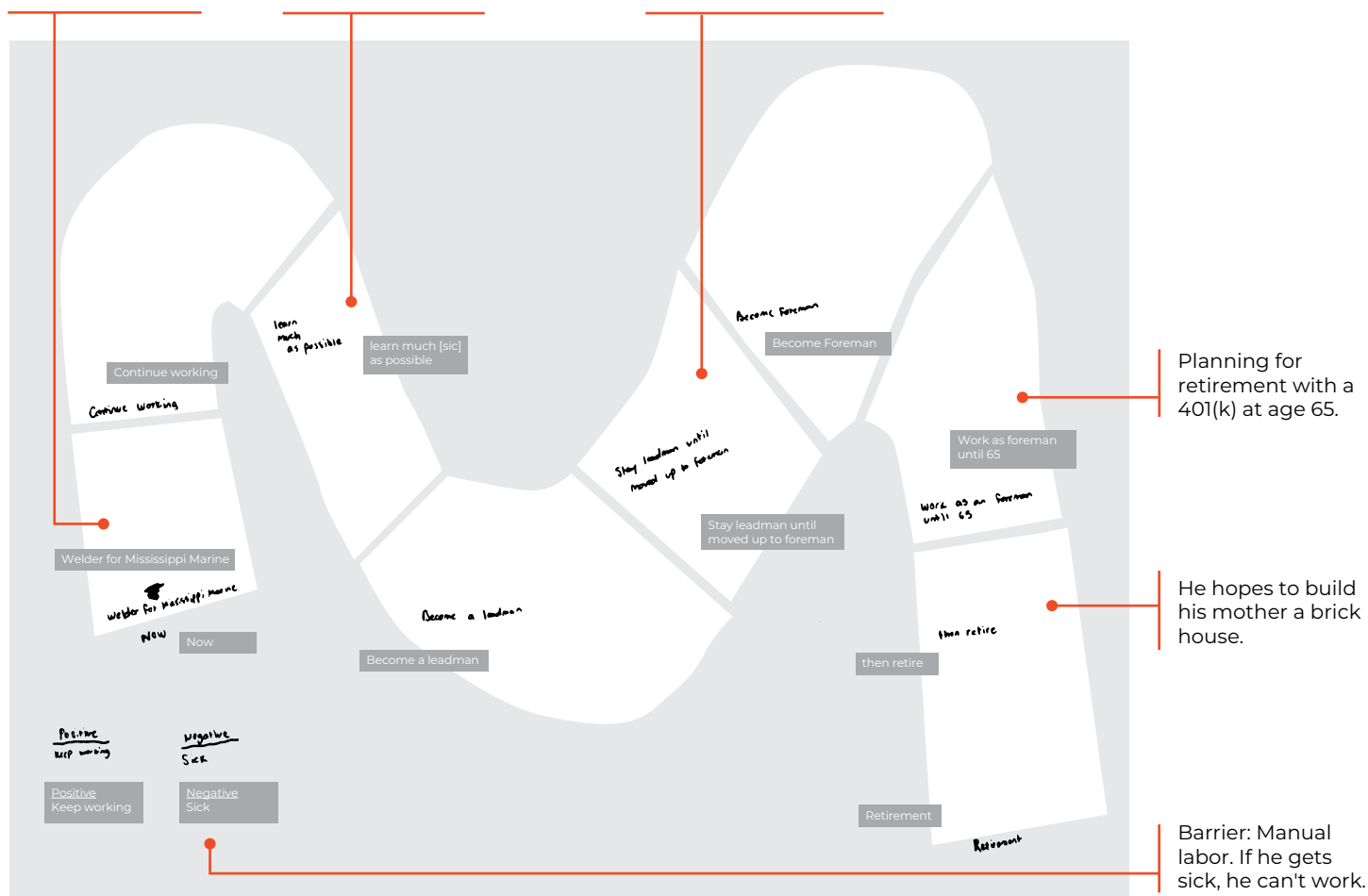
He is out of school and works as a welder. After graduating from high school he got a job through his grandfather at the shipyard. He makes more money at his job than all of his friends and most of his family. He knows that a life as a welder can be hard on his body and that sickness or injury could be a barrier to his career goals. Therefore, he plans to work his way up from welder to leadman, and then from leadman to foreman so that he can do less physical labor as he gets older. He feels that on the job experience will be most important to his success, and at each step of his pathway, he says he will learn as much as possible so that he can be prepared for the next step. When he retires at age 65, he will have a 401(k) and hopes to live in a brick house.

FIGURE 20.

Not sure what they want to do, yet have a good idea of the steps to take to explore in order to get there

"I'm already getting it...I'm networking. I'm meeting. I'm bumping elbows with the right people. You feel me? I make great rapport with people. I think everything in life is about first impressions and being able to know how to talk to people. You know what I'm saying?...If you come to [people] in the right tone of voice, and you tell them what you're trying to do, you could probably end up with something [an investment of money] I'm just one of those people that believe, and I use my beliefs to get through life."

—CHICAGO, IL, BLACK FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Currently not enrolled in school.

Upon completing LPN program and passing the nursing boards, she can work as a nurse.

She has conducted research online to learn more about the certifications necessary to become an RN.

Sees the LPN program as a building block to becoming an RN and getting a bachelor's and master's degree.

She plans to save money from her first career in order to finance her second career.

She knows she needs to find support but may be unrealistic about how to find sponsorship or investors.

Second career as an entrepreneur begins.

Thriving is characterized by giving back, ownership, and travel.

In her lifetime she anticipates having and plans for two careers that fulfill two different core interests.

Labels in figure: Receive my lisecensure. (Pass Nclex) · Nursing LPN program · Bridge to RN program · Receive my BSN or Master's · *Use $$ from career to open dance studio. · Host my 1st charity fundraising event. Open 1st stuido · Find sponsors/investors for studio · Open at least 6 studios · International travel nurse · Wound care · Nursing foundation or charity. · Expand locations of dance studios.

She is not currently enrolled in school, but plans to pursue a Licensed Practical Nursing (LPN) program, open a chain of dance studios, and eventually become a traveling nurse.

After starting the LPN program, she will work to pass the NCLEX (nursing board exams) and enroll in a Registered Nursing (RN) program, where she will first receive her bachelor's degree and then her master's degree. "I am actually aspiring to be able to open up my own dance studio. So what I want to do is use the money from nursing to be able to open my own dance studio." After completing her master's degree, she will look for investors and sponsors—"people that are interested to putting their money into me and I also want to host my first charity fundraising event. I feel like [fundraising will] open up more doors for networking." From there, she will open up her first studio, and, over time, expand her studios into different locations. "At the end of my life, I shall have owned at least five studios and be an international traveling nurse." She has already begun to network in order to meet the types of people she believes will invest in her dream.

She has two career goals, the first to become a traveling nurse and the second to own a chain of dance studios. She has a clear sense of the instrumental steps she will need to take in order to reach her goal of becoming a nurse, but has a less clear sense of the steps necessary to move from nursing to becoming a traveling nurse or those that might prepare her to run her own business. Her timeline to open her first dance studio with her own savings is five years.

FIGURE 21.

CATEGORY 2

Not sure what they want to do, yet have a good idea of the steps to take to explore in order to get there

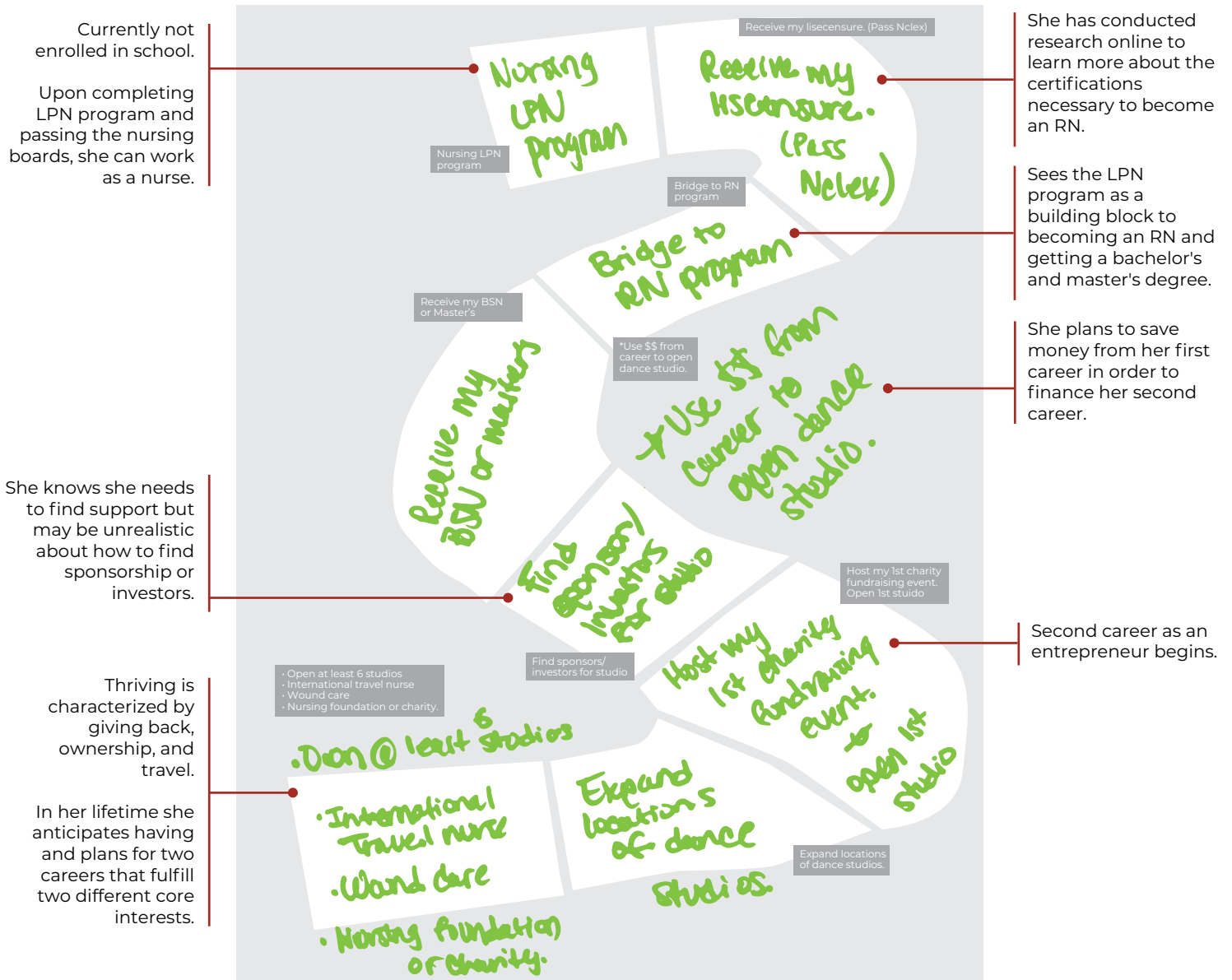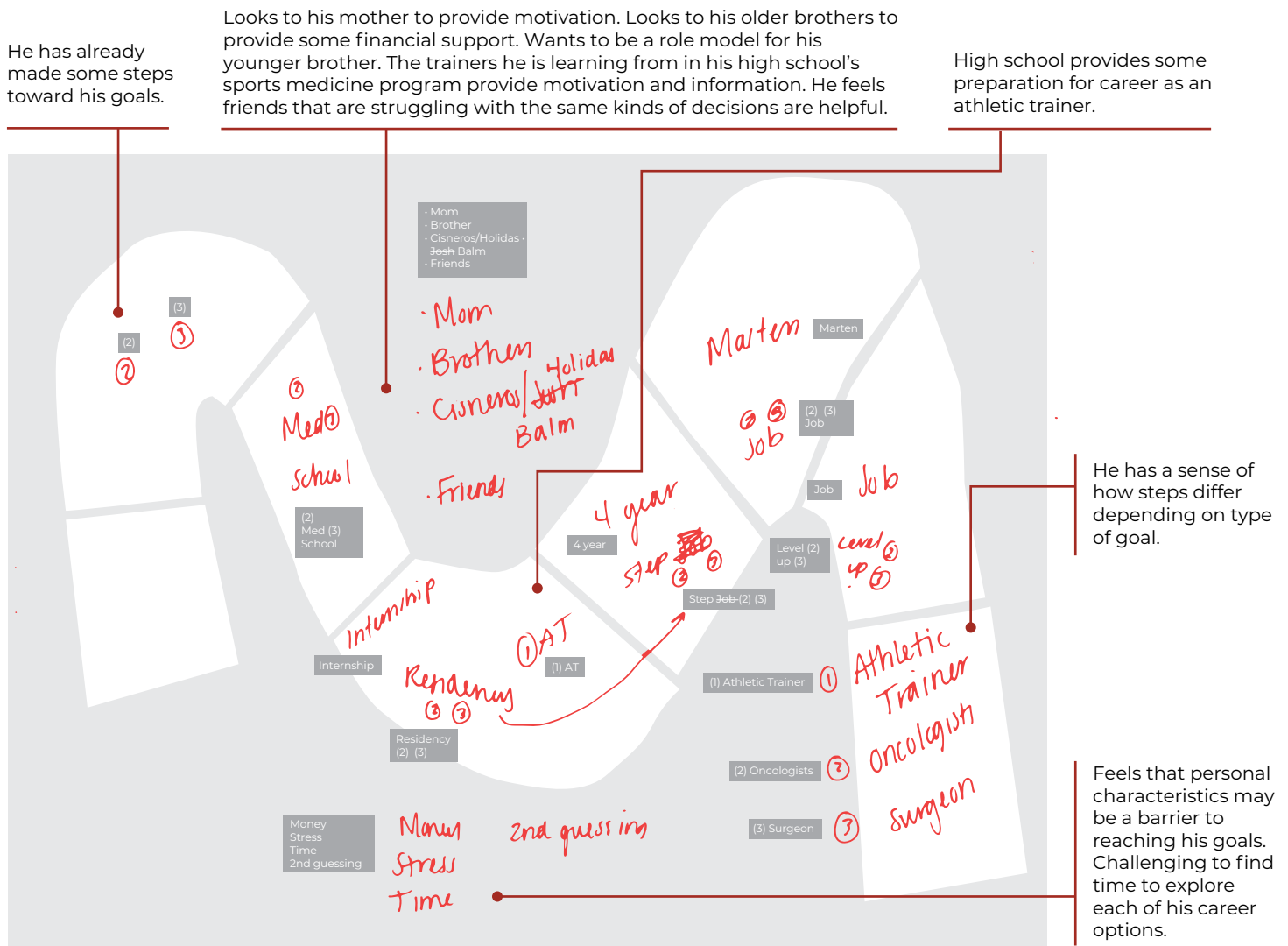*"Going into high school, you get to choose which classes you want to take. And the class that I chose was sports medicine. And I excelled in that class, so…the teacher invited me to join the after-school program my freshman year. So then I sticked with it until this year. I'm still in it."*

"My, both of my older brothers didn't go to college, but they're really hard workers. And I know they're going to get really good jobs in like through the effort that they're putting just right now. So I'm pretty sure they might help pay some of my college. I'm not going to ask my mom for money. I know she's going to want to give me money…I don't want my mom to take out loans. So I'm going to focus on scholarships and that kind of stuff…For my little brother…I just want him to see where I can go and where he can go as well. And then for my mom, basically the same thing for my mom. Like, you know, she didn't go to school at all, so it's just showing my mom and my little brother where we can go through like higher education.

—YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, AGE 16–21, LOWER INCOME

He has already made some steps toward his goals.

Looks to his mother to provide motivation. Looks to his older brothers to provide some financial support. Wants to be a role model for his younger brother. The trainers he is learning from in his high school's sports medicine program provide motivation and information. He feels friends that are struggling with the same kinds of decisions are helpful.

High school provides some preparation for career as an athletic trainer.

He has a sense of how steps differ depending on type of goal.

Feels that personal characteristics may be a barrier to reaching his goals. Challenging to find time to explore each of his career options.

He is not sure yet whether he wants to work as an athletic trainer, an oncologist, or a surgeon. He numbers them 1, 2 and 3, to reflect how much progress he has made toward realizing each profession. If he decides to pursue athletic training, he feels he has already started his pathway. He studies with professional trainers at school and they provide him with motivation and information about what 4-year college to attend, where he might go to get his master's degree, and how to make connections that will help him get a job. He is already taking anatomy courses and feels like he is gaining a foundation that will help him if he pursues oncology or surgery. To be a doctor, he will go to medical school, and do an internship and a residency (that lasts 4 years) before finding a job as an oncologist or surgeon. There may be barriers that prevent him from his goals. "[M]ed school is extremely expensive. Like just getting a job at Burger King or

something like that is not going to pay for med school. And then [there's the] stress, the time, and then I had as well the second-guessing." He will be supported by his mother, brother, the trainers he studies under at his high school, and his friends. His mother will provide motivation but not money.

He has an idea of what his interests are and is working to determine how best to match his interests to a set of career goals. He has a sense of the steps and experiences that are critical to reaching each of his potential careers, and he has a sense of the external factors (money, time, stress, and his own self-doubt) that may impact his choices. He doesn't have all of the steps worked out, but he is making choices that will enable him to learn more about what each pathway looks like.

FIGURE 22.

CATEGORY 3

Know what they want to do, but are unsure how to get there

"Well, my family members, like I have three brothers that are in the military. They were all in different branches...My dad did, my dad was in the Army. My mom was in the Navy. My grandpa was in the Navy. It's just kind of like a family thing. I just feel like serve a great country and enjoy doing it while doing something you love and having like a good life while doing it."

—YAKIMA, WA, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Has already taken steps to explore areas of interest and prepare himself for his military career.

The military is a *good job* and an opportunity for career exploration.

Begins military career.

Knows he needs support, but doesn't know where he will find it. He anticipates external challenges as a potential barrier to his career pathway. Fear of not liking the career he chooses.

Second career begins.
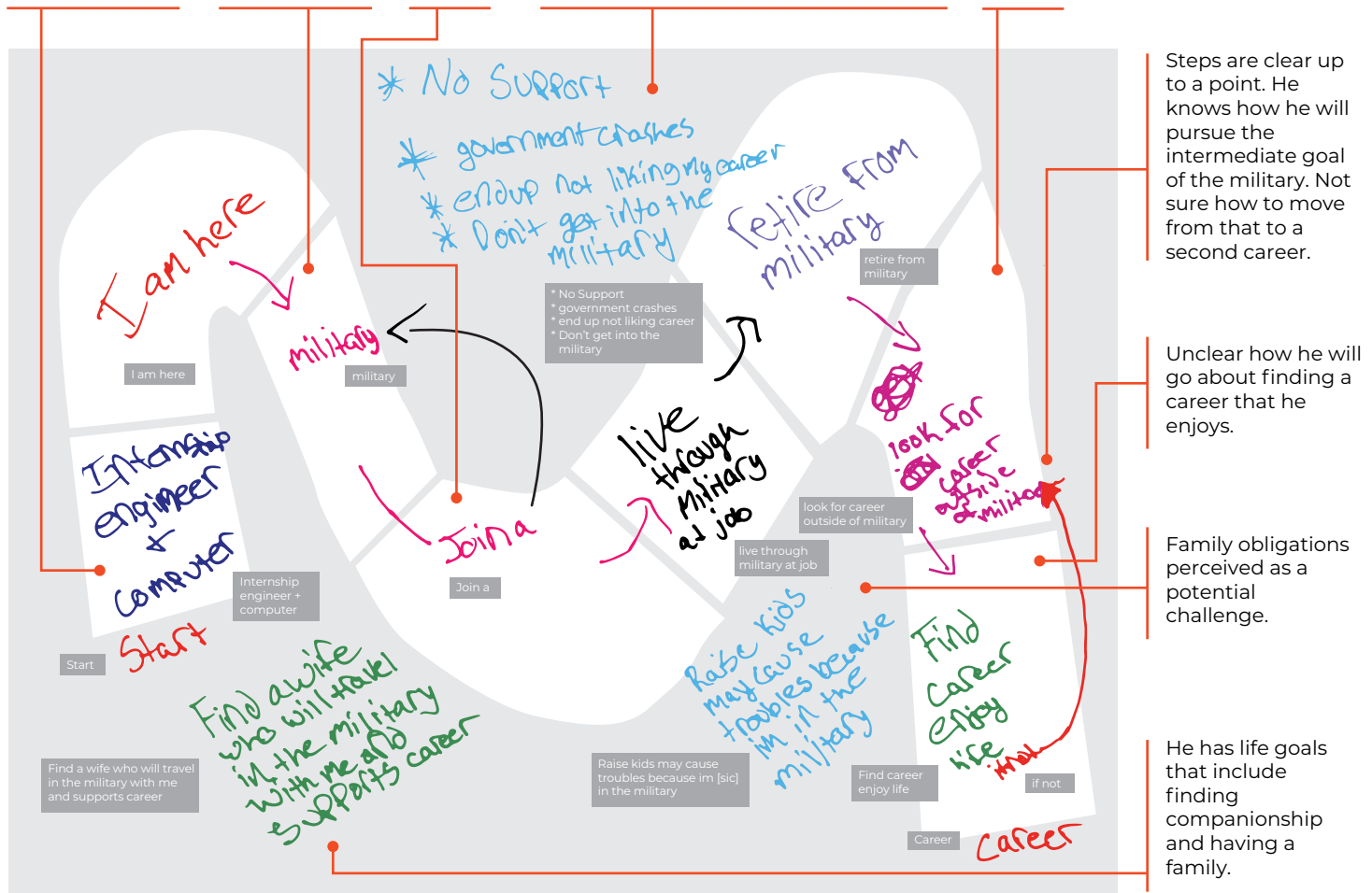
Steps are clear up to a point. He knows how he will pursue the intermediate goal of the military. Not sure how to move from that to a second career.

Unclear how he will go about finding a career that he enjoys.

Family obligations perceived as a potential challenge.

He has life goals that include finding companionship and having a family.

He has been admitted to a university in Seattle, but cannot afford the tuition. He has decided to join the military. "Well, now it's between Army and Air Force, but I'm leaning more towards Army because Army offers promotions. And with the Air Force, you, there's not really many, much promotional opportunity." He has already taken high school classes in engineering and computer science and believes the military will provide him with more opportunities to learn about his interests. He is hopeful that he will like being in the military. However, his military recruiter told him that if he does not, he can serve for four years, qualify for a free education, and leave the service (he describes this as "retiring"). If he leaves the military, he will look for a career he enjoys. He hopes to find a

wife (or get married to someone) who will be willing to travel with him if he is in the military and support his career. He knows that life may not end up the way he would like it to and says not getting into the military, not liking his career, government instability, and encountering troubles with his own kids could stand in the way of him reaching his goals.

Unable to attend a university directly out of high school, the military represents his Plan B. His pathway relies almost entirely on a single experience—military participation—to direct his occupational goals. He expresses uncertainty about how he would explore careers outside of the military.

FIGURE 23.

CATEGORY 4

Know what they want to do, and think they know how to get there, but their imagined pathway is inaccurate and/or unrealistic

"Like our education system sucks right now. [I want to] bring jobs back into our community. Trying to reduce the violence levels that we have by giving youth an outlet, you know what I'm saying? Not just the basketball court so people can go hoop, but a recreational center. Do you know what I'm saying? And just things that gives us a different outlet."

—CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

Thriving is immediate. Striving is not anticipated.

Part of thriving is giving back.

Systemic change is important.

He believes a high school diploma is the only instructional step he will take on his pathway.

High school is not connected to career goals.

Part of thriving includes becoming a role model and a community leader.

Identity connected to geographic location —City of Chicago. Political backdrop influences self-perception and understanding of systemic failures and opportunities for change.

graduating High school

Sign's [sic] Record Deal

Release's [sic] Multi Platinum albulms [sic]

[shaded background] generate revenue to bring back to urban communities

change the communities by being the change

Get involved wtih Politics (Run for Mayor)

Change the corruption of politics in this City (bridge generational) gap

SEE The Change

He is in high school and plans to sign a record deal upon graduating. After that he will release multi-platinum albums and use the revenue from these to invest in urban communities. Giving back in this way makes him an example of "being the change" and this propels him to get involved in a second career in politics and a run for mayor. After winning the mayoral race, he works to change the corrupt politics in Chicago and bridge the generational gap. His pathway ends with him seeing the change he has helped to enact. He estimates he will move from signing a record deal to becoming mayor within 10-15 years.

He is in this category because he has a clear sense of where he wants to go, but the steps he imagines taking to get there feel unrealistic. He envisions himself moving from strength to strength, with little or no striving. He sees himself running for mayor and winning and yet he doesn't describe any steps or relationships that may enable him to prepare for that role.

FIGURE 24.

CATEGORY 4

Know what they want to do, and think they know how to get there, but their imagined pathway is inaccurate and/or unrealistic

"Motivation to get out of the house, yeah. To enroll in the program you have to wait at least a year and in that year they can call yo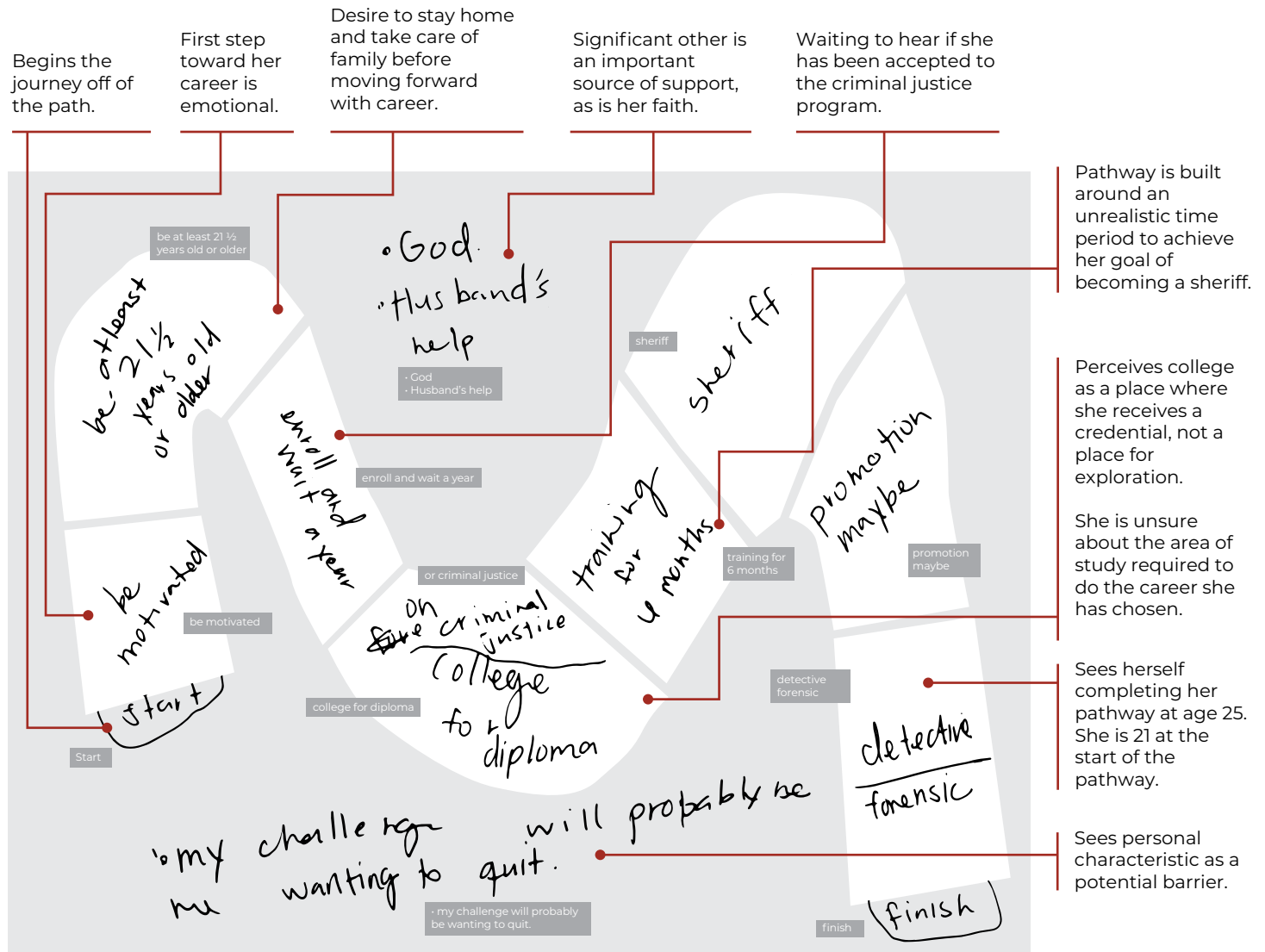u or they cannot call you. So during that year I want to go to college for criminal justice...They pay you at least $1K or more and you don't need it but they pay you more. The training is 6 months and you have to...maybe get the promotion to be a detective because not everyone can be a detective or forensic. It takes years sometimes being in a field just as a sheriff."

—LOS ANGELES, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Begins the journey off of the path.

First step toward her career is emotional.

Desire to stay home and take care of family before moving forward with career.

Significant other is an important source of support, as is her faith.

Waiting to hear if she has been accepted to the criminal justice program.

Pathway is built around an unrealistic time period to achieve her goal of becoming a sheriff.

Perceives college as a place where she receives a credential, not a place for exploration.

She is unsure about the area of study required to do the career she has chosen.

Sees herself completing her pathway at age 25. She is 21 at the start of the pathway.

Sees personal characteristic as a potential barrier.

She is twenty-one and a mother. She graduated from high school and is currently not working and she stays home to care for her three-year old son. She wants to have a career, but worries about it taking her away from her son. She places her "START" off of the pathway and says that she first needs to be more motivated about pursuing her career and plans to enroll in college 2.5 years from now when her son is older. She hopes to apply to a specialized program for criminal justice, but while waiting to see if she has been accepted, she will enroll in college. After completing college, she will enter a 6-month training program, at the end of which she will be a sheriff. She anticipates she might receive a promotion and then move into a new position as a detective or forensics specialists. She believes that after completing college, it will take her 4-5 years to reach her career goals. She plans to be 25 when she is promoted to be a detective or get into forensics.

She has a clear idea of what she wants to do, but her understanding of the steps and stages necessary to reach her goals are vague and the timeline (4-5 years) is unrealistic.

FIGURE 25.

CATEGORY 5

Not sure what they want to do and unsure of what steps to take to get there

"There ain't no goal at the end...I was thinking about working, being a doctor...and help people out...it is like there are people dying...and when I was a kid, I would see doctors help people come back to life."

—OAKLAND, CA, BLACK MALE, 16–18, MIXED INCOME

Selecting a non-college pathway and anticipates working out of high school.

Income from high school job helps to support himself and his mother.

Graduation from high school is not included on the pathway.

He struggles to describe how and if these steps build on one another.

Help

Home

Work

Be Rich

Play Football

Work on cars

College Football

(illegible)

Once he is rich he can work on cars, which is something he enjoys.
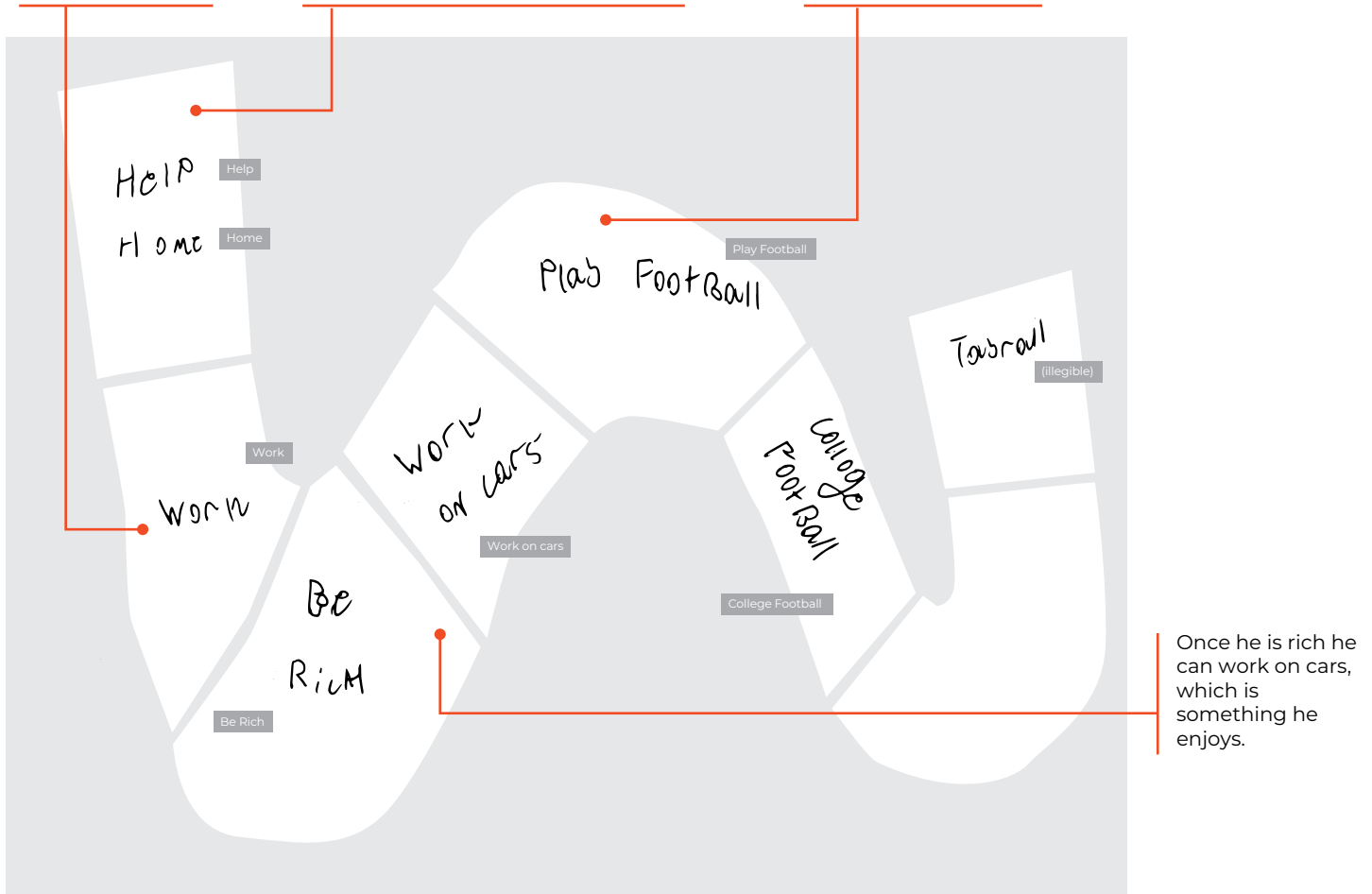
He is in high school and using his high school job to help his mother out at home. "It is important to help my mom. Bills are real high, and she doesn't know how to pay them...and I try to help." After working and becoming rich, he plans to work on cars—something he enjoys. Later on, he hopes to play football. When asked to describe his pathway with the focus group, he says that he lacks a goal, then says he has been thinking about becoming a doctor so he can help people.

He is in the final category because he does not describe any steps that would enable him to think about or make progress towards his goals. For example, he says he has been thinking about becoming a doctor but he does not describe steps that would enable him to explore a career in health or medicine, to get more information about the field of medicine, or future steps or stages he may need to pass through in order to reach his goal.

Young people develop and iterate on their occupational identities in interconnected stages

As discussed in the previous section, *Young People Try on Their Futures*, as young people move through and return to each stage of developing their occupational identities—*Exposure*, *Exploration*, and *Selection*—they develop and refine their personal sense of what constitutes a *good job*, learn more about their own strengths and interests, and begin to assess the jobs and careers that allow them to incorporate both.

As young people move through the stages of *Exposure*, *Exploration*, and *Selection*, they are also learning more about the knowledge, experiences, connections, and information they will need to travel from where they are now to the *good job* or career they would like to have in the future. While some young people anticipate a linear occupational pathway that ends with a sense of finality at their chosen career, others anticipate a more iterative pathway where they return to the *Exploration* phase several times in their lives.

In the pathway exercise, some young people anticipate engaging in aspects of exploration during high school, others after working a first job(s), still others while attending or after attending post-secondary education.

Young people understand pathway progression differently

Importantly, participants envision and think about their pathways differently. Some young people focus on the acquisition of instruments that will enable them to reach their goals, while others focus on the emotional capacities they must develop or relationships they must nurture. These differences may highlight important distinctions between the ways in which participants think about and demonstrate agency in relation to their long-term goals. It also gives us insight into young people's perceptions of what is necessary in order to meet their own definitions of success.

Instrumental: For some, the idea of steps and stages is perceived in instrumental terms, that is to say, a series of steps made up mostly of academic information and certifications.

> *"Graduate high school, go to college and get my AA, transferring over to a UCU, finding a girlfriend, getting my law degree and getting my real estate license, opening up a law firm. Using the money I make from law and invest it in real estate and then with the money I invest increase my income. Retire at 50 and have at least 8 figures in my bank account and living like [I am]."*
>
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE MALE, 16–18, LOWER INCOME

> *"My first, is learning more new things about it. My second, is finishing high school with an associate's degree for psychology…[I am] going out there and finding new things to learn about psychology and getting into the field for things. [Learn from] classes and inside of school. Some people do psychology internships for teenagers. The one after that, is go to college; get a bachelor's degree and then possibly a master's. Then, go to internships more professionally and get more psychology experiences with real psychologists. Find a place to work; keep working hard at it until I succeed. School and learning more about it [will help]."*
>
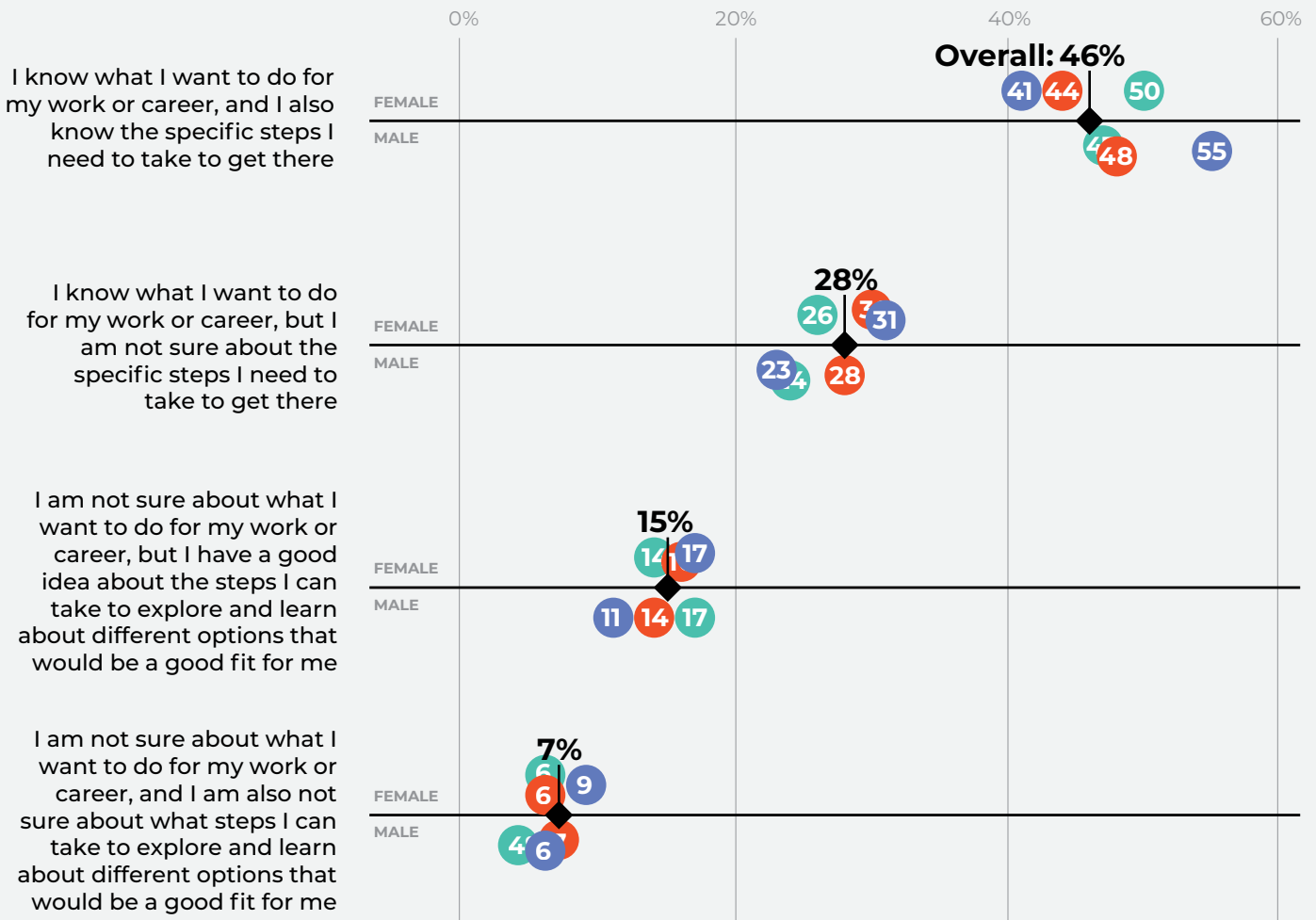> — PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

Which of the following feels closest to how you would describe your feelings about your future career?

Racial breakdown   BLACK   HISPANIC   WHITE

I know what I want to do for my work or career, and I also know the specific steps I need to take to get there

Overall: 46%

FEMALE: 41, 44, 50
MALE: 4, 48, 55

I know what I want to do for my work or career, but I am not sure about the specific steps I need to take to get there

28%

FEMALE: 26, 3, 31
MALE: 23, 4, 28

I am not sure about what I want to do for my work or career, but I have a good idea about the steps I can take to explore and learn about different options that would be a good fit for me

15%

FEMALE: 14, 1, 17
MALE: 11, 14, 17

I am not sure about what I want to do for my work or career, and I am also not sure about what steps I can take to explore and learn about different options that would be a good fit for me

7%

FEMALE: 6, 6, 9
MALE: 4, 6

0%   20%   40%   60%

Emotional: Others understand pathways as a series or accumulation of emotional competencies—such as developing more confidence in one's abilities—at the end of which lies the life or career they aspire to live.

"Just practice drawing more, just sketch more stuff out. Save up that is a big thing. My second step: be more open with people, being more confident about myself—learn the business; learn business in general."

— OAKLAND, CA, HISPANIC MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"I want to be an artist or a firefighter...I put confident and time and patience because it is going to take a little time if I am right here to get right here. I said one step closer and I put practice or try to get better at getting above that...I don't know what the classes are called... but I have seen them around when I first started high school. They can show me what I need to do, their gear and all of that. Then, an artist—I have been in art for 3 years, and I have learned and grown from my first year."

— PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

Relational: A minority of youth participants (ages 15-21) view their pathways in primarily relational terms, that is to say, the steps and stages of their envisioned pathways are primarily focused on establishing connections and relationships with individuals or institutions. In contrast, many young people do not report a clear sense of what kinds of relationships they might need to have or develop to thrive or of how to acquire or develop those relationships. However, it is notable that in the focus groups among young adults ages 26 to 29, many looked back on what lead to their success to date and emphasized the importance of relationships. Many young adults in this research describe the influence and importance of personal relationships and how future success relies in some part on their ability to access, nurture, and build intentional relationships.

> *"Then, I put internship next at a hospital. And then, hopefully, through that internship, I can meet a psychiatric therapist and get some connections. Therefore, at the end of this…I will be able to get my degree and become a psychiatric therapist."*
>
> — DOWNEY, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 16–18, MIXED INCOME

> *"Then, I am going to choose my classes. So, they are college classes, making new friends and connections with professors, going to office hours…Then, going into med school, but in that kind of time in my life I will be making connections at a hospital and be working at a hospital. Those internships that I did before got me a permanent job at the hospital before becoming a real doctor…I heard this conversation where they were like, 'oh yeah during the summer I'm going to go intern at my parents' where they work as doctors. I am just like okay, maybe I will start making friends in that area. That comes into play, making friends and internships at hospitals and making connections."*
>
> — DOWNEY, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 16–18, MIXED INCOME

Thriving young adults lift up relationships when reflecting on their pathways

Young adults (ages 26-29) who consider themselves to be *thriving*—happy with where they are in life and excited and optimistic about what lies ahead—were asked to reflect on the decisions, steps, and stages that enabled them to get from high school to a current state of *thriving*. In their responses, they frequently describe the importance of having, and sometimes intentionally building, a diversity of personal and institutional relationships that offered support and helped them to navigate a pathway toward their goals.

> *"Past, I guess a scholarship to college. I'm the first generation to go to college. Once I joined organizations and a fraternity, I formed a relationship with my mentor, who is a key figure. That's the man I wanted to become, create. Then, I would volunteer and work at nonprofit organizations to build my portfolio while I was an undergrad. I had my first child too. I took a semester off. My parents didn't like that at all because I was the first to go to college. I took a semester off, spring semester, and went back to college. I balanced being a parent and a student. Still ended up graduating on time at the top of my class. Then, I utilized my networks and my fraternity to gain employment, which transitioned me over here to Chicago. And now I just continue to move up the ranks in my organization and cultivate strong relationships."*
>
> — CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 26–29, HIGHER INCOME

> *"There are two people that really motivate me now. One was the first engineer I ever worked with, old guy in his 60s, and he just went back to work because he wanted to continue being a consultant. He taught me so much, and I would constantly tell him I don't think I'm ever going to be able to do all of that because I don't have the degree for it. He would laugh at me, like why are you counting on that? You come up with ideas all the time; you are going to have everything you need without the degree. That pushed me. Then, I have a cousin who worked toward being an engineer. They would call me all the time and tell me about how their*

parents are getting on them about whatever they are doing in school or all of this. I didn't go to school for it, but I would hear from him and I would be like damn... I would live off of that. I would live off her energy, but I am going to get it done and I am going to get through it, and I live off of that energy."

— NEW YORK, NY, HISPANIC FEMALE, 26–29, HIGHER INCOME

Education and career goals are not uniform

Young people who participated in this research have a wide diversity of interests and aspirations. These interests include a mix of more historically traditional careers, like working as a teacher, doctor, engineer, and social worker, but also include new economy careers like gaming, YouTube or Instagram micro businesses, software engineering, and creative careers like acting, photography, dance, fashion, and graphic design.

Independence and ownership are goals for many

Ownership—whether business ownership, home ownership, or real estate acquisition—is an important part of *thriving* for many young people.

Owning a business emerges as a goal on several pathways. Importantly, many young people do not use the words *entrepreneur* or *entrepreneurship* explicitly, and in some focus groups young people described entrepreneurs as people who have a big idea, something more than the kinds of businesses that the young people themselves hoped to own and sometimes operate.

"I will be able to run my own company and work for myself."

— ONLINE, BLACK MALE, 26–29, MIXED INCOME

"When I am 45, I would like to have my own private practice for physical therapy."

— PASADENA, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

"All right, age 25, I've got my own crib with friends. And we're professional live streamers and gamers. Have our own team and everything. They call us the NY Heat."

— NEW YORK, NY, BLACK MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"End goals right now, lawyer, but I don't know how it is going to go...I have to go to law school.

—BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"By the time I'm 25, I plan on being a radiologist tech and staying in Texas in my own house."

— GREENVILLE, MS, BLACK FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"Owning my own hotel and then to have a franchise, owning more than one. Then ending my career and passing it along to my kids."

— ATLANTA, GA, BLACK MALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

Planning for Plan B

Some young people already have an impression that their lives may not work out the way they expect them to. In the context of the pathways exercise, this uncertainty sometimes manifests as having multiple career pathways—sometimes literally drawn in parallel to the initial image—a Plan B, or a career they may fall back on if their lives do not go as planned. In the former example, young people are more likely to experience the double pathway as positive. The parallel path represents their own exploration process or

agency in determining their future—not remaining or returning to a survival phase. For young people in the latter category, that describe their Plan B, it is often associated with the inability to make money or sustain themselves with a creative or passion pursuit that represents Plan A.

"It feels bad when things don't go your way. But like a Plan B is like, okay, you want to go to a certain place or a certain college, and you tried to get there, and it don't work. You don't make it. You don't make it to that college. The college don't accept you. So, where else are you going to go? That was your first choice. That's why when they tell you to pick colleges and stuff like that or pick where you want to be in life."

— GREENVILLE, MS, BLACK FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"Usually you thought you had this thing lined up and then it didn't work out, or the bottom fell out of it and what are you going to do? You can't quit, and I do feel like in the communities of color we are very aware that you don't get to just lie down and die or you don't get to lie down and feel sorry for yourself. You ain't got time for all of that, so if this didn't work out, you'd better have a Plan B, C, D, and E and keep pushing, keep it moving.

— OAKLAND, CA, BLACK ADULT INFLUENCER, LOWER INCOME

"They [my brothers] want me to make a five-year plan, but I can't do that if I don't know exactly what I want to do. I wrote down what I think I want to do, but if it doesn't happen and plans change, I don't know."

— PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

Hustling as necessity or passion project

Young people from households with lower incomes and their parents and influencers often talk about the importance of being able to hustle. However, among these groups, the idea of hustle can have multiple meanings. Hustle can be any of the following:

A necessary behavior to make ends meet. This idea of the term is viewed as positive in the sense that a young person has the ability to hustle and, therefore, will be able to care for themselves, be self-reliant, and survive. It can also be viewed negatively as a behavior that adults do not want their children or the youth that they work with to have to do. In this sense, hustle is negatively equated with survival.

"From there, make that studio job more as an actual career, and then have my real estate stuff be more of like a side hustle, kind of keeping it in the back pocket."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 26–29, HIGHER INCOME

"You know, hustling, use your money to make more money or buy this, sell it three times more. You know, run across deals, flip it. Hustling, you know, I really learned from my dad. My dad will hustle your shoes off your feet before you know it...So, hustling, you know, is just something I just took a part of in the family. Yeah, I just like to hustle. Like, if I ain't working, I get up, and during the day, I try to hustle a little bit before I go in at night."

— GREENVILLE, MS, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

[Re: the word work] "I put effort, grinding, hustle, bonding, and hardest one...The reason I put hustle is because like sometimes like there's a lot of, I mean, anything that you do, basically, you've got to hustle. Like, if you want to, like, succeed, I feel like you got to hustle, like put in overtime...basically do things that you don't want to. So, like, that's why I put hustle."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

A side hustle. A part-time job or passion project that is unrelated to a central and often more traditional occupational pathway. For young people, a side hustle is generally understood as positive and a source of pride. Some, still in high school, say they already have a side hustle. Often, this is a job that they are able to do while still studying that is aligned with their interests, strengths, and passions. In the focus group pathways, some young people note that as they pursue more arguably stable or traditional career options, they will continue to invest in and grow their side hustle in the hopes of it becoming their full-time job later in life.

> *"She works full-time; she goes to school full-time. She works for a bakery. She is in the bakery program...The first thing I always ask her, can this pay your bills? This could be a side hustle, but can this pay your day-to-day life, bills, and how you live? If not, then we need to figure something else out."*
>
> — OAKLAND, CA, BLACK PARENT/GUARDIAN, HIGHER INCOME

Creatives see themselves as inhabiting their occupational identities in the present

Young people aiming for creative and new economy careers often have detailed knowledge of the pathway they will take to reach their goals. Some young people who aspire to work as adults in these sectors are already actively pursuing part-time or full-time jobs that will enable them to gain the knowledge and connections they believe are necessary to succeed. Notably, young people who see themselves as working in creative industries are more likely to associate their chosen profession with their core identities than those who pursue more traditional careers. See Figure 27 for an example of a creative pathway.

Thriving young adults' inflection points

Among *thriving* young adults ages 26-29, it is not uncommon to also hear that they have experienced inflection points in their young lives—events or experiences that caused them to reassess aspects of their lives and change course or double down on the course they were already pursuing. Notably, many of these inflection points are often assumed to be irrevocably damaging to young people's life pathways or sometimes cause young people to abandon their pathway and their goals permanently. Young adults in this research do not describe these moments in that way. Instead, they share moments of deep reflection in which they continued to refine their occupational identities and the future to which they were aspiring. In this way, many young adult research participants viewed the circumstances or events that caused this inflection in their pathway as a pothole, but not a crater.

> *"My life is a little different. I left the house when I was 15 because almost everybody got locked up by then. So, I was in the streets. But I met a dude. He was like three years older than me, which is my kids' father...now. And he put me in a crib at the age of 17...He wasn't that much older than me, only like three years. But in between times, I had a baby, and at the age of 19, I had a baby by him. I never really had to work. He did everything for me. But when my baby turned like one, I went back to school and finished up school, because during all that time, at 15, you know, I didn't finish high school. So I ended up going back to school, getting, you know, getting a GED...and like my dad, he always, he stay in jail. I don't even, I just figured out his birthday this year. And my mom, she always done hard work. You know, she's always doing work. She always put things together. But, you know, I guess when people in love they get a little bit messed up. So, I left her too. But other than that, that's why I'm always on my kids, my family, because you don't know the things that people have to go through or what they've been through. And a lot of times, we don't get the support that we need to get to where we going. So, that is why I wanted to do better. So that's why I got a job...I found a full-time job. But in between times, you know, with my little life being in the streets, I got into a few run-ins with the police, put a couple of scratches on my background. But I'm still...I've maintained a job. So, I just work and, you know, support my kids."*
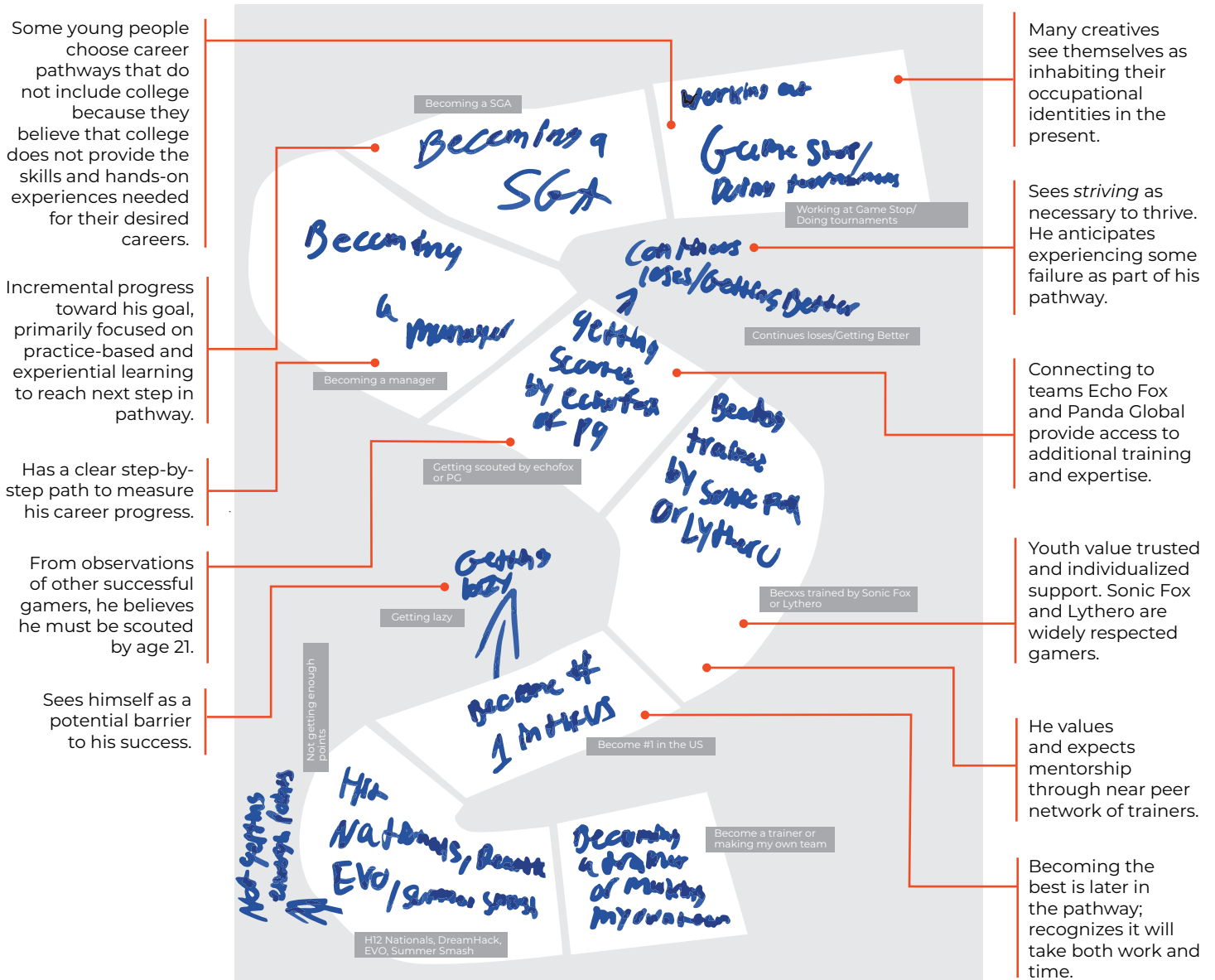>
> — CHICAGO, IL, BLACK FEMALE, 26–29, HIGHER INCOME

FIGURE 27.

1

Know what they want to do, and have a good idea of the steps to take to get there

"...I'm starting at now working at GameStop and doing local tournaments and streaming...Basically, I want to be scouted by two of the biggest eSport teams. And then, I want to be trained by their top players. And then, I want to become number one in the U.S. in whatever game I decide to play. Then, I want to hit nationals and the rest of the biggest gaming tournaments of the year. And then, I want to become a trainer for the team that I decide to be on. Or I want to become a manager of my own."

—NEW YORK, NY, BLACK MALE, AGE 18–21, LOWER INCOME

Some young people choose career pathways that do not include college because they believe that college does not provide the skills and hands-on experiences needed for their desired careers.

Incremental progress toward his goal, primarily focused on practice-based and experiential learning to reach next step in pathway.

Has a clear step-by-step path to measure his career progress.

From observations of other successful gamers, he believes he must be scouted by age 21.

Sees himself as a potential barrier to his success.

Many creatives see themselves as inhabiting their occupational identities in the present.

Sees *striving* as necessary to thrive. He anticipates experiencing some failure as part of his pathway.

Connecting to teams Echo Fox and Panda Global provide access to additional training and expertise.

Youth value trusted and individualized support. Sonic Fox and Lythero are widely respected gamers.

He values and expects mentorship through near peer network of trainers.

Becoming the best is later in the pathway; recognizes it will take both work and time.

He is 19 years old and currently works as a sales associate at GameStop. He has been inspired and motivated by his roommate, an important source of social capital for him. In a few months he hopes to move up to a senior sales position and later to a manager position. While working at GameStop, he is playing local tournaments and streaming his games. He hopes that, by the time he turns 21, he will be scouted by one of the teams he respects (Echo Fox or Panda Global). Once he is working with a team, he wants to train under his role models, Sonic Fox or Lythero, while continuing to compete. With this individual training, he will begin to specialize in a specific game, and, with practice, he will become the number one player in the U.S. and compete at DreamHack, Evo, or Summerslam (gaming competitions). Ultimately, he hopes to become a trainer or manage a team of his own. After he is scouted by a major team, he feels the remainder of his pathway and his career goal may take 20 years to achieve.

He knows what he wants to do, and he has put himself on a pathway that includes a series of incremental and interconnected steps that he believes will prepare him for success in his chosen profession.

Young people understand the value of education through the lens of their own experience

Many believe college is 'worth it'

As young people determine their next steps after high school, they assess and weigh the benefits and costs of post-secondary education as it relates to their occupational and broader life goals. Thinking about the potential benefits and potential downsides of going to college, more than four times as many young people surveyed believe going to college is or would be personally worth it (72%), than those who do not believe going to college is worth it (16%). While Black, white, and Hispanic young people generally share this view, the differences by gender are striking. For example, 78 percent of Black females think college is worth it, compared to 64 percent of Black males. Similar patterns emerge among Hispanic females (78%) and Hispanic males (68%), and among white females (78%) and white males (70%).

Income plays a significant role here as well. Eighty-five percent (85%) of respondents from households with higher incomes believe college is worth it, compared to 75 percent among respondents from households with middle incomes and 64 percent of respondents from households with lower incomes.

Strong majorities view college as extremely or very valuable at preparing them for a career with skills, knowledge, or experiences (73%), as well as helping them identify their strengths and weaknesses (71%), exposing them to new kinds of people or ideas (70%), helping them find a job or career (69%), and encouraging them to think creatively (69%).

Black, white, and Hispanic young people generally agree on the value of college, although Black young people (67%)—and Black males in particular (63%)—are significantly less likely than white young people (79%) or Hispanic young people (72%) to see college as extremely or very valuable at preparing them for a career with skills, knowledge, or experiences.

More young people (74%) know someone who went to college and who was happy with that decision than know someone who went to college and who regretted that decision (49%). However, approximately the same proportion of young people (61%) know someone who decided not to go to college and who was happy with that decision as the proportion who know someone who decided not to go to college and who regretted that decision (60%).

FIGURE 28: COLLEGE

Do you know people who have decided to go to college and are happy with that decision?

Racial breakdown **BLACK** **HISPANIC** **WHITE**

Overall: 74%

Yes
FEMALE: 72, 74, 85
MALE: 66, 73, 77

15%

No
FEMALE: 9, 15, 16
MALE: 15, 19

11%

Unsure
FEMALE: 5, 9, 13
MALE: 8, 13
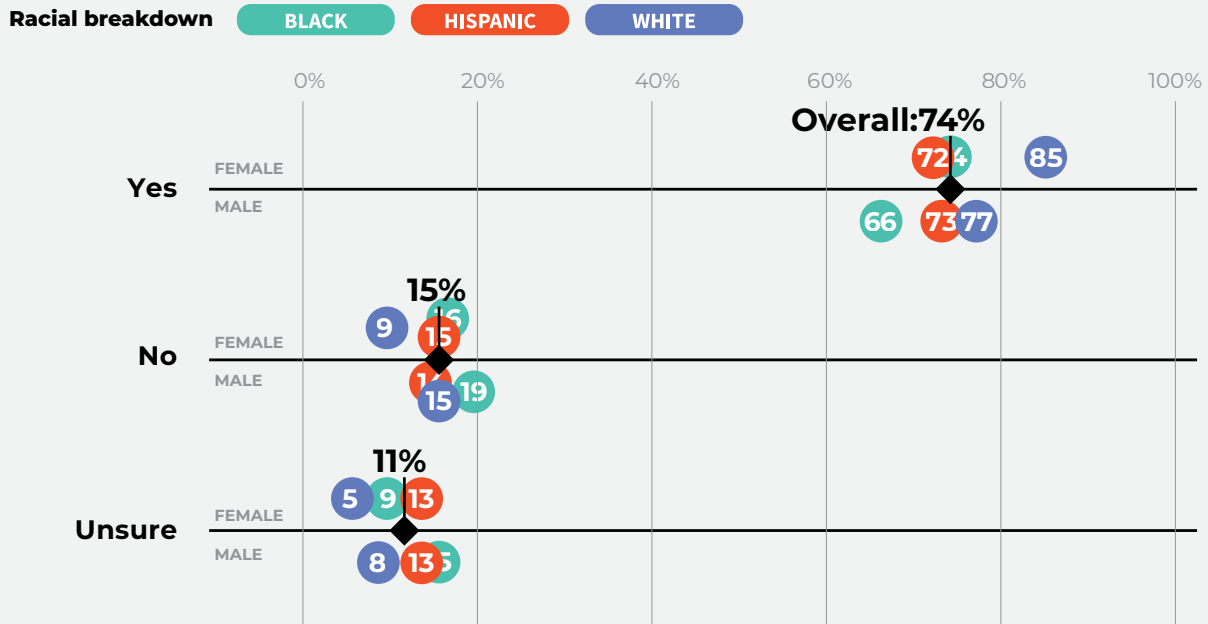
FIGURE 29: COLLEGE

Do you know people who have decided to go to college and regret that decision?

Racial breakdown **BLACK** **HISPANIC** **WHITE**

Overall: 49%

Yes
FEMALE: 51, 54, 57
MALE: 46, 51

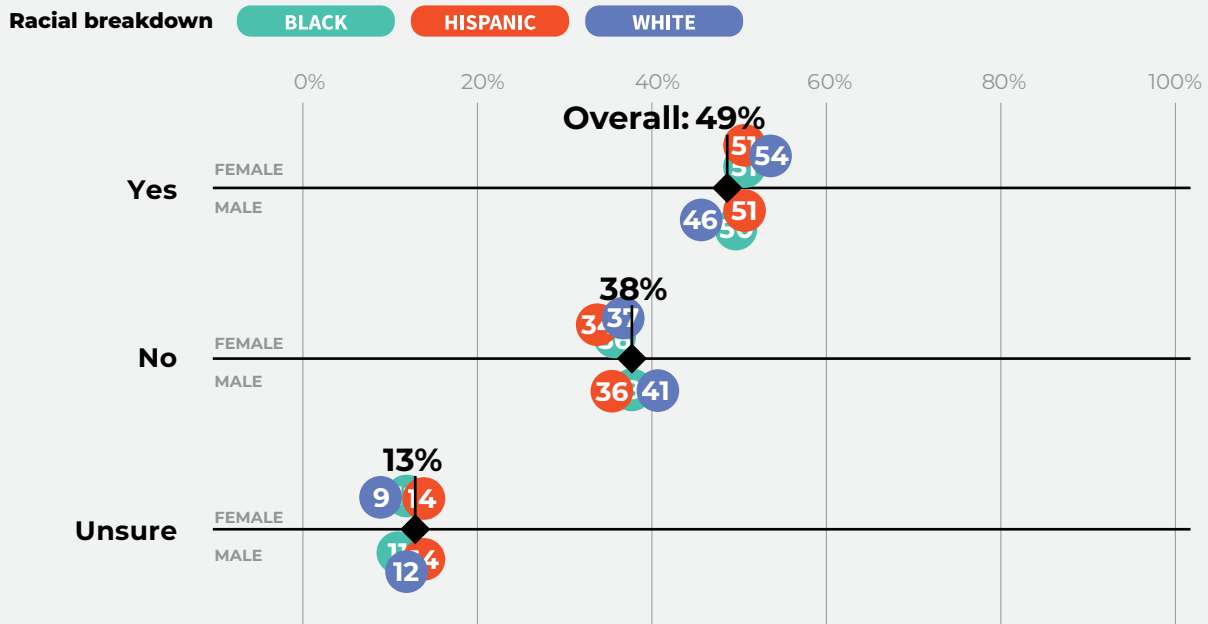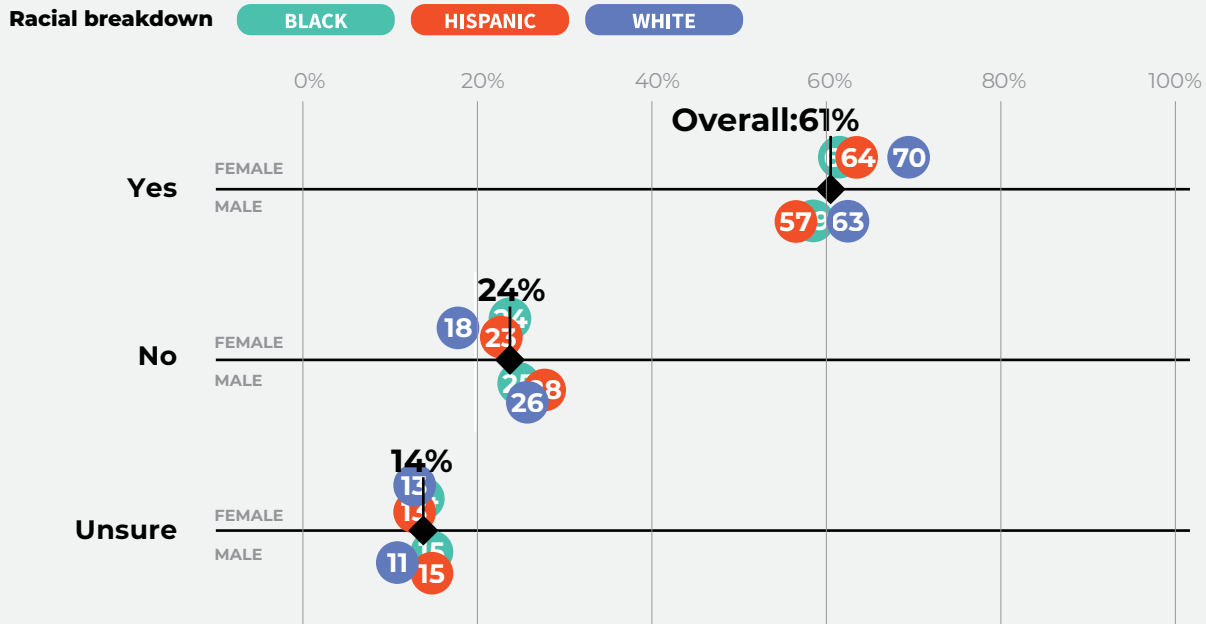**38%**

No
FEMALE: 31, 37
MALE: 36, 41

13%

Unsure
FEMALE: 9, 14
MALE: 12, 14

FIGURE 30: COLLEGE

Do you know people who have decided NOT to go to college and are happy about that decision?

Racial breakdown: BLACK · HISPANIC · WHITE

Overall: 61%

Yes — FEMALE: 64, 70 · MALE: 57, 59, 63

No — 24% — FEMALE: 18, 24, 23 · MALE: 27, 28, 26

Unsure — 14% — FEMALE: 13, 15, 13 · MALE: 11, 15, 15

These patterns reflect what youth shared in the focus group discussions, in which they expressed a mix of views on the value of attending college and a sense of the need to weigh the costs against the potential benefits.

A stronger connection between college and career makes a college education more valuable to young people in their efforts to try on the future. Participants perceive college to be more rewarding than high school and to be more worth their time, primarily because they can more easily connect their college experiences to the future life they desire to obtain.

> *"You are actually working towards a profession in college instead of high school."*
>
> — CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

> *"College is something that I feel like to get a career you have to go to college. College, you learn about something specifically for that career."*
>
> — PUEBLO, CO, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"Finding connections on my path like we talked about internships. We said going to college is always a good idea to do internships when you can because when you graduate college sometimes that can turn into a job for you."*
>
> — OAKLAND, CA, BLACK FEMALE, 16–18, MIXED INCOME

For young people who upon leaving high school remain unsure about the future life they want to have, college provides a time and space for them to try on the future and explore career options. Younger participants, especially, view college as a place where everything will come together and where they will get a clearer understanding of the career they want to pursue and the skills they need to achieve it.

> *"[They will help me narrow it down...] that is how I narrow it down because before it was, 'Oh, maybe I just want to be a cop.' But when I went into it, that is when it opened my eyes to more. The forensic science interests me, and part of that being homicide detective. From there,*

I have always been interested in the FBI, so meeting them gave me an insight. I know what I need to expect, and I know to work hard. Narrowing down my options is part of that, and after that, just study and work hard until I get to what I really want to do."

"The college I'm applying to, for biomedical engineering they have the direct course, but then they also have, the way they work it is a little bit weird. They have an extra, separate course every year that you can take that you're required to fill with electives or other courses. You can explore other interests, like if you want to shift to a similar major, or if you want to shift to something else completely. Like I am also interested in political activism, so I might take a few courses involved with that."

Nonetheless, many young people also have doubts about the value of college when trying on their future. While these young people assume going to college will help them get a good career, many do not know how it will help them develop skills and knowledge for such a career. As young people get older, they have more varied perceptions of college, including believing that they can be successful without a college degree. Many report knowing someone who decided not to go to college and who was happy with that decision.

"Even if you get a degree, sometimes they end up being worthless, so I feel it is going to be harder for all of us to break into any industry if we want to have a career...A lot of us are trying to go toward the same thing. Some of us want to be like our parents and try to get into that industry, and we still have the older generations that are occupying those industries, so it is virtually impossible."

"In today's world, a bachelor's isn't going to get you anywhere."

"Yeah, I went to...Washington State University...It was a waste of time...College is a waste of time, period...I was in a fraternity, too, and stuff, but, I mean, you don't have to go to college to get like get a career or whatever...Like, I got a full ride six to eight years. I went two, and, yeah, no matter what, you still come out with student debt."

"...It is going to be something that you are going to do for the rest of your life, so you got to love it...I know a lot of people that don't go to college. Rich right now...Yeah, they turned a hobby into a career. They didn't need no school for that. Any little thing that you love doing, your hobby, that can make you a millionaire one day."

The cost of college adds to the doubt young people have over whether college will be a worthwhile investment in helping them try on the future and choose a career pathway that will help them attain the future life they desire. Thirty three percent of survey respondents reported that they" are extremely concerned about college debt, while 22 percent are very concerned, and 20 percent are somewhat concerned. Among those who are attending college (or who have already attended college), 60 percent feel very weighed down by student debt. Nearly a third (29%) report feeling weighed down a huge amount, with another 32 percent saying they feel weighed down a fair amount. Notably, only 15 percent of college attendees do not feel weighed down by student debt at all.

To offset costs, young people focus on opportunities to reduce the financial burden of college while still in high school. Many participants who did take the risk of becoming indebted to attend college say they did not know enough about how college debt would impact their future lives.

How much do you personally feel weighed down by student debt?

Racial breakdown `BLACK` `HISPANIC` `WHITE`
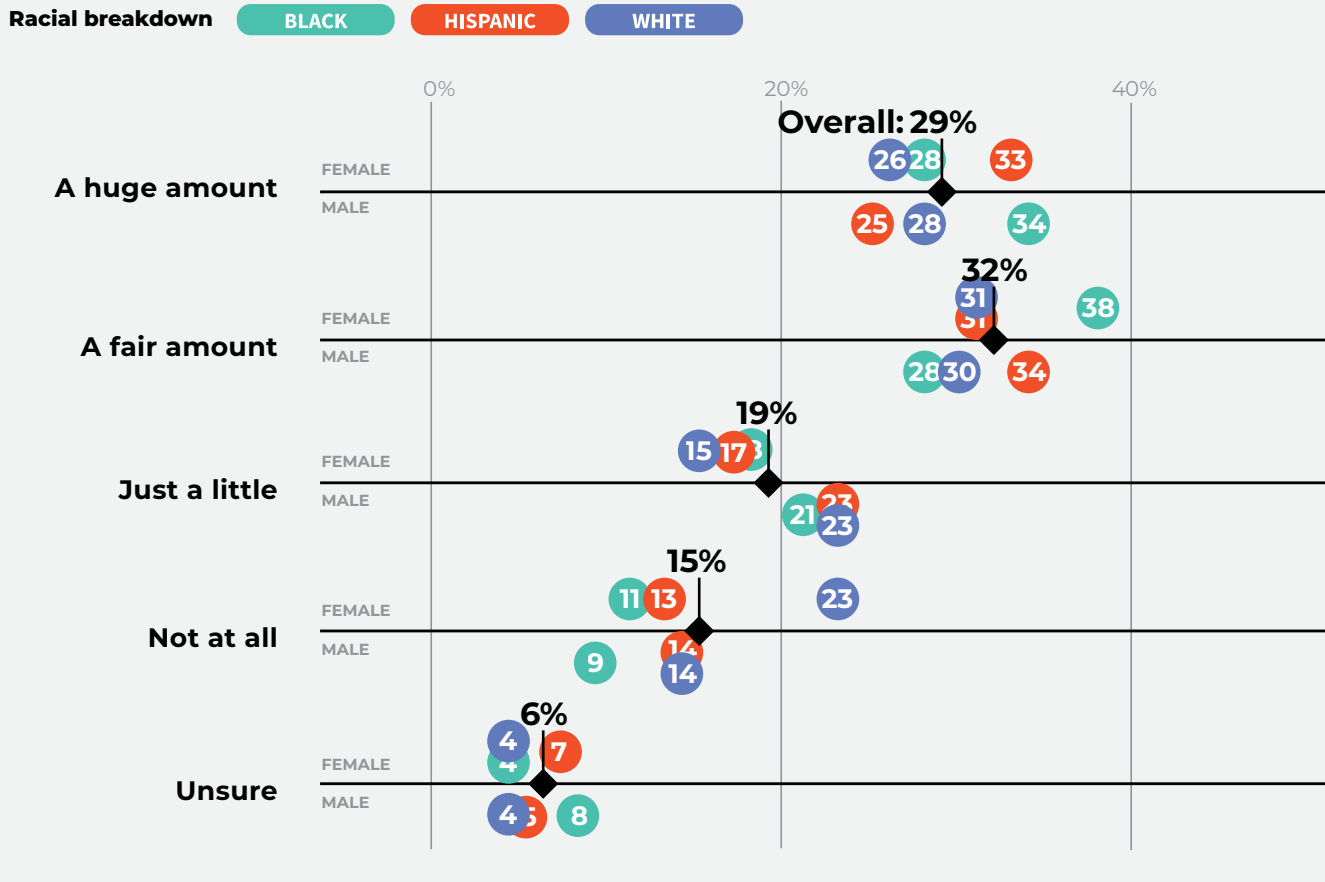
"It goes back to being expensive. You can't go three years into college and not know what you want to major in because it is going to be expensive in the long run."

— BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"I can't go get a loan on a house right now because I have student loans to take care of."

— BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20, LOWER INCOME

Some prioritize non-college pathways

Some young people find value in choosing career pathways that do not include college because they believe that college does not provide the skills and hands-on experiences needed for their desired careers. In focus groups, trade and technical skills came up as valuable alternate routes and spaces to learn real-world, hands-on, marketable skills.

"You don't have to have a career by just going to college. You can go to a technical school; you can go to beauty school. That is what kind of path I mean. If you are going to go to college, if you are going to be [an] electrician, if you are going to be a plumber, if you are going to be a hairdresser—that is what path I mean."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"I have cousins that are my age. Or they're two years older than me now, actually. But they went straight into a trade. And they love what they do, and they make really good money. They have a lot of money, but they came out debt free."

— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

Older youth have more nuanced pathways

Notably, as young people accumulate more life experiences and are exposed to a broader diversity of types of people, jobs, and careers, their career pathways seem to be more nuanced and detailed than those of the youngest research participants.

Some parents feel ill-prepared to support children on their pathways

Adults demonstrate various degrees of confidence in both their children's abilities to meet their goals and their own ability to support them. Many parents and guardians found the pathways exercise as an opportunity to reassess their own conversations with their children. Some also expressed gratitude at being able to learn how their adult peers are navigating issues related to their children making education and work decisions.

In the lower-income groups, many parents describe themselves as lacking a career and instead just working jobs. They view career as aspirational for their children, yet unattainable for themselves. This tension influences the support and guidance they offer and are able to offer their children.

Information gaps are also commonly observed among parents, many of whom feel ill-equipped or do not fully understand the academic steps their children must take to reach their goals.

> *"She's got two scholarships. I don't know. I never went to college. I don't understand. I dropped out...kind of lead her and I am blind. I am reading everything, and I paid her undergraduate fee, made sure she did this. I go up and I talk to the school, but it is like they are talking gibberish at me. I can't help her with her homework."*
>
> — BELLE GLADE, FL, WHITE PARENT/GUARDIAN, LOWER INCOME.

Adult influencers often see young people from households with lower income's potential as underestimated

Among some adult influencers, there is a feeling that young people's own agency and ability to assess information and make choices for themselves is often underappreciated and undervalued. They say that, contrary to the perception that young people from households with lower incomes are without resources, most of the young people they know arrive at school, organizational programs, and/or work with skills honed and resources developed in the context of their everyday lives.

> *"I think they're survivors, right. Like they have seen a lot, experienced a lot, and they're still standing. They know that if there's not food coming in, they know how to go out and find a way to make money like to get food on the table, right...if there's nothing coming through the door that's going to be able to keep the lights on, and [they've] got to find a way to go out and get it. [they're] going to find a way to go out and get it."*
>
> — NEW ORLEANS, LA, BLACK ADULT INFLUENCER

Parents and guardians feel connected by their experience raising and caring for young people

Many parents and guardians appreciate the opportunity to share with one another in the context of the group discussions and learn from one another's experiences. A feeling of camaraderie emerged during many of the discussions.

> *"This was a great discussion. This is like a revival. It's like parental revival."*
>
> — NEW YORK, NY, BLACK PARENT/GUARDIAN, LOWER INCOME

> *"After this conversation, I think I will be finding out more about what the steps are and what it takes to get to the career that my kids want."*
>
> — BELLE GLADE, FL, WHITE PARENT/GUARDIAN, LOWER INCOME

Examples of completed adult pathways worksheets follow. The worksheets have been annotated with insights and transcribed (when necessary) to enhance readability.

FIGURE 32.

In the quote and pathway below, a parent describes not fully understanding the academic steps their children must take to reach their goals.
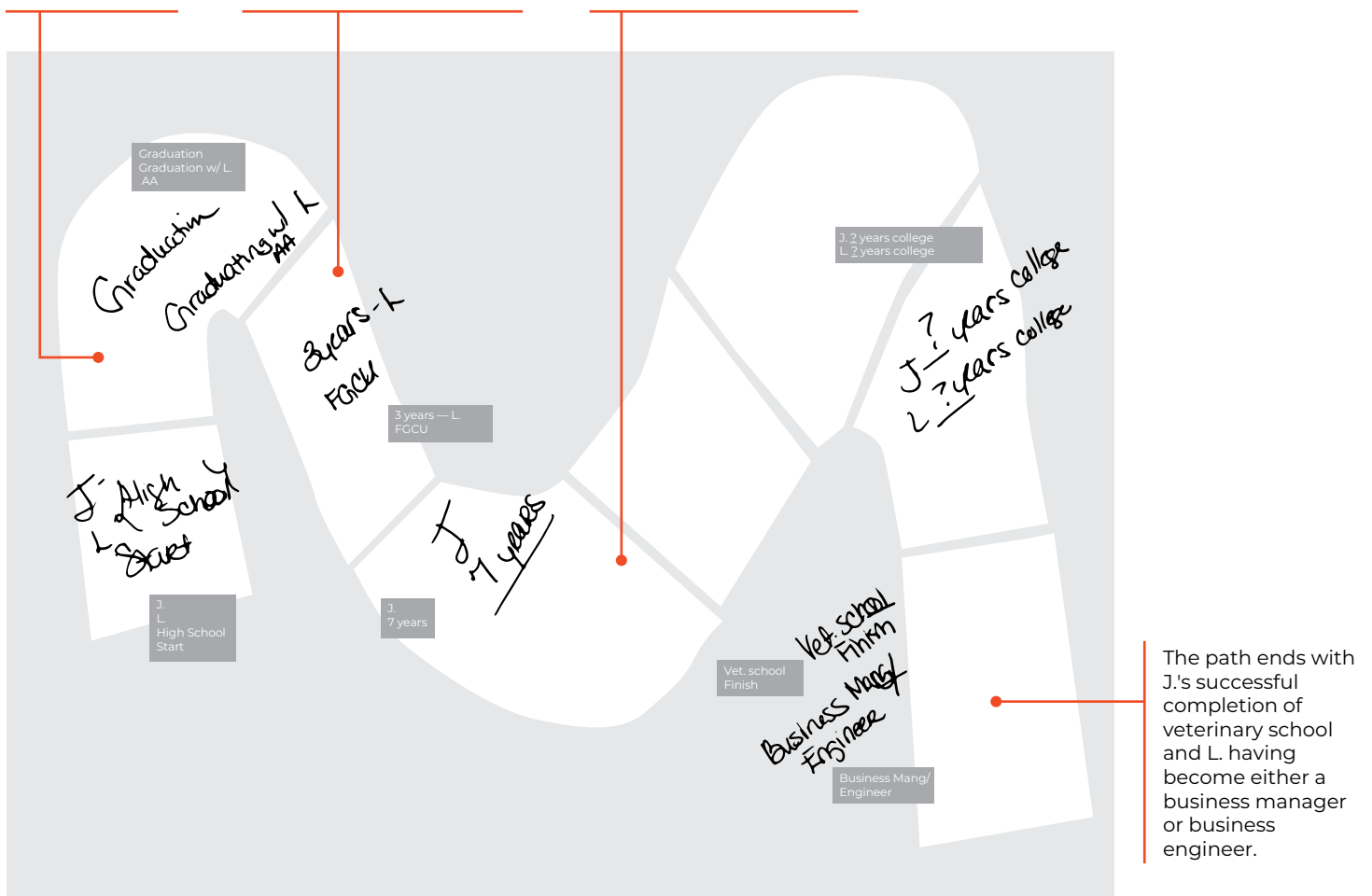
"My stepdaughter wants to go to vet school. I'm not sure how long that takes. I think she said it would be seven years. My son wants to go to school for management or business engineer. I'm not sure how long that takes either."

— BELLE GLADE, FL, WHITE PARENT/GUARDIAN, LOWER INCOME

L. is enrolled in a program that will enable him to graduate HS with his associate's degree.

L. is on schedule to graduate in 3 years because he has already completed his AA in step 2. Additionally, the participant mentions that L. will receive a 3 year scholarship to FGCU.

J. has expressed a desire to go to veterinary school. While the participant (parent) is unfamiliar with how long this will take, J. says it will take 7 years.

The path ends with J.'s successful completion of veterinary school and L. having become either a business manager or business engineer.

Parent/Guardian has four children ages 13-17, some of whom are stepchildren. She works part-time as a florist and part-time as a substitute teacher at a Christian school. During the focus group, she describes the pathways of her two eldest children, J. and L, who are high school seniors. J. has expressed interest in attending veterinary sch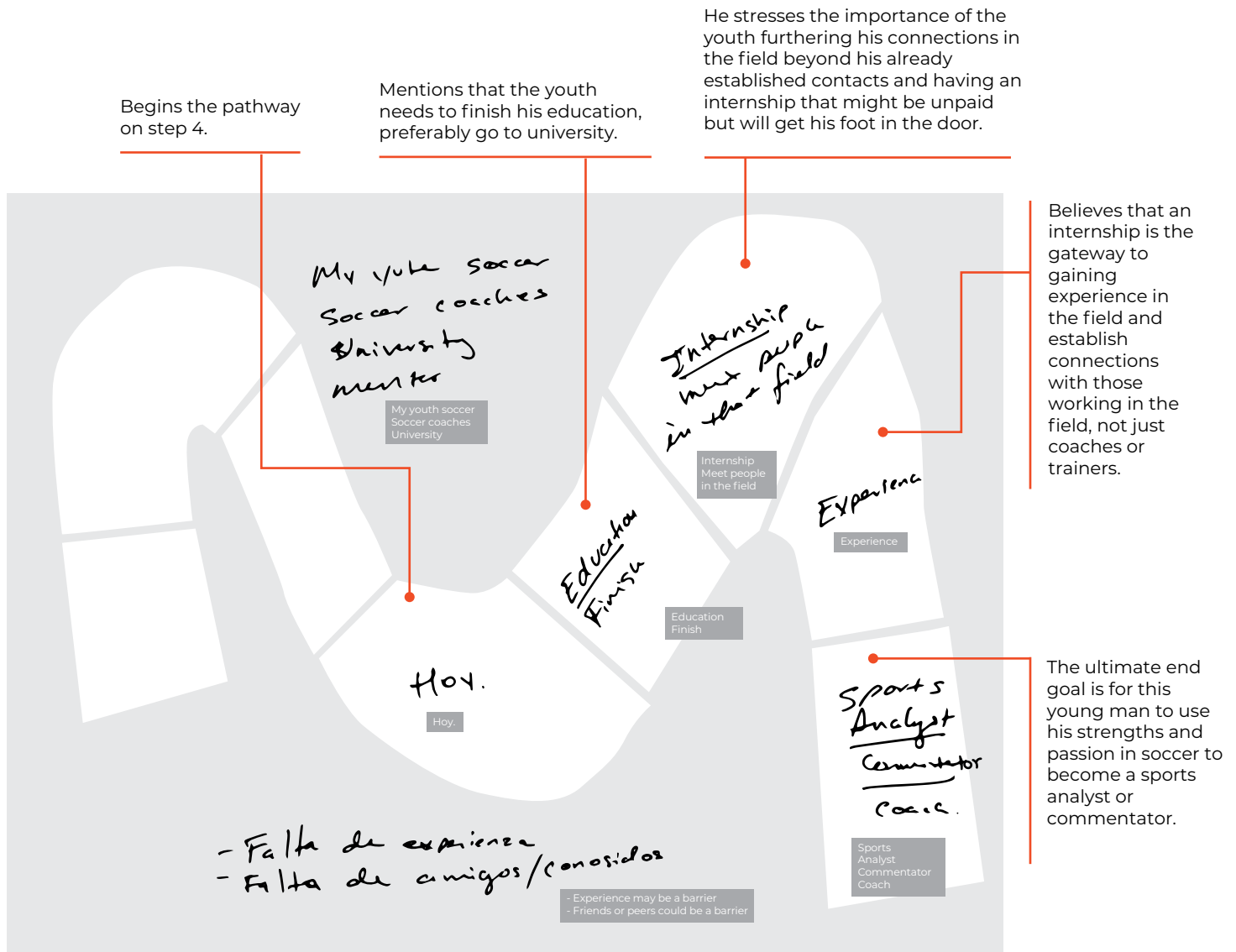ool and L. would like to be either a business manager or business engineer. The parent participant says she knows little about the time or steps required to achieve these career goals. She worries that both children have the unrealistic expectation that they will not have to get a [side] job because they are going to college, and states that she and her husband will not be paying for everything.

FIGURE 33.

In the quote and pathway below an adult influencer describes one young person's strengths and potential.

"He loves to talk. He is really good at finding information. He can tell me play by play what happened in a particular game. Even if he didn't see it, he can find the information, find the statistics. He knows how to find statistics for things like that. At school he is not so smart, but he knows. He has very good knowledge of what a sports analyst or a sports commentator does...He needs his education. He has to go to the university. He needs an internship."

— OAKLAND, CA, HISPANIC ADULT INFLUENCER, LOWER INCOME

Begins the pathway on step 4.

Mentions that the youth needs to finish his education, preferably go to university.

He stresses the importance of the youth furthering his connections in the field beyond his already established contacts and having an internship that might be unpaid but will get his foot in the door.

Believes that an internship is the gateway to gaining experience in the field and establish connections with those working in the field, not just coaches or trainers.

The ultimate end goal is for this young man to use his strengths and passion in soccer to become a sports analyst or commentator.

Adult influencer works with youth in an after-school program geared towards getting youth into universities or earning scholarships and is also a volunteer soccer coach for boys ranging from 13-17 years old. He describes a youth who, despite not being academically inclined in the classroom, displays an immense acuity in sports, specifically sports analysis. Influencer understands the value of internships and mentors who are in the field as ways to build social capital especially for youth who don't have professional connections through friends or family. In general, he worries that low-income youth don't have the mindset to prioritize long term goals since they don't always have emotional support or informed guidance at home to invest in a stable career.

For some young people geography plays a critical role in career pathways

Young people of every socio-economic background relate differently to the places in which they live and grow up. While some young people wish to leave their place of origin as soon as possible, others see themselves as leaving for a period and returning, and still others see themselves as remaining in a specific community for the duration of their working lives. Young people in urban areas are no less likely to want to stay or leave than those in rural areas.

For some young people, geography can be an important factor in determining the career pathways they choose and feel able to pursue. Some young people, feeling tied to a geographic location or community, constrain their career aspirations or pathways to enable them to stay close to home or in familiar settings. Young people experience this constraint in the context of culture, safety, and family.

Culture is an important feature of geography for young people

Some young people describe their connection to a place in cultural terms, where they feel by staying in (or in some cases moving to) a specific location, they will remain more grounded and connected to their own cultural identity. This sentiment is particularly observed among young people who grow up in the southern part of the United States—where many participants cite being Southern as an important aspect of their identities. This positive connection to the cultural experience and narrative of place was also strongly observed among some participants in Atlanta and New Orleans.

> *"My whole family is from here, and I know I want a family in the future. I think this is a great city to raise a family in because it has everything convenient, but it also has the suburbs that are nice, relaxing, and safe. It also is the chocolate city. I thought all of America was like the city. I did not realize most of America was white when I was a kid. I am comfortable; I like that, and I want my children to have that also growing up."*
>
> — ATLANTA, GA, BLACK FEMALE, 16–18, MIXED INCOME

> *"I just love Atlanta...I am from California. I tell my mom all the time I can't imagine living anywhere else. And just looking at how many people want to be here; it is just amazing. Business-wise there is a lot of Black entrepreneurship in Atlanta. I just love Atlanta for a whole bunch of different reasons."*
>
> — ATLANTA, GA, BLACK FEMALE, 16–18, MIXED INCOME

Young people value connection to family and community

Some youth from households with lower incomes determine the boundaries of occupational exploration in terms of whether they will be able to remain connected to family and community. In some cases, young people characterize this connection as an ability to fulfill familial obligations or expectations, while others describe the sense of belonging and place that comes with remaining closer to home. For some young people, this idea manifests as a desire or an obligation to stay at home to care for younger siblings, for others it is a need to contribute financially to the family, and for still others it is a desire to see parents and family members more frequently.

> *"I guess my parents [are most important people in my life]. I guess they've been always in my life, so I really cherish them. They're always there for me when I need them. So, I just wanna give back to them. Hopefully, I can find my mom a better place to live in."*
>
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, MALE, 18–22, BUILD STUDENT

> *"Definitely go back to my old neighborhood and build stuff, build stuff; build a community center over there. The people that is in need and give back to them; administer to the kids over there, so they know it is possible."*
>
> — ATLANTA, GA, BLACK MALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

Safety is an important factor in determining career goals and pathways for Black males

Some young Black males in this research described personal safety as one part of their occupational decision making. These young men are more likely to prioritize moving away from urban settings in which they and their peers have experienced or expect to experience violence, incarceration, or early death. For these youth, the cities where they have grown up are perceived as problematic and sometimes dangerous, and they believe that in order to thrive they must leave home and pursue their life somewhere else. These youth describe the most dramatic geographic changes over their lives, including relocating from more urban to more rural settings, changing coasts, and living internationally. In many instances, these youth have less well-defined pathways to get to their goals.

"I've witnessed that just like growing up. I have peers who I've lost. I've lost like some friends, and their family, like they have to prolong their funeral for a while until they was able to raise enough funds to be able to bury them. And so, yeah, I just, I really thought about that at a young age, like, man, I want to be able to make sure that the next generation of mes are straight, you know. So, leaving something behind for them is very important."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"I just feel like nobody, not nobody, but not many people, like, if you're better than somebody else, they just want to find a way to bring you down. And, like, when I, well, recently, I went... during Spring Break. And, like, here, if you're just outside, you can get mugged...but there, in North Carolina, when I went there, like, everybody was just, like, it was...it was more like a place you wanted to be. Like, it didn't make you feel like you got to watch your back all the time. It made me feel more safe, I don't know, more comfortable."

— BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

Young people see a variety of internal and external challenges

When probed to think about the challenges or barriers that might impede progress towards their goals, young people say they are primarily concerned with challenges related to their personal character and/or inherent disposition. These descriptions include, but are not limited to, what they already perceive as character flaws or weaknesses that they feel they must overcome in order to succeed.

"Confidence and self-esteem, not believing in one's self. People around me that have helped me before. Friends, siblings, my mom and dad, school staff. We have a therapist at school."

— DOWNEY, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 16–18, MIXED INCOME

"I'm not good at, like, paperwork...procrastinated and stuff like that."

— NEW ORLEANS, LA, WHITE MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"I think I am shy, and it gets in the way. I don't like participating in conversation. Sorry. I am not a very good leader to do that stuff, and I think that is why. Because I am not confident in what I say."

— PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"Procrastination and laziness for sure! Self-discipline is hard to do."

— ONLINE, BLACK FEMALE, 15–21, LOWER INCOME

In focus groups, young people were asked to write down the types of challenges or barriers that might get in the way of them achieving their goals. Below are some of the words young people wrote, organized thematically into categories.

Potential Challenges or Barriers Young People in Focus Groups Said They May Face in Their Pathway to Their Goals.

Motivation

- Lack of motivation
- Slacking
- Stress
- Depression
- Procrastination
- Losing focus
- Self-doubt
- Being lazy
- Giving up

Doubt and anxiety

- Anxiety
- Fear of failure
- Imposter syndrome
- Mental health
- Lack of clarity/certainty
- "Inner demons"
- "Being hard on myself"
- Feel alone

Peer relationships

- Girls/guys
- Fake or "toxic" friends
- Heartbreak
- "Bad influences"
- "Social life"
- Peer pressure
- Bad coworkers
- "People getting in my head and telling me I won't become anything"

Family relationships

- "Maintaining family with career"
- Being a parent/raising children
- Divorce
- Child support/providing for kids
- Lack of support
- Isolation "On my own, away from family"
- "Not finding husband soon enough"
- Relating to "Baby mama"
- "Family doubting me"

Challenges in starting a business

- Raising capital to start a business
- Competition from similar businesses
- Having a worthwhile idea, being first to market
- Hiring and firing the right people

Grades/School Performance

- Not finishing school
- Failing classes/bad grades
- Dropping out or flunking out
- School is too hard
- Not turning in assignments
- Not graduating high school or college
- Not studying enough

Drugs and alcohol

- Partying
- Drugs and alcohol

Not getting into (desired) college, school, military

- Rejection
- "Not getting into nursing school"
- "Not getting into good law school"

TABLE 4. (CONTINUED)

Money

- Poor money management
- Insufficient funds
- Low pay
- Debt (especially student debt)
- Not getting loans
- Poor credit
- Standardized tests

Not getting (desired) job

- Rejection
- Not enough openings
- Work history
- Lack of network/connections
- Not social enough to develop networks
- Lack of job openings
- "Bad" or low-paying jobs

Sickness, injury, violence or death (personal or others)

- Self
- Child or family
- Guns: "Stray bullets don't have a name"
- Health emergencies
- "Try not to die"
- Accidents or emergencies
- "Losing people I love"
- Police

Unable to stand out in field

- "Book not good enough"
- "Not getting golf scholarship"
- "People not liking my music"
- Lack of creativity/ingenuity
- "Dreaming small"

Race/racism

- Being African American
- "White man holding me back"
- "Idiots thinking I'm in a gang just because I'm Latino wearing a red bandana."
- "Society doesn't value a Black woman, and we have to deal with a lot of struggles even down to our natural hair texture."
- "The first strike against me getting to climb the corporate ladder is my color. I may have the same qualifications as a person of a different race but the other person will be chosen because of my color."

Gender discrimination/misogyny

- "Sexism and pay gaps because society thinks women aren't as strong as we really are."
- "We aren't taken as seriously and our abilities are downplayed."
- "Males dominate the future I want. Everyone thinks and assumes male are dominant and are smart with math and sciences, and look past females in general."

In addition, young people worry about what they perceive to be circumstances or people external to themselves. This concern includes the impact of family obligations or illness on one's career pathways, external circumstances such as running out of money, and family illness and/or death.

> *"Some of the barriers I foresee have a lot to do with being a working mom. It can be difficult to balance being a devoted mother and wanting to excel in your career because, in my opinion, the role of a mother always wins out as the priority."*
>
> — ONLINE, WHITE FEMALE, 26–29, MIXED INCOME

"My mom has a heart condition. What if along the way she needs surgery? I can't just say, 'oh I can't be there for you. I have to go to school.' I am always there for her. I wouldn't want anything bad happening to her."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"When it comes to my illness, I am technically terminally ill when it comes to—I have a disorder called gastroparesis. My stomach is paralyzed, so that has me in the hospital a whole lot getting feeding tubes put in every six months, that sort of thing."

— PUEBLO, CO, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"Taxes, Uncle Sam, health, car breaks down, baby momma, and child support. I put those two at the end because you said maybe. It is not that I don't plan on it, but it is life."

— PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Young people are also concerned with the impact of systems or institutions on their abilities to reach their goals. Here, young people describe fear of their own premature death at the hands of the police or as a result of neighborhood violence.

"The [police] can ruin a life."

— ATLANTA, GA, BLACK MALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

"Where I grew up, you know what I'm saying, I was seeing people get killed if I was right outside my crib, since I was like four or five maybe, one of those. You know what I'm saying? Seeing the police draw the mark, outline marks of the dude, you can, and then a couple hours later, life just goes on like it ain't nothing. Go back outside and play."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

Finally, a minority of young people are concerned with seemingly random occurrences such as the death of a loved one, natural disasters, and world politics.

"And then I said, like, if the government crashes, which I don't know if you follow the current news, but they're about, I think Donald Trump just said something about it. But none of them are ever very long, but there could potentially be one that is long...Yeah, that's what I meant, crashes, shutdown."

— YAKIMA, WA, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Personal, cultural, and familial identities are not in and of themselves understood to be a barrier to meeting educational or career goals. However, when asked to reflect on their race, ethnic, and gender identities in the context of education and the workplace, for some, their initial positivity and optimism changes as they anticipate workplaces and a broader society that dismiss, hold back, or tokenize them based on their racial and ethnic identity.

Discrimination exists, but young people feel it can be overcome
Many Black and Hispanic young people seem resigned to the existence of racism and other forms of prejudice in the workplace, yet they believe they will succeed regardless.

"Like, I feel like anything that, like, obviously, like, there will be, like, people that will try to hold you back. But, like, at the end of the day, you still got to put in that work. Yeah, he's white. He's probably going to get the job before you, but what are you going to do about it? Like, are you just going, okay, I'm not going to do it then? You got to work harder. I think you definitely got to work harder as a Black man or a woman or a woman in general just to like get your spot because that's just the way it is right now."

— NEW YORK, NY, BLACK MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"Obviously [for child development work] you have to reach out to me and stuff, but to help them or for their kids I have to reach out to them as well. I feel if I get a family that is completely white, they will see I am Mexican. My last name will give it away. Maybe they will be like no. I can see that happening...Because I will be going to their house. There is a lot of trust going to their house."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Some Hispanic and Black young people expect to have to code switch, that is, to suppress or change aspects of how they talk or appear, in order to thrive in mostly white work environments.

[On code-switching] "I mean you don't have to, but, like, if you don't then there is this perception of you. It is automatically a negative."

— OAKLAND, CA, HISPANIC MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"[I consider] the way I talk [white] sometimes. [I put on] my white voice [for customer service] [laughter]."

— BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Some Black young adults ages 26-29 describe the emotional and psychological stress that results from *striving* in predominantly white education, social, and work settings.

[Participant 1] "Oh, I can tell you a lot. I just feel like with the career that I'm in you have to go and be different, other than yourself, in order to sort of, like, fit into the work and just kind of pass the day, even though you're not putting in your full Black self."

[Moderator] "Okay. What does that feel like?"

[Participant 1] "It's frustrating, and it's a little bit limiting...You just sort of feel like, if you can't be yourself, you're working extra hard to be something else, so, but, you know."

[Participant 2] "I[t] feels like...work overtime."

— CONVERSATION IN CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MIXED–GENDER, 26–29, MIXED INCOME

"I go through it myself, like, since gentrification and everything. In certain areas that I used to blend in, now I am standing out. I am thinking I am going to [wear a] button up [shirt] and things, and it don't matter. And going in stores, especially in Berkeley, oh man, and just the way the treatment and just being on BART you will scoot over and nobody sits next to you so now you feel in the way. Somebody genuinely asks me something like do you need help? I am [mad]. Don't talk to me. It is the things they [young people] have to deal with on the way; it is kind of rough and not to have attitude but talk about ways to cope with it."

— OAKLAND, CA, BLACK ADULT INFLUENCER, LOWER INCOME

Some Black parents prepare their children—encouraging them to make trade-offs

Some Black parents and guardians describe conversations with their children in which they warn them of the impossibility of being your full self at work. Making decisions about how much of themselves to share with coworkers or in a work environment is described as necessary to *thriving* in the workplace. As parents describe the guidance or advice that they give their children about how to walk through the world of work with a specific racial or ethnic identity, it is often deeply informed by their own life experiences in the workplace.

"[My daughter will say] my name is Alexandria and my name is Michelle. Alexe gets the checks, so she is a different person. Michelle is a different person, so when you come back home and when you hit them streets you need to be Michelle. Alexe gets the checks...she has a great Disney voice because I taught her well. You have to do that in this world in the workplace. It is like you are two individuals...I do it every day in my life. For me, it is normal. It is normal now."

— OAKLAND, CA, BLACK PARENT/GUARDIAN, HIGHER INCOME

"For me, it is tuning in. How far am I going to go? I know who I am, but I am trying to instill it in my son that he knows who he is. It is a balance. How much do I want to give up to get to where I want to go, and how much do I feel comfortable giving up to get to where I want to go? If you are comfortable with that, then look at it as a means to an end. Don't worry about what the next person is always thinking all the time and know who you are and know who your real friends and family are...Just like what we've been talking about, having to be on or adjust the way you carry yourself based on your environment."

— OAKLAND, CA, BLACK PARENT/GUARDIAN, HIGHER INCOME

Young people are aware of trends to advance racial and ethnic diversity

Young people of all races are attentive to changes in education and professional hiring practices that aim to diversify campuses and workplaces by recruiting more Black and Hispanic candidates and women.

"I agree, like, especially getting into universities and scholarships, being Hispanic is a plus. And I feel like sometimes when you look into careers that are mostly Caucasian, sometimes it can be like a set down [set you apart] like, you know?"

— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

Some Black and Hispanic young people see the increased availability of scholarships and work opportunities for themselves as evidence that diversity, and by extension their racial and ethnic identities, are valued by educational institutions and employers.

"I mean, because Lockheed Martin, they have diversity. They actually advertise it. So, I mean, that's [discrimination in the workplace] not really something I have to worry about...because they advertise diversity in their company."

— BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

Hispanic young people are more likely to view this increased focus on diversity as exclusively good or beneficial, while Black youth are more likely to express worry about being effectively tokenized by a company's interest in diversifying its staff.

"They want you to be there. And they'll show you off for as long as they need to, to not look like an all-white company."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

"I feel like it'll help because right now, they're trying to, a lot of places are trying to get their diversity up. So, the more not white you are, the better it is. Like, to put it blunt, like, that's what it comes down to because of, like, you see these companies, like Google, if people, like, look at their diversity charts, they see like 70 percent Caucasian. Then, they're just going to be, like, oh, they only hire white people. But that gives us more opportunities as, like, I'm colored, or not colored people, but like Latinos and, like, other races and ethnicities to have an advantage over the Caucasians because, like, we are part of, like, the people. And I just feel like we have opportunities as well."

— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

Spanish-speaking and non-Spanish-speaking Hispanic young people and parents see being bilingual as valuable in relation to work. They report that they see a desire to hire more Spanish-speaking employees as positive for themselves or their Spanish-speaking family, peers, or community members.

"My next step would probably be mastering the Spanish language, since I am on my beginning stage of learning Spanish. I want to become a bilingual person because you can get more opportunities whenever you are a bilingual citizen."

— BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"I think we can get paid more by speaking Spanish."

— PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

Some Hispanic participants specifically describe being bicultural as an asset, separate from being bilingual.

"Well yeah, you are almost living two lives. You've got the Mexican side, the American side. In a way that is true. You have two perspectives. The more perspectives and experience you have, the better."

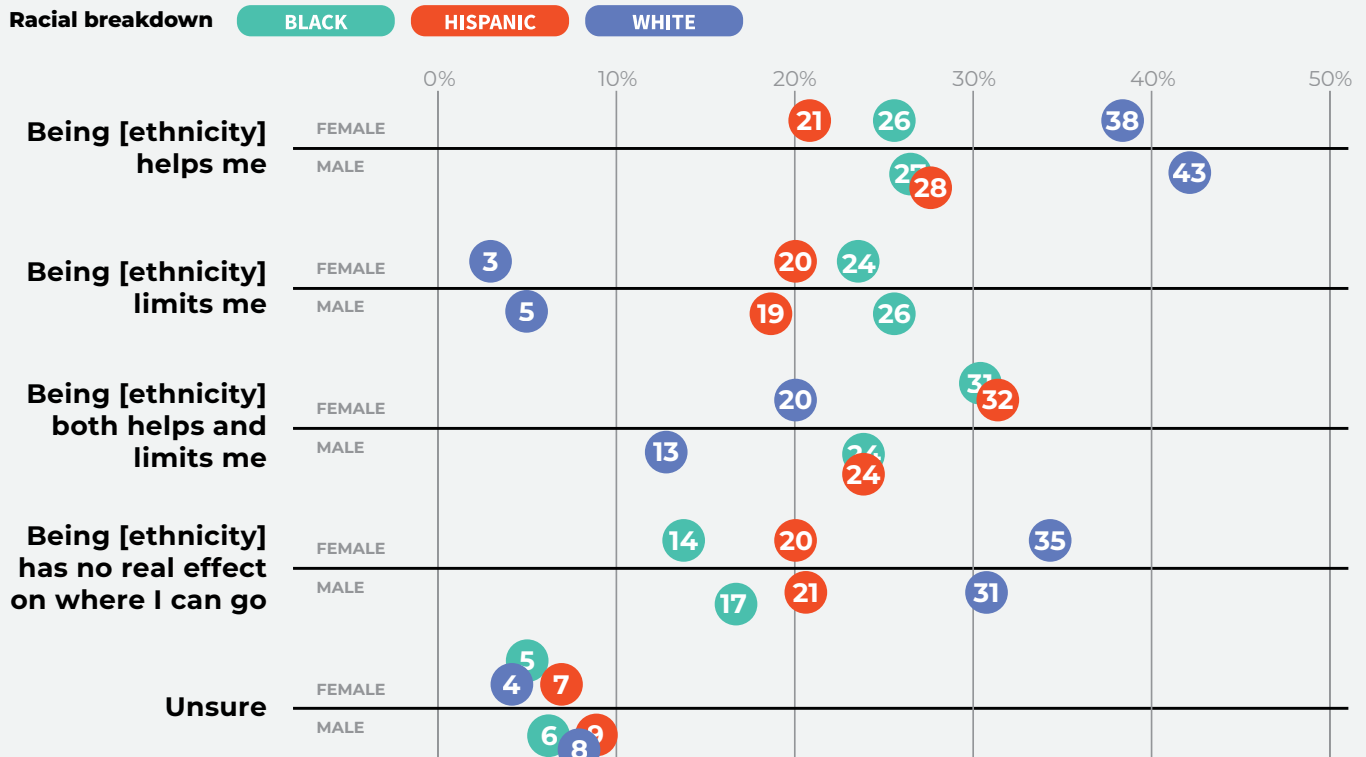— OAKLAND, CA, HISPANIC MALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

"I think being Latino is something that helps us because most of the kids with whom I work they have lived here; they know the language. They can communicate; they know both cultures. They may be living aside their Latino culture and they are entering more in the American culture...It is positive because they have their Latin roots and family. We want to hold them back because we don't like seeing people higher than us as Latinos. They are going more to the American culture where they are going to move forward, move up."

— OAKLAND, CA, HISPANIC ADULT INFLUENCER, MIXED INCOME

The survey results mirror the largely positive qualitative findings outlined above. For example, more Black (42%) and Hispanic (45%) young people in the survey believe that their race or ethnicity helps them (26% Black; 24% Hispanic) or has no real effect on where they can go in their life (16% Black; 21% Hispanic), than believe their race or ethnicity limits them (25% Black; 20% Hispanic). Figures 34 and 35 provide full breakdowns by race and gender.

FIGURE 34.

How Young People Feel Their Ethnicity Affects Them

Racial breakdown: BLACK | HISPANIC | WHITE

		0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%
Being [ethnicity] helps me	FEMALE			21 · 26	38		
	MALE			27 · 28	43		
Being [ethnicity] limits me	FEMALE	3		20 · 24			
	MALE	5		19 · 26			
Being [ethnicity] both helps and limits me	FEMALE			20	31 · 32		
	MALE		13	24 · 24			
Being [ethnicity] has no real effect on where I can go	FEMALE		14	20	35		
	MALE		17	21	31		
Unsure	FEMALE	5 · 4 · 7					
	MALE	6 · 8 · 9					

Most white youth do not experience a racialized identity in relation to career and work

When most white young people in the focus groups talk about their education or career pathways, their own racial identity is largely absent from the discussion.

A few white male youth described their whiteness as an unfair potential barrier to their aspirations and life goals because of what they perceived to be a trend towards unequal and preferential treatment of Black and Hispanic people in the workplace.

> *"But I'm sure that everyone in this room, when they start looking at college applications or scholarship applications, we see the word minority a lot. Like, do you belong to any minority groups or exclusive for minorities. And I think that, that trend is becoming a lot more common because of reverse discrimination, where they're trying to get more equal representation of all groups. And while I do agree that the trend of racism against people of color throughout history has been absolutely atrocious, I don't really think that having minority-specific opportunities is the correct solution because that's just promoting reverse discrimination. And that's almost taking away opportunities from white men because we are what we're born. We didn't ask to be born into the majority. We simply were."*
>
> — NEW ORLEANS, LA, WHITE MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

However, the survey results clearly indicate that far more white young people believe that their race or ethnicity helps them (41%) than believe their race or ethnicity limits them (4%).

Indeed, some white young people express very positive feelings about racial and ethnic diversity, as illustrated in the following focus group comment:

> *"Before a lot of internships, a lot of jobs were only offered to white people, and minorities had to fend for themselves. But now they are starting to have more stuff for minorities like more internships."*
>
> — PASADENA, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

Young people have varying levels of awareness of gender discrimination in the workplace

Black and Hispanic female youth are more likely to describe a 'double yoke' of race and gender

Some Black and Hispanic female youth in the focus groups perceive their future occupational experience through the lenses of both ethnicity and gender and describe a double yoke of discrimination and diminished expectations that presents barriers to entering or advancing in the workplace. Stereotypes about women of color are present in Black and Hispanic female young people's minds and inform how they anticipate experiencing their professional lives.

> *"[As women and Hispanics], I think we will have to work harder to prove yourself, but you are not just—you are more than a housewife. You are more than someone that cleans a home or whatever. Just seeing the way people treat their wife, threat their daughters."*
>
> — PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

> *[Participant] "Black women are often stigmatized, and there's a lot of racism and stuff so that's definitely a big one."*
>
> *[Moderator] "How are they stigmatized?"*
>
> *[Participant] "Just being unqualified, not smart, and with the racism thing."*
>
> — BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20 LOWER INCOME

At the same time, however, the survey results suggest that many Black and Hispanic young women do not view their gender as limiting where they can go in life. For example, more Black (30%) and Hispanic (26%) young women believe that being female helps them rather than limiting them (14% Black; 14% Hispanic). These results are summarized in the graphic below.

How Young People Feel Their Gender Affects Them

Racial breakdown **BLACK** **HISPANIC** **WHITE**
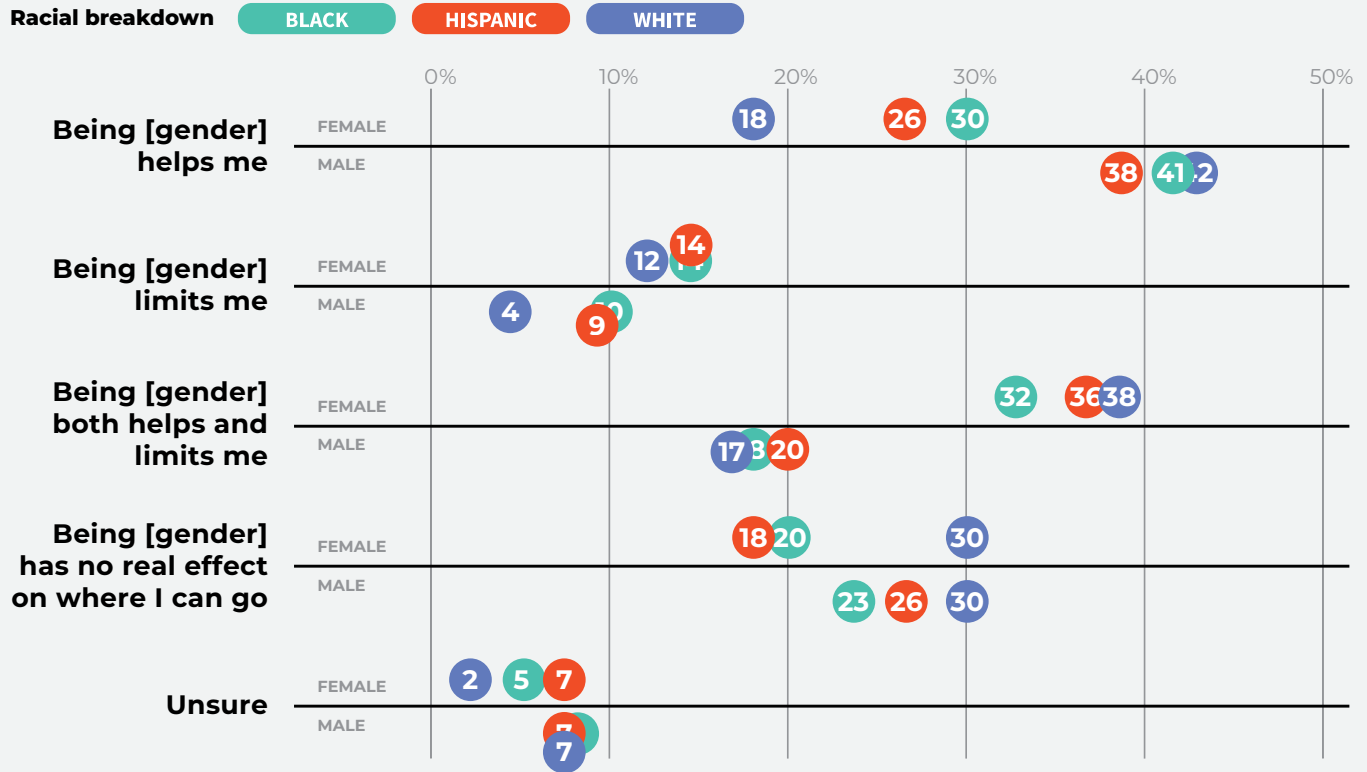
The different challenges Black and Hispanic women experience are often explicitly called out by male and female Black parents/guardians and adult influencers. The perception of how Black females experience the work environment informs the advice and guidance offered to their daughters about how to navigate the world of work. Similar to parental advice that cautions young people from bringing their full selves into work settings, young Black and Hispanic females are often advised to be "careful" about the way they carry themselves in order to avoid being stereotyped.

> *"I think it is different. It is more, I think it has to do with personal conduct like don't get mad. Watch your tone. Modulate how you are speaking because if you…even if you are not mad, but it sounds angry to somebody. A lot of times you are just talking to somebody and they're like whoa, I feel threatened by you. I really feel like you took this thing to the next level. You are like, I was just talking to you. How did we get here? I think as a Black woman not to be interpreted as being angry, you always have to be careful about how you are speaking, the words you are using, how you are looking. It is very much put on you what happens in an interaction, especially if it is a woman not of color and you are having a dialogue. You have to be very careful about the way that you are carrying yourself because they are interpreting your actions based on their perception of you as a Black person."*
>
> — OAKLAND, CA, BLACK ADULT INFLUENCER, MIXED INCOME

"Okay. The way I feel about my daughter, everybody out there in that world don't feel the same way. They don't look at her as my daughter. She just another woman, a ho, or whatever they want to call her in life, and folks going to beat her down…Folks are mean, you know. People are mean, are cruel. And the way I treat her, everybody ain't going to treat her that way. She need to know that, and she need, better have strong crocodile skin and keep it moving'."

Many Black male youth are acutely aware of a dual oppression that exists at the intersection of race and gender.

"Like, my mom always told me like be cautious of what, like, because everything like a five-year-old do, like, it's under a microscope. And sometimes, like, I just had a friend who almost got expelled for something he said, and, like, somebody else took it the wrong way, so just knowing, like, what you say is under a microscope. And sometimes as, like, Black men, we do some stuff, and we mean like one thing, and people will take it the wrong way, and they take it in a whole other direction. And it could cost us, so just being cautious of what we say and do like around certain people."

These experiences are reflected in the survey results, where 64 percent of Black male and 69 percent of Black female respondents report there are certain things about being a Black male or Black female that they need to navigate, or deal with, in certain ways. Among Hispanic young people, 50 percent of Hispanic male and 58 percent of Hispanic female respondents report there are certain things about being a Hispanic male or Hispanic female that they need to navigate, or deal with, in certain ways.

Young women share concerns about the impact of gender on pay and career advancement
Some female young people who are still in high school are aware of gender inequality in the workforce, in particular as it relates to unequal pay and lower expectations of women's leadership abilities and professional value. However, their perception of gender inequalities does not dissuade them from pursuing their work or career goals.

"Gender has like a big role because like you're in the business, I feel like they automatically pay men more or, like, even if they're not, like, they don't mean to. Like my dad said once, he had, like, two people that are doing the same job. Like, one was a male and one was a female, and he asked them both, like, what do you want to get paid? The guy automatically asked for more than the female did. Like, she asked lower than what she should have been getting. It's like, I don't know if it's intimidation which is kind of how our society works."

"[Being female], it seems like there is a stigma to it. It is going to be harder. Yeah, I think it has some [real stigma]. I don't think it is as bad as people make it out…But there is some."

"Sad to say, but being a woman in STEM, which I just hate the fact that I wrote that down, but unfortunately…2019 it is still an issue…Just the fact that up until really, like, the last 50 years that the scientific field and technological field has predominantly be dubbed a male territory. Of course, there have been miles and miles of progress made in recent years, but we still have so far to go before we can be seen as equals and get rid of those glass ceilings and all of that good stuff."

Young white females describe potential sexual harassment in the workplace

A small number of young white females mentioned the #MeToo movement and/or sexual harassment as one element of gender discrimination in the workplace. When harassment is mentioned at all, these young people have varied perceptions of how frequently it occurs and whether they are likely to be harassed personally.

"Sexual harassment is a very large thing with women, especially right now the restrictions that politicians are putting on women, just having to sort of navigate…Regarding abortion in Arkansas, the rapist is now allowed to sue the victim for having an abortion. In Alabama… Georgia, Texas like all of these states are coming out with these super strict laws."

— PASADENA, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

"You hear a lot that white men usually in higher positions are accused of like sexual harassment or assault or being inappropriate with a worker. And some were false accusations, so I feel like that also threatens that. But at the same time, like women have had a history of being like either less likely to get a job or being abused by their higher up, usually males."

— NEW YORK, NY, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

White parents/guardians are more likely to express explicit concerns about sexual harassment in the workplace, including both fathers and mothers.

"For the ladies here, it is a lot different. What I am worried about for her is when she goes to a job interview somewhere, whether it is tomorrow or a month from now, and some guy makes a rude comment to her. She has two decisions: not say anything or to make a big thing and say something about it. If she says something about it, then, again, it is like a pyramid. Is the guy going to get fired? Who knows. It depends how many other ones come out or if there is another movement. I don't mean that. I mean if there is another #MeToo movement and stuff like that to back her, or if it doesn't catch on and nothing happens, she is out that job because they are definitely not going to hire her. But if she doesn't say something, she may get the job, but now she has to deal with this guy that thinks that it is okay to say that. That is something that us as men, we really haven't had to worry about, but it is something the women, even to this day I believe that they still have to deal with that. Is it an everyday thing? No."

— BELLE GLADE, FL, WHITE PARENT/GUARDIAN, LOWER INCOME

Young people believe that they can overcome systemic inequalities

Young people believe that they can overcome barriers related to their race, ethnicity, or gender identities by excelling as individuals. For example, many Black young people say they anticipate being treated negatively or unfairly because of their race and/or gender as they work towards their life and career goals. Despite this, they remain confident that they can overcome this treatment—and, in effect, these systemic barriers—by being or doing better than their white peers.

"I don't really care what people think of me as long as they respect me, as long as you know that I am a respectful person, but I'm also not one to be overlooked or just kind of ignored."

— BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

"Like, I feel like anything that, like, obviously, like, there will be, like, people that will try to hold you back. But like, at the end of the day, you still got to put in that work. Yeah, he's white. He's probably going to get the job before you, but what are you going to do about it? Like, are you just going, okay, I'm not going to do it then? You got to work harder. I think you definitely got to work harder as a Black man or a woman or a woman in general just to, like, get your spot because that's just the way it is right now."

— NEW YORK, NY, BLACK MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

The way that young people develop their ideas about what is possible or not possible is impacted by a wide range of factors, such as social pressures, family culture, and the lived experience of others they witness day-to-day.

People in young people's lives influence their career decisions

From parents to teachers and coaches and friends, those in the lives of young people carry significant influence on their ideas about what's possible in the world—and for themselves. Focus group participants describe the ways in which they experience influence at each of these pathway development stages in positive, negative, and neutral ways.

Young people describe four primary types of adults in their lives

The way that adults show up in young people's lives varies by support, availability, and expertise levels. Youth participants in our focus groups primarily described four types of adults in their lives: *supportive and informed*; *supportive and not informed*; *unsupportive* adults who actively tear them down; and those who are *absent*. All four types of adults influence the way that young people develop an understanding of the world around them and how they might fit into it.

It is worth noting that, among the adults who are supportive in some way, mothers are most frequently mentioned by focus group participants.

Supportive and informed adults are clear in their desire to assist and bolster young people, and they have an understanding about the specific steps necessary to help a young person meet their goals to thrive. These adults—most often parents, teachers, or coaches—are knowledgeable about a specific professional field the young person has in their sights or are expected to navigate, like applying for college or financial aid. These influencers offer emotional support along with technical know-how, connections, or guidance to facilitate pathway development.

> *"My mom [helps me out] because she's tried to push me to go to school. She likes what she does, and she works in a school district, so she has told me just go to school. I will help you out. I know the field, and I know what you can do and where you should go. She would help me a lot."*
>
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"I'd say definitely my rugby coach…I came to him, and when I told him I wanted to, you know, pursue bodybuilding and everything like that, he was just starting to show me the range. Okay. Talk to this person. Talk to that person. This is what you've got to do."*
>
> — YAKIMA, WA, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"When I first filled out my FAFSA, I was very lost. I decided to contact my advisor, and we set up a meeting for the day or two after. He helped me get through it so I can fill it out."*
>
> — OAKLAND, CA, BLACK FEMALE, 16–18, MIXED INCOME

Adults who are ***supportive and not informed*** provide more general support, but are no less enthusiastic in their expressed desire for youth to succeed and thrive. This type of support often comes from parents or other family members and is perceived as something that can be trusted. It is constant. Supportive and not informed support tends to be primarily emotional and financial, described as providing reassurance about a young person's general value, potential, or specialness.

"I love my family, and they are always there for me. I know they will support me in anything I do, and they will always help me to get to my goal. My parents are always there for me, and I know they are, so if I mess up, I know they will help me like pick me back up."

— PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"I think my mom's always just been like, she obviously wanted me to go to college and get a career, but her, at the end of the day, as long as I'm happy with what I'm doing, that's all she cares about."

— NEW YORK, NY, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Sentiments communicated by adults who are **unsupportive** range from actively tearing down a young person (bad-mouthing or harshly criticizing) to expressing doubt in their ability to achieve, thrive, or otherwise meet life goals. These adult influencers are often seen as barriers, with their words undercutting confidence and becoming something to actively overcome.

"My family doesn't help me accomplish my goals whatsoever. They are haters. If anything, they are a barrier or an obstacle that is in between me and my overall success."

— PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"I feel like, when they, like, knock you down from, like, striving so high…like, especially from, like, a counselor, like, someone you think that is there to support you and hearing, like, words, like, that actually, like, can really, like, knock you down."

— LOS ANGELES, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

"I had a teacher tell me you ain't going to be nothing."

— ATLANTA, GA, BLACK MALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

Some young people experience actively unsupportive or doubting adults as inspiration to achieve their goals. Getting to where they want to go, *in spite of being told they couldn't do it*, can be a deep source of pride.

"…I surround myself with people that kind of dis me, and it makes me think like, you know what, I'm going to do it, just because they said I can't."

— YAKIMA, WA, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"There's, like, positive and negative motivation where there's someone supporting you, and then there's someone who's saying that you can't do it, and it pushes you to try to prove them wrong pretty much."

— YAKIMA, WA, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"Once you get the career you want, you make yourself proud…I have people say you are going to give up—being a doctor is so hard…I want to make those people be like, oh, she actually did it, and she is happy doing it."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Absent adults are described as people who could or should be supportive, but are simply not present. They are often parents who have not fulfilled their expected role in a young person's life. Teachers also come up as absent adults, who, by virtue of their profession, are expected to be supportive but have not held up their end of the implicit agreement.

"Me and mom have a, like, complex relationship. So, like, personally, I've been working since I was 14, so I've pretty much worked to take care of myself because my mom didn't, like, support me."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"Like he said, a lot of teachers, especially in college, they're just there to collect a check, so they're not going to go the extra mile for you to make sure you're doing good."

— BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

"I mean, I talked to them about it, but they [parents] don't really seem very invested in my future…So, at this point…we respect each other, but from a distance…Like, I might stay in contact with them, but they're not really a huge influencing factor in my life."

— NEW ORLEANS, LA, WHITE MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

Support has multiple meanings

Young people in our focus groups use the word *support* in several ways. Regardless of income level, the most common uses of support imply *emotional support, financial assistance, sharing technical know-how, offering informed guidance,* or *providing professional connections*. These types of support can overlap and inform each other and can be offered by the same source, but they carry distinct weight as young people describe the ways that family, teachers, peers, and other influencers show up in their lives.

Emotional support is one of the most frequently evoked types of support among focus group participants. Ranging from very specific life examples to general experiences of someone 'having my back,' emotional support comes from trusted people.

"I think the main person that has always been there for me is my mom."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 16–18, LOWER INCOME

"I think friends help out with emotional support like motivation…I feel like, just being there and being a real friend just helps…with company, you are just out for the love."

— OAKLAND, CA, HISPANIC MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

Financial assistance is also a commonly mentioned type of support, particularly when it comes to paying for education. As we know from other sections of this report, concern about the cost of college looms large in conversations about higher education. The cost of housing is also mentioned. Some participants report that they can rely on their families, particularly parents, to support them financially. Financial assistance often, but not always, comes with emotional support as well.

"I feel like my parents are very supportive, and I don't know if this is for everyone, but, like, they're like helping me pay for school, which is, like, the only way I'm going to get the career I kind of want. So, like, I wouldn't be able to do it without them because they're, like, supportive."

— NEW YORK, NY, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Financial assistance, like emotional support, can also be a missing component of a relationship in young people's lives—or something that can be withdrawn to incentivize young people's specific life choices or behavior.

"My dad and my brother. If I do a decision that they don't like, I feel they will take [their financial support] away from me."

— BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Young people report that parents, teachers, coaches, and professional mentors can be sources of **sharing technical know-how.**

"I worked on stuff with [my dad]. I've built several engines myself. I think I technically built my first engine when I was right around like six to eight, somewhere in there, but with help of my dad."

— YAKIMA, WA, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Some participants also mention looking online to seek out technical information:

> "I learned how to braid in third grade from my sister. She taught me how to braid. And I had always wanted to do hair since. And then, I had taught myself how to do different styles from YouTube. And then, I look at different videos on Instagram and stuff and I see people doing hair styles. And I'm like I want to be like that. I want to get as good as them and get as big as they are, too."
>
> — BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

To focus group participants, support can also mean **offering informed guidance** or advice.

> "When I did make a mistake on my own, they [my parents] will give me the advice to fix it rather than telling me what I have to do."
>
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE MALE, 16–18, LOWER INCOME

> "I only have three very close friends, and those are the ones that aligned the most. They give me good advice. Those are the ones that talk to me most, and we have good talks. I am actually able to use that advice in real life."
>
> — OAKLAND, CA, BLACK MALE, 16–18, MIXED INCOME

Finally, **providing professional connections** are perceived to be a valuable support by some young people, primarily those who have honed their professional interest and are clear on what they would like to pursue—or at least further explore.

> "I volunteered at the training room, and I built a big connection with the athletic trainer. She said she could talk to people at a certain community college because they have a good program. I turn to her for advice."
>
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE MALE, 16–18, LOWER INCOME

Photograph by Ava Victoriano, age 12

"My dad works in ad placement and he has a lot of connections in H.R., so he is kind of able to connect me with some people, like, hands off, and it is all about me. But that is really important steps. So, I am grateful that he has that. He has been a really huge—he has always been my biggest role model and my biggest supporter, so that is really cool."

— PASADENA, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

Many types of people influence young people's identity formation

Parents and family

Young people experience the influence of their parents and immediate families in a range of ways, from loving and supportive, to damaging or absent. Some experience their family members actively telling them they cannot achieve their goals or should not try, while others experience family as attentive and supportive, helping to set goals and holding them accountable. Whatever the quality of the relationship, it is clear from focus group discussions that interactions with immediate family members are deeply impactful and influential.

"So, I mean, definitely, your parents can be your number one setback, or your parents could be your number one push forward."

— YAKIMA, WA, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"I feel like your family can kind of be the best people and sometimes they are real harsh."

— ATLANTA, GA, WHITE FEMALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

When asked about sources of support and motivation in their lives, many participants first mention parents—particularly mothers. There is a cultural expectation that mothers should be supportive, whether or not that is a young person's lived experience.

"My parents are very supportive. It doesn't matter what, I know they are always going to be there to support me, and if I ever need help with money other than college or whatever the case is, I know I can count on my siblings and my parents to help."

— DOWNEY, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 16–18, MIXED INCOME

"If I think about it…at the end of the day, no matter what, you always have just you, yourself, and that's it. And your mom usually."

— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

"If it weren't for my mama, I don't even think I would have graduated."

— GREENVILLE, MS, BLACK FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"My mom didn't push me to go to school. I don't know. I think she made it clear that you need to find something to do to take care of yourself."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and siblings are also mentioned as familial influencers. While other non-parent relatives tend to be depicted in a positive light, siblings are perceived with more variation; they are often presented in focus group discussions as role models who help pave the way or examples of cautionary tales to avoid emulating.

"My brother has played a role for me. Because of him and what he did—he guided me…I didn't know what I was doing the first semester and went to college. He really helped me. He told me what classes to take and what to do for this. He did everything and then he passed it down to me."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 16–18, LOWER INCOME

"I just, like, I feel like the most impact that I had was from like brothers because, like, they didn't really put effort into high school. And, like, they didn't go to universities, and that's kind of where I feel, like, I had to like create a change."

— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

Even if supportive, some young people doubt their parents' understanding of their future plans, career goals, or what it takes to achieve them. Instead of their parents being sources of support, guidance, or positive influence, some participants describe feeling that their visions of the future are explicitly unsupported or misunderstood by their parents.

"Sometimes I feel like my mom and my dad will get in the way…Only because of the decisions I make, they feel it is not best for me or they just feel like I won't make enough money. They don't understand my happiness. My family doesn't impact me. I just don't pay attention to it, or don't talk to them."

— BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

[About parents] "If I were to, then they would probably think I was crazy or something. I feel they have high expectations of you like having a really good job. When it comes to me being an actor or something, I feel they don't think you are real about life."

— OAKLAND, CA, HISPANIC MALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

The quality of an exchange matters

Across the focus groups, we heard participants express the difference between *having a conversation* with parents and feeling like they were *being told what to do*. The quality of an exchange impacts the way intended influence or support is received.

Young people describe feeling more supported when parents offer guidance from a place of connection and authentic discourse—when youth priorities and goals are taken into account and inform the support being offered. In other words, youth experience deeper support when their parents listen to what matters to them and offer guidance to help facilitate meeting their goals or help them course correct.

"I love my family, and they are always there for me. I know they will support me in anything I do, and they will always help me to get to my goal. My parents are always there for me, and I know they are, so if I mess up, I know they will help me like pick me back up."

— PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"When I did make a mistake on my own, they [parents] will give me the advice to fix it rather than telling me what I have to do."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE MALE, 16–18, LOWER INCOME

"[Family] want you to better yourself, push you to do what you want in life and how to get there too."

— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

Youth who experience being told what to do assume their parents care more about their children's achievement than the quality of their experience (happiness). This type of input is often perceived as pressure instead of support, with the child motivated to succeed in order to avoid upsetting their parents rather than having their own intrinsic motivation.

"My mom…she just wants me to have a job. I want to say she doesn't care if I'm not happy in the job, but I feel she is more worried about the financial part than me being happy or content in what I'm doing."

— BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"My parents, they tell me to do well in school. And, like, they get upset when I don't do as well as they want me to."

— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

Some parents want their kids to 'be better than me'
Some participants from households with lower incomes report that their parents want better work experiences and successes for their children than they themselves have—less physical labor, higher paying jobs, less stress and struggle. These parents want their children to thrive and experience more financial stability and ease—something they do not feel they have achieved themselves.

"'I want you to be more than what I did,' my dad tells all my siblings and I. I work so that you guys can be more than what I am."

— BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"My dad dropped out of school too. He was kind of young. And he's always telling, like, I want you to be better than me. So, like, I don't because he says, like, working for, like, the white man is, like, you get nothing. Like, he doesn't want me to do that. So, he's telling me like right now to, like, start figuring out what I want to do and work for that now because you don't want to be working for other people because you're not going to get nothing."

— NEW YORK, NY, BLACK MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Many young people want to give back to their parents
Some participants are influenced by witnessing their parents' sacrifices and shape their future goals around a desire to give back to their parents. These young people want to repay their parents for support and care that came from struggle. To them, a *good job* is one that enables them to provide for their parents and other family members.

"I grew up with just a single mom…I've seen my mom worrying about having to pay the bills, making sure there's food on the table. She doesn't eat so that we make sure we eat. Like, all my goals—everything I do—is to make sure she never has to worry about that again. Or make sure that my siblings never have to worry about that. That's my number one goal. That's what is going to make me the happiest in the world. Knowing that my parents, my mom, my brother, and my sister never have to worry about that or their kids or my wife and my kids. As long as I know I can do that, and I make enough money to support all of them, I'm fine."

— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

A related sentiment expressed by several participants is a commitment to make the most of what their parents have given them as a way to honor those contributions.

"It was, like, I was self-driven to go to school. So, I'm just doing this to make them proud, to not, to take advantage of everything they've given me and not put it to waste."

— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

Youth say some parents do not want them to aim high
Participants report that some of their parents do not want them to achieve more than they themselves have achieved. Not all parents' lived experience allows them to believe *thriving* is possible, and they counsel their children to avoid aspirations beyond what they themselves know.

"I worked at Walmart because my mom was like, it is better to make money now instead of going to college and wasting money. Then that pressured me to work even before going to school. That is just how they think here."

— BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Other parents and other adult relatives are described as actively tearing down their children or nieces and nephews to keep them from achieving more than they have.

> *"I am not going to say it is all, but some people have family members that they might talk to you and they smile in your face, but they don't want to see you doing better than them."*
> — ATLANTA, GA, BLACK MALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

School and teachers

Young people's experience of teachers and school varies widely. For many, high school in particular is seen as an experience to survive in order to reach better things in the future. As detailed elsewhere in this report, few connect their experiences in high school to their ultimate career goals.

While most high school participants do not see school or their high school teachers as being influential in their career choices, many have had positive experiences with teachers who offered emotional or academic support along the way.

> *"Teachers, because they are just always trying to—most of them are trying to take you down a path and help you."*
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE MALE, 16–18, LOWER INCOME

Even more meaningfully, when a teacher takes the time to get to know a student—and then offers the student something positive that feels personal to them—the student experiences that as a meaningful connection.

> *"I have, well, my English teacher, he is a very, like, encouraging teacher. Like, no matter, like, outside of English, I can go to him after class and be like, hey, mister, you know, I've been thinking about this. I've been thinking that. And like he's always down. Like no matter what, he's, like, very helpful and willing to help me reach my goal."*
> — GREENVILLE, MS, BLACK FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

Teacher engagement with meaningful, positive impact is reported by both youth from households with lower and higher incomes. However, this is less commonly reported among the youth from households with lower incomes, who more commonly experience teachers as having fate control (the power to knock them off track or ensure they succeed in school).

In the survey and focus groups, far more Black and Hispanic young people see their teachers as helping them accomplish their goals than see them as getting in their way.

A strong majority of young people (61%) feel that their high school teachers have (or have had) their best interests at heart, compared to just 23 percent of young people who feel like their high school teachers did not have their best interests at heart.

While these results are generally consistent by race and gender, young people from households with higher incomes are significantly more likely to feel like their high school teachers have (or have had) their best interests at heart. For example, 75 percent of young people from households with higher incomes feel like their high school teachers have (or have had) their best interests at heart, compared to 49 percent of young people with very low household incomes—a gap of more than 25 percentage points.

FIGURE 36.

Impact of Teachers on Achieving Life Goals

Racial breakdown — BLACK | HISPANIC | WHITE

| | | 0 | 10 | 20 | 30 | 40 | 50 | 60 |

Help me to accomplish my goals
- FEMALE: 49, 56
- MALE: 49, 54

Get in the way of me accomplishing my goals
- FEMALE: 10, 14, 18
- MALE: 16, 21

Help me and get in the way
- FEMALE: 9
- MALE: 8, 11

Won't have an impact one way or another
- FEMALE: 14, 16, 18
- MALE: 12

Unsure
- FEMALE: 7, 11
- MALE: 7, 10

Most young people can report positive experiences with teachers, with seven in ten (70%) indicating that they have (or have had) relationships or experiences with high school teachers that were especially positive. By contrast, just 19 percent of young people report that they did not have a positive experience with their high school teachers.

Young people report that their high school teachers offered them support or guidance in a variety of areas, including school work (71%), college or future education (57%), personal issues (45%), job or career (36%), and sports (17%). However, Black (30%) and Hispanic (35%) young people report receiving less support with their job or career compared to white young people (41%).

In addition, when young people in the focus groups are asked to reflect on the people who have influenced their success, teachers are sometimes identified as important connectors to information or resources that enabled young people to identify what they are good at, where to find information, how to apply to and be accepted at internships or other programs, and develop their own ideas about what they want to do with their lives. This finding is particularly true among those who are graduating from high school and those who are working or enrolled in higher education.

"I have a video art teacher who helps get people their Adobe certifications—help you work towards things that you want in life. He is actually a good person. I like him a lot."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE MALE, 16–18, LOWER INCOME

"I'm going to do HVAC if I do go to college. I'm going to go for two years because my high school teacher told me I could make $40,000 more a year if I go to college."

— NEW YORK, NY, BLACK MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Illustration by Daniel Patrick, age 16

"Well, my computer science teacher, he's very nice. He's very helpful. My theater teachers are actually really supportive...of me with the computer science."

— NEW ORLEANS, LA, WHITE MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"I had one teacher and some people thinks he is kind of mean, but I think the...he just motivates me. He is great."

— OAKLAND, CA, BLACK FEMALE, 15–18, MIXED INCOME

Most young people (63%) report having at least one teacher who really supported them in high school, with 40 percent reporting having more than one really supportive teacher. Young people point to a wide variety of high school teachers who support (or supported) them, including those who teach English, math, science, history, and the arts.

Significant demographic differences emerge when it comes to levels of high school teacher support, however. Hispanic young people are less likely to have more than one really supportive teacher (35%) compared to Black (41%) or white (44%) young people. Income definitely plays a role here as well, with young people from households with higher incomes being more likely to report having more than one really supportive teacher. For example, over half (53%) of young people from households with higher incomes report having more than one really supportive teacher, compared to 34 percent of young people with very low household incomes.

While young people describe many positive experiences with their high school teachers, approximately two in five young people (39%) nevertheless have (or have had) notably negative relationships or experiences with their high school teachers. Notably, the proportion of young people reporting having negative experiences is consistent across gender, race, and income subgroups.

In an open-ended question asking about these negative experiences, young people described teachers who were unfair, rude, mean, or just generally disinterested in teaching. Some illustrative quotes are provided below:

> *"The teacher constantly shut down when anyone was misbehaving, took it out on the whole class, eventually gave up on her job."*
> — SURVEY, ASIAN FEMALE, 15–21, MIDDLE INCOME

> *"I have this illness, and they were rude to me about it. They weren't understanding, and they'd make fun of me and single me out in front of everyone."*
> — SURVEY, WHITE FEMALE, 15–21, MIDDLE INCOME

> *"Just them being mean for no reason at all."*
> — SURVEY, NATIVE AMERICAN FEMALE, 15–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"Some don't care to teach."*
> — SURVEY, HISPANIC FEMALE, 15–21, LOWER INCOME

Peers and friends

Friends

Young people report that friends are important influences in their lives. Friends offer social engagement, solidarity, and those found or made in communities with shared interests can provide support.

> *"Well, one of my friends, she's doing the same classes as me, and she's taking the same certification class…She makes sure I stay on top of things. And I make sure she stays on top of things. So, we really help each other."*
> — BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20, LOWER INCOME

> *"But then my other friends who I met at my clinical and I became really close with and who are doing the same thing as me, they're the ones who are, like, super supportive and always willing to help and always saying you're going to do great."*
> — NEW YORK, NY, WHITE FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"My connection is to certain people who will probably help with my recording music because I have a lot of rapper friends that also have music out."*
> — PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Still, the support offered by friends is largely described in broad, general terms.

> *"My friends are the most supportive people I know. I like them so much. All we do is lift each other up and tell each other how good we are."*
> — PASADENA, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

> *"[Friends] probably help me. They challenge me for greatness, honestly is what it is. Being better than I was before is what my friends do."*
> — PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"With me, it's not really verbal. It's just, I like to surround myself with people that are hardworking and that have goals. Like, these are a couple of my friends too, and as you can tell they all have high goals. And that's what I love about them."

— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

Even if friends are supportive in meeting short-term goals like completing schoolwork, few see the influence of friends as critical for determining or meeting long-term career goals.

"Sometimes I want to say that [my friends] help me accomplish my goals, but sometimes they get in the way because they don't really know what I want. They want what they want, and they think it is what I want but it is not."

— PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

"It depends on the friend because I have some friends that encourage me, and I have some friends that steer me away from my goal, like studying or whatever it may be."

— BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Some young people have experienced friends providing disingenuous advice or support, or friends who simply have different priorities and must be discarded before they can get serious about their careers and futures. Among these participants, friends are often described as holding you back or as a distraction.

"Like, all of my friends coming from seventh and eighth grade that stood with me in high school—I dropped most of them in ninth grade because they all turned out to be potheads. And I got to be able to pass a pee test for football. So, yeah, I just, I dropped that...It was hard, you know. They always told me something about it, but, I mean, I'm doing me. I don't want to worry about no one else."

— NEW ORLEANS, LA, WHITE MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

Non-friend peers

Being in settings with peers (not necessarily friends) with similar values can support meeting long-term goals. We saw in the focus groups that peer-sharing around future goals and pathways can be supportive, inspiring, and instructive in the following ways:

- I know what I want to do and how to get there, and I like being able to provide guidance and support to peers who are less sure or are exploring their options.

- I know what I want to do, and talking with a peer helps me to think in new and different ways about how I might get there.

- I'm not sure what I want to do, and I'm exploring different career options. Talking with my peers reassures me that it's okay not to have everything figured out.

- Some people have it figured out, some have it figured out a little bit, and some don't have any of it figured out, and all of these are okay places to be.

- I have no idea how I want to approach my education or career, and hearing from my peers who have a better sense of these things motivates me to learn more about my options or to make a plan for my future.

In observing the focus groups, we saw that peers want to be of support to one another. After the focus groups, participants volunteered themselves to share information, resources, and to personally support each other through connecting on social media and over the phone. There is perhaps opportunity for young

people to interact in more positive ways when they *do not* share social circles or attend the same schools; that way they can share without fear of reputational risk.

> *"I think I found a sense of comfort, because I'm not the only one that's going to work and going to school and stuff. So I think it was pretty cool that there are other people that are doing the same thing as me."*
>
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, LATINA FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"Just everybody's different perspective, it gave me a lot of insight. And I was exposed to a lot of different like a lot of ways that other people think. It was like a good reminder that, you know, we're all different, but we're really all the same, so, yeah."*
>
> — NEW YORK CITY, NY, BLACK MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

For small peer discussions like these focus groups to be effective, at least one person has to have a clear sense of their goal or how they want to investigate where they want to go. This influences the group conversation to open up and move forward. When no one in the group has a clear goal or a sense of how to explore their potential goal, the small group discussions are not productive.

Media and Social Media Influence

- Across income levels, young people's expectations of what work life will be like is heavily influenced by social media (Instagram) and television.

- Instagram is particularly important for young people's understanding of pathways to entrepreneurship, what you can do with a side hustle, and how to turn your creative passion(s) into a career (gaming, beauty, music, fashion, etc.).

- Young people from households with lower incomes describe learning about education requirements, salaries, and benefits for forensics, medical and health-related professions, and entrepreneurship through television shows.

- Young people from households with higher incomes describe media as a jumping off point for getting excited about a specific job or career but not as the sole resource for information.

- Young people are engaging in the online world to get information and inspiration, not just entertainment.

> *"I had taught myself how to do different styles from YouTube. And then, I look at different videos on Instagram and stuff, and I see people doing hair styles. And I'm, like, I want to be like that. I want to get as good as them and get as big as they are, too."*
>
> — BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20, LOWER INCOME

Young People are Empowered by Connections

For adults and youth alike, the quality of an interaction or relationship directly impacts the way it is perceived. While those most closely involved in a young person's day-to-day life exert significant influence over their understanding of future possibilities, the type of connection with an individual is also hugely influential on what youth feel they can pursue or achieve.

In the focus groups, many young people report feeling that their future success or failure is 'all up to me.' For some young people this is a source of pride; for others it is a worry about being dependent or perceived as being dependent on other people.

"You're your own support. Look in the mirror."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"There hasn't been anybody to help me get where I've been going. It has all been me for the last 3 years…My family hasn't been helping me really, so it has just been all me, just dedicating my time to my whole goal…just been grinding."
— PUEBLO, CO, HISPANIC MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"And it actually comes down to just self-motivation. I mean, there's really no one else out there…I didn't have any family support. I didn't have any support from the outside world. It was just completely myself."

— YAKIMA, WA, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"I would say family, they do nothing. They understand your goals but my family, they haven't been through what I'm having to go through and stuff like that. So, they don't really know what exactly they should be doing to help me."

— BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20, LOWER INCOME

While young people often indicate they value support from others in their lives, more than half (53%) think it is ultimately going to be mostly up to them to achieve the kind of job or career they want, compared to about a third (37%) who believe they will need help from other people. Interestingly, differences by race, gender, and income on this question are minimal. Most young people generally think it will be mostly up to them to achieve their career goals.

Despite often saying that they are making decisions on their own, Hispanic and Black young people report that they have people in their lives who help them accomplish their goals. For example, 61 percent of Black respondents indicate their parent or guardian helps them accomplish their goals. By contrast, just 21 percent of Black respondents say their parent or guardian gets in the way of them accomplishing their goals. Hispanic respondents report similar levels of support (63% say their parent or guardian helps versus 18% who say they get in the way).

Young people from households with higher incomes also report feeling that they are making choices about their educational and work goals and futures on their own. However, when probed to think about the types of support or other inputs they may need or use as they proceed on their pathways, this group readily names positive adult relationships (both existing and those they will need to build) as important and sometimes critical to their attainment of future goals and success.

> *"I know my parents expect me to go to whatever school I want to and study what I want...I haven't had any resistance from my parents. If I say I want to study medicine or I want to study this, they are very supportive."*
>
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

> *"My friend just told [me] that one of my professors mentioned me in his class. She said 'Oh yeah, he is very talented.' It makes me feel good; it makes me feel that I am recognized by somebody."*
>
> — NEW YORK, NY, HISPANIC MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

> *"At Howard, I'm in the School of Business honors program...And just the fact that I actually have a dean who I can call and just say, 'Hey, I need this, I need you to talk to this person, that network, that support system,' definitely is going to help me be successful."*
>
> — BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

Young people may also be impacted by the way in which their parents or other adults in their lives reject or embrace a narrative that mythologizes individual achievement, bootstrapping, and celebrates exceptional individuals who appear to have succeeded 'on their own' and against all odds. For example, if a parent embraces the idea that life's successes are a product of *only* one's inherent character, strength, and abilities, a young person may perceive relationships and connections as immaterial to their own education and career goals. On the other hand, a parent who sees their personal successes as informed by multiple factors—including strength of self, relationships with peers and elders, access to and taking advantage of resources in the community or online, and extracurricular opportunities—may share this experience of relying on others with their children, thus changing the way the young person understands and values these relationships and connections.

While murky about the source, some young people know they will need support

Some young people acknowledge and understand that it is important to have access to people who can support them on their pathways by providing guidance; sharing their experiences; or connecting them to information, opportunities, and resources. Young people often articulate this as "it's not what you know, it's who you know" or by describing the importance of being close to or in some cases becoming "the plug."

> *"More like the—'it's not what you know, it's who you know.' Kinda like that connections of it are important...I know, like, a lot of people who like got jobs or got things because, like, for relationships and stuff that they created."*
>
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, MALE, 18–22, BUILD STUDENT

> *"You really do need connections if you want to go far in somewhere. No matter what you are doing you always need one or two people to get you somewhere where you probably wouldn't be able to get alone."*
>
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 16–18, LOWER INCOME

"I think networking is really important for most people's careers. I want to work in a government job or in academia, so I think for me it would be really important because I need someone to mentor me or to hire me for whatever position I get."

"When you are networking it is like gaining more connections. I feel networking is a broader form of connections. When you are in a job when you are networking, you can gain advice or make connections with older people, like people who have higher positions than you or positions that are lower than you."

"I was gonna put down was 'the plug,' because I had a very similar feeling when I saw that word. But basically it's, I think the connect—connections just means you're someone who has hands on many different things...someone who has a lot of connections is more someone who is just intertwined in a lot of different fields. And I think that's ideally someone who I would want to be at some point."

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

Young People are Empowered by Connections

This research provides an opportunity to align programmatic language to leverage and reflect young people's positive associations and feelings about key words related to relationship building. For example, programs may choose to use language that describes the quality of intentional relationships rather than focusing on the transactional nature or potential output of those relationships.

Aligned with this is the development and testing of programs and tools that enable young people to see themselves as valuable contributors to an asset-rich community *to which they already belong*: communities where they provide guidance and support for peers and others with different life experiences than themselves.

The pride that young people display at identifying resources and information on their own is also an opportunity for tool experimentation and design. For example, it may be important to develop tools that balance opportunities for young people to grow their feeling of personal agency by finding information, resources, and solutions with opportunities where they develop relationships with adults who can serve as a broker for this information and support.

There is also a critical opportunity to understand when the inflection point occurs in young people's lives that enables them to transition from "I know I need connections to thrive" to "I know I need connections to thrive AND I know how to get or build those connections."

Among young people who recognize the need for these types of adult supports or connections, some struggle to articulate and think through the steps and actions they might take to initiate and nurture those relationships.

"I'm not sure how I'm going to get from my experience to contacting people and getting into that field of work."

— YAKIMA, WA, HISPANIC MALE, 16–21, LOWER INCOME

Some young people struggle to trust adults and peers in their lives. When asked, they self-assess that this lack of trust is one barrier to accessing resources and establishing relationships that could help them succeed in school, transition to college, and later build their careers.

"I stand in my way because I can't trust people now...I feel like I have passed so many people that could have been an important figure in my life because of my trust issues. Maybe I should have talked to you a little bit, you know, but I just didn't give you the time of day at all."

— OAKLAND, CA, BLACK FEMALE, 15–18, MIXED INCOME

Importantly, in some cases, young people report that the environment in which they live and grow necessitates a laid-back or 'chill' demeanor and behavior. This behavior and demeanor may grow out of a need to maintain personal safety—the idea that you are less vulnerable to violence and unpredictable events when stepping back and not getting 'into it' with other people. This belief is more likely to be reported by Black youth (both male and female) and young adults who report experiencing violence at school, home, and on the street; racial profiling; and/or harassment by police.

"Say for instance you're at a party, and just hear the people there getting rowdy, you gotta chill. Knowing something's gonna pop up, you either just chill or you just go with it. And if you go with it, you never know what's gonna happen with the outcome."

— BALTIMORE, MD, BLACK MALE, 17–20, LOWER INCOME

Youth value trusted, personalized support

Most young people who participated in the focus groups desire and value relevant, trusted, non-judgmental, personalized guidance, advice, and support. When participants describe positive and productive experiences with adults regarding their education or career pathways, the conversations or interactions are often characterized by:

- Non-judgment
- Trust
- Personalized guidance
- Advice
- Emotional support
- Relevant information

When young people experience adults (either present or absent) to be unhelpful, uninformed, or uninterested, the qualities above are missing. That is to say, even young people who have not experienced positive interactions with adults related to their education and career goals identify these qualities as important in any adult who might help them in the future.

Mutuality and transparency are key in relationships with adults

The most positive relationships for young people are those where they feel valued and where there is mutual support for one another. The research also showed that some young people—especially those in the southern part of the United States, those in rural communities, and those in Hispanic communities/families—see themselves as responsible and contributing members of a larger community. Becoming of greater value to that community as one grows, and 'paying back' investments made in you through helping the next generation and in some cases your parents or grandparents, is an important marker of adulthood and of success.

Tied to values of mutuality is a belief that trusted relationships—peer and adult—should be transparent. For example, when young people have a mentor or other relationship with a supportive adult outside of their families or immediate community, young people want to know what that adult's motivation is for being a mentor, coach, or volunteer.

Trust

When encouraging youth to develop and maintain connections, be aware that many youth from households with lower incomes have not consistently experienced adults or peers as trustworthy.

Youth from households with lower incomes often report that they distrust that the system can work for them, and distrust that people with more power will use it to back them up or help them advance.

Some youth from households with lower incomes do not know or trust that they could ask an authority figure to come to their assistance. For example, that they could ask a manager to deal with an angry customer on their behalf rather than having to deal with it alone.

Young people have largely positive perceptions of mentors

Regardless of race, gender, or socio-economic background, young people largely report having positive associations with the word *mentor* and understand this relationship to be of potential value to them as they pursue their educational and career pathways.

> *"My parents come home and are tired and they don't listen…but my mentors have given me respect as a person. That makes it easier to go to them when I need something."*
>
> — OAKLAND, CA, BLACK MALE, 16–18, MIXED INCOME

> *"[A mentor is] just someone that you can look up to, someone that you can go to if you are stuck and you don't know what to do. They guide you through it. They help you."*
>
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE MALE, 16–18, LOWER INCOME

Young people's access to mentoring relationships varies by both socio-economic background and by type of school and extracurricular opportunities that they attend. Young people from households with higher incomes, who are more likely to report that they have already had a mentor, see having a mentor as important and sometimes critical to their educational and occupational pathways. They are also more likely to report having a mentor or mentor relationship through their high school or extracurricular opportunities.

> *"I think a big thing is just my mentors and how helpful they are. Through residencies you always have people above you that are instructing you and helping you, and if those people aren't very patient or helpful then that can be a big barrier."*
>
> — PASADENA, CA, WHITE MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

"In college freshman year, I got to go on a medical mission trip, and it was upper-classmen there too...I have done some research assistant stuff. My academic mentor, she helped set that up. I am doing an internship next semester too."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

Young people from households with lower incomes are more likely to report mentor relationships through occupational preparation programs (such as VOTECH or other occupational pathways programs), clubs, and specialized high schools that target young people from households with lower incomes and/or Black and Hispanic youth.

Young people in this research who grew up in households with lower incomes are also eager to become mentors themselves. Some want to give young people like themselves an opportunity that they did not have. For others, it is a desire to continue the legacy of programs they participated in as young people.

"Mentorship and lifting others, so I want to get to a point where I can give that back because I feel like, especially being Black, African-American community, we don't know about these opportunities...can do with our lives. And I just want to be a source for that."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK FEMALE, 26–29, MIXED INCOME

"[I am] thinking about starting being a girls' mentor, reaching out to my friends and family if anyone wants to do it with me. Starting a social media page, spread the word, [inaudible], get other girls to help mentor and maybe start, like, a [foreign] one."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 16–18, LOWER INCOME

For some young adults (ages 26-29), having a mentor is associated with work and life happiness—support in making career and life decisions, getting a promotion, and setting and reaching long-term goals.

"That's one of the reasons why I joined my fraternity, not for the partying or anything like that, just to be with brothers that kind of walk the same path...When they look at you, they see themselves 20 years ago, and they remember how it was being 20 or so and wishing they'd had an older mentor, someone that can light the pathway."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 26–29, MIXED INCOME

Individual connections are best for introverts

Some young people in the focus groups express anxiety when asked to consider the role of networking or connections on their work pathways. This feeling was particularly the case among young people who self-identify as introverted or less social. For these participants, mentors provide an important one-to-one relationship that frames social capital as attainable and decreases stress associated with feeling that their introvert personalities are a deficit to their *thriving*. Among these young people, a deep relationship with one adult, complemented by a few strong connections, is appealing and actionable.

"I think networking is important, but for me personally, I don't like that it is important because—I am okay talking to people, but I always get uncomfortable...If it is a conversation where you are getting to know someone or something like that, I get a lot of anxiety with that kind of thing...Networking is really important, but I feel, like, for me it would just be very difficult, which would kind of set me back."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 16–18, LOWER INCOME

Perceptions of social capital language and concepts

The Intervention focus groups and social capital workshops enabled researchers to look more deeply at the language and implied meanings the field is currently using to refer to the intentional relationships young people build or need to build in their work lives. The groups aimed to more fully understand the language young people use to articulate the care, resources, and information they may need or draw upon as they move towards their futures—and young people's understanding and emotions around these ideas and words. The focus group conversation focused specifically on four ideas and keywords associated with intentional relationship building: social capital, networking, connections, and mentor.

Social capital

There are different programmatic models that aim to support young people to learn aspects of relationship-building. Some of these programs explicitly use the term *social capital* and train their students to use and integrate this specific language to refer to the asset-rich networks that can support them as they learn and enter and navigate their working lives.

Several young people in the focus groups found the word *social capital* to be problematic. Most youth participants have never heard the phrase and, in the absence of a concrete understanding of its meaning, they fill in the gaps in ways that undermine its positive intent. Even when participants were taught the meaning of *social capital* in the Intervention focus groups, the term itself was not sticky.

Among young people who had heard of the phrase before participating in the focus groups, the definitions and meaning they assigned were frequently negative or inaccurate.

One problematic interpretation of the phrase *social capital* is that the term monetizes relationships. This negative interpretation highlights the dimensions of intentional relationship-building young people are least comfortable with and implies that these relationships are *not* based on trust, mutuality, or personal affinity.

> *"Social capital sounds fake to me, like you are trying to make friends or connections just because you want to use someone because you know that they can get you somewhere... The term 'social capital' is just kind of funny because it has a weird connotation. It is an economic term, capital, like building money and wealth. It is funny they describe relationships that way."*
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 16–18, LOWER INCOME

> *"I kind of already knew, like, monetary, wealth, and then the understanding of needing to have your smarts and sort of having connections with the community. I just didn't know what that was called, the phrases for it...I just didn't know what it was called."*
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, MALE, 16–20, BUILD STUDENT

Connections and networking

Young people understand *connections* and *networking* to be different ideas and, as such, they evoke different emotional reactions. Although often used interchangeably by the field and curriculum developers, young people understand and relate to the words *connections* and *networking* differently. In the Intervention focus groups, young people had mostly positive associations with the word *connections* and more negative associations with the word *networking*. Young people desire *real* relationships and friendships, and in that context, they feel that *connections* are more likely to be real and deep. By contrast, *networks* are perceived as superficial and transactional. Below are some distinctions that young people drew in the groups.
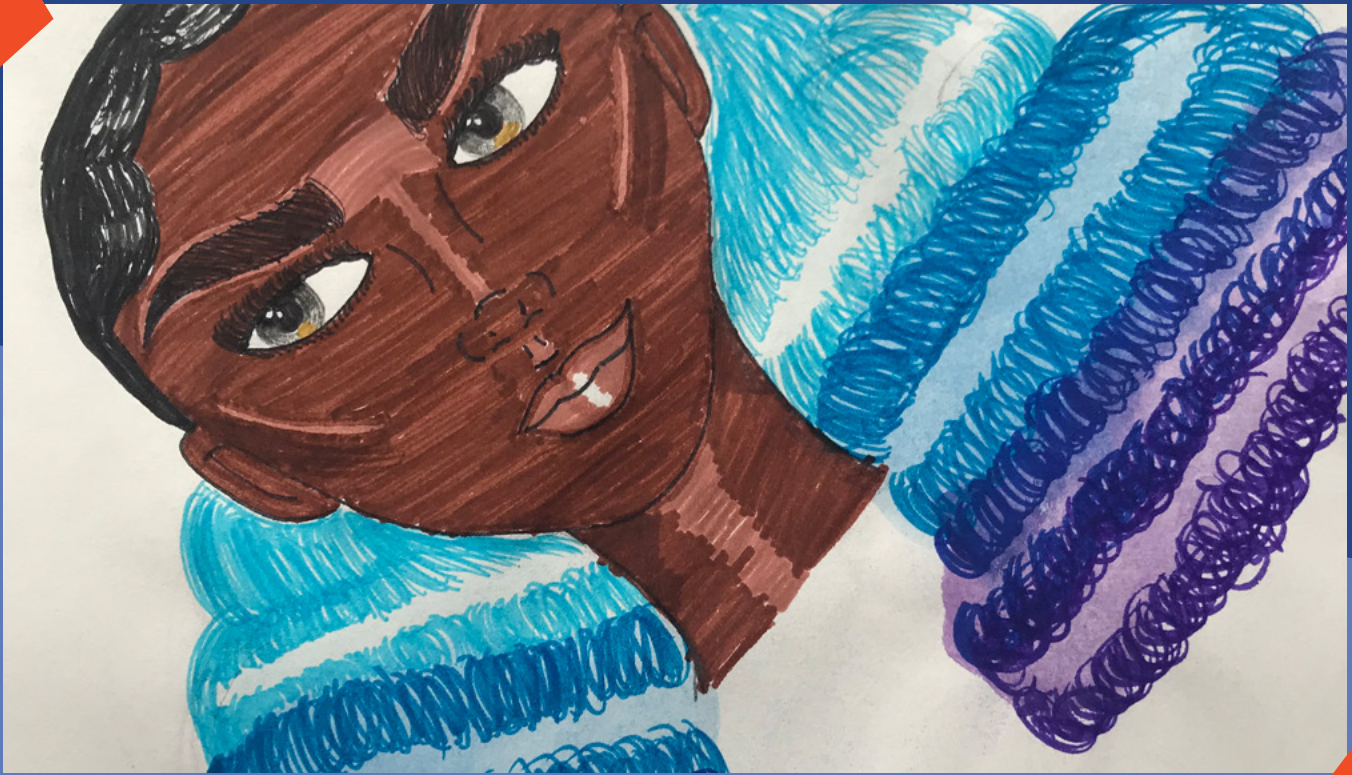
Connections

- Connections suggest warm and mutual interactions between equals.
- Connections are relationship-driven, not transaction-driven.
- Young people feel that making connections is within their control, is potentially accessible to them, and that connections are among the assets they already have (e.g., family members, friends, and community).
- Connections feel mutually beneficial, and both parties benefit from being in relationship to one another. The young person contributes something to those they are in connection with.

Networking

- Networking is conflated with technology, social network, and advertising (a social network that you use to advertise/market/sell your work).
- Networking is understood as being transactional and, therefore, superficial. It is related to business or getting something for yourself and is not related to human or personal relationships.
- Networking is described as cold or grey, while connections are warm and blue.
- Networking is about accumulating wealth; it is selfish and about getting ahead.

One exception to this more negative view of networking was found among young people in the BUILD Intervention group in Los Angeles. The proximity to the entertainment industry and how it highlights the importance of capital and robust networks as necessary inputs to successful careers may have an impact on how young people view these ideas in this region.

The age of participants may also be important, as younger people (those who are 16 and 17 years old) have less experience building relationships outside of their families and friends and, therefore, may be less exposed to the idea and utility of networking beyond the social networking they described as transactional.

Mentoring

Although definitions for who can be a mentor and the types of behaviors that a mentor undertakes are not uniform across the focus group participants, young people's understanding of mentors and mentoring tend to have positive associations.

According to young people, a mentor can be:

- Peer
- Near-peer
- Family members (aunts, cousins, older siblings, grandparents, etc.)
- Teachers
- Other school staff
- Counselors, therapists
- Adult professionals
- Employer

Expectations, characteristics, or behaviors of a mentor include:

- Someone with more experience than you.
- A relationship that is not time bound; it can be a one-time provision of guidance or support or a long-term or short-term relationship.
- Someone who has some shared life experience or identity or common interest with you.
- Someone who gives you 'clutch' advice.
- You can confide in them.
- Someone who takes the time to listen to you and know you and ask questions.
- Someone who offers specific, tailored advice to you and not generic advice.
- They don't pressure you—they guide and support you.
- They help you think things through and let you come to your own decisions.
- They encourage you to push boundaries and yourself.

Although the field often distinguishes between types of people who provide support—a mentor versus a coach versus a role model, the quality and duration of those relationships, and the professional position and resources offered by the person providing support—young people do not make these same distinctions and instead focus on what it *feels like* to be in a relationship with this type of person.

> *"A mentor is someone that you can look up to, someone that you can go to if you are stuck and you don't know what to do. They guide you through it. They help you."*
>
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE MALE, 16–18, LOWER INCOME

> *"I really love the feeling of getting advice from my peers."*
>
> — ONLINE, HISPANIC MALE, 26–29, MIXED INCOME

> *"I really don't have any mentors, but I have family members that I can go to. I have a cousin… He has connections to people like that…just by me and him being close, I feel like he's that door to open up."*
>
> — CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

> *"A mentor is someone you can trust and can lean on when you are not strong on your own. Someone you are close with and you can pick up the phone and say 'Hey, I need you today.' They are always there for you. They are loving and they are kind."*
>
> — LOS ANGELES, WHITE FEMALE, 16–18, LOWER INCOME

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

Implications
These insights raise questions about the importance of investing in defining certain terms and educating youth and parents about the (often contested) meanings of specific words (e.g., social capital or mentoring) versus investing in leveraging the existing positive associations youth and parents have with some phrases and using these existing perceptions as a foundation for further learning and engagement.

Developing intentional relationships

In the focus groups, young people (ages 15-21) were asked to describe the people or information that might help them on their education and career pathways. Young people most readily identify long-term and intimate relationships such as those they have with parents, siblings, and other family members.

In the survey, 76 percent of young people say the guidance they receive from a parent or guardian about work, job, or career is generally helpful, with 39 percent saying that guidance is extremely helpful. In addition, 61 percent of young people say the guidance they receive from other adult family members is helpful (21% extremely helpful).
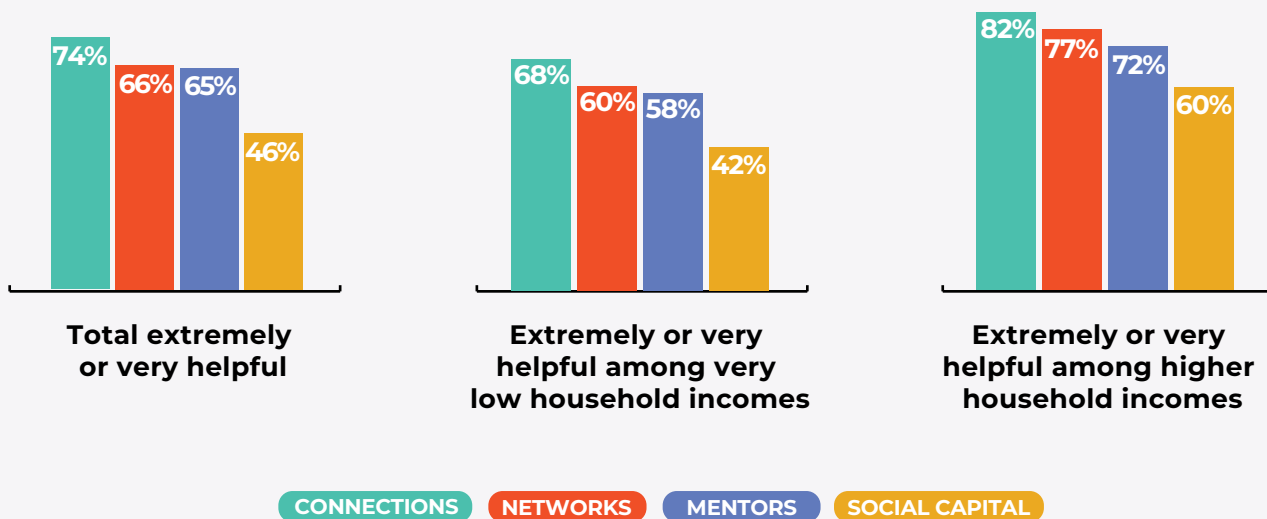
Although many young people demonstrate personal agency as it relates to seeking out people, information, and resources that can support their thinking about education and career, they tend to do so prioritizing the possibility of finding and developing a deep relationship with an individual person who can guide or advise them (e.g., teachers, mentors, friends). Many young people seem to believe that the potential for less intimate and intensive relationships to impact or positively influence their career pathways is minimal. In the focus groups, this belief is demonstrated in part by young people's likelihood to focus on a need or desire to meet one well-positioned person (singular) who can help them to get where they want to go in life rather than the importance of knowing many people who do different things—depth, breadth, and diversity of network.

FIGURE 37.

Connections Valued Over Social Capital

Young people in our survey were asked to review a list of words—connections, networks, mentors, and social capital—and assess how helpful each is in terms of impacting their career or future career. The results among these respondents indicate that young people are more likely to value connections over networks, and value mentors over social capital. These perceptions remain largely consistent by race and gender, although age is an exception.

Young people ages 15 to 16 are significantly more likely to see mentors as extremely or very helpful (73%) compared to those ages 19 to 21 (59%). In addition, young people who grew up in households with higher incomes are significantly more likely to view connections, networks, mentors and social capital as helpful to their career.

Total extremely or very helpful
CONNECTIONS 74%, NETWORKS 66%, MENTORS 65%, SOCIAL CAPITAL 46%

Extremely or very helpful among very low household incomes
CONNECTIONS 68%, NETWORKS 60%, MENTORS 58%, SOCIAL CAPITAL 42%

Extremely or very helpful among higher household incomes
CONNECTIONS 82%, NETWORKS 77%, MENTORS 72%, SOCIAL CAPITAL 60%

CONNECTIONS   NETWORKS   MENTORS   SOCIAL CAPITAL

"My cousin works for HBO, and he's trying to do more of the actual production. Me and him have been talking it up, and he actually has the filmmaking background, and I have my weird-ass mind of random ideas. And us choosing to craft a collaboration and actually trying to make it into something is something I can see doing."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 26–29, MIXED INCOME

"I guess a scenario would be like in the movies how we saw fancy people wearing dresses and suits and you are talking to people. If they were me, I would be going up to a doctor or something and I'd be asking questions about if he is doing research. When I get more experience, if I can go building some kind of connection towards him so that later on if I need something related to their field, I can contact them."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 16–18, LOWER INCOME

In this way, young people perceive *strong-tie* social connections, that is, individual and often intense relationships with people that deepen over a longer period of time (mentor, coach, teacher) as having the potential to have greater power in their lives than *weak-tie* social connections, that is, interactions with people or institutions that are less familiar to them but also more likely to introduce new information.

In addition, a sizeable number of focus group participants perceive that teachers do not care about them as individuals, are not interested in being in the classroom, or are actively trying to prevent them from succeeding. Many experience high school curricula as unimportant or irrelevant to their futures, and some report being frustrated that teachers do not know this or do not care.

Participants report feeling pride in self-sufficiency

Young people in the online focus groups shared deep pride in finding resources and information on their own versus information that is given to them. This sense of personal accomplishment is an important aspect of the stories they tell themselves and others about their personal pathways and success.

"I am not very good at math, so it was a huge struggle for me, and I would deal with it by getting tutoring help and just practicing on my own online."

— ONLINE, HISPANIC FEMALE, 15–21, LOWER INCOME

"Challenges have taught me to do things myself rather than relying on a company to hire me for experience."

— ONLINE, WHITE MALE, 15–21, LOWER INCOME

In this research, younger people describe opportunities to get information on their own. For this age group, information and resources are more likely to come to them through someone in their lives and that person helps them to understand the importance of the information or the resource.

In the survey, nearly two thirds (63%) of young people say they have an extremely or very good idea of where to look for information to learn how they can achieve their future job, work, or career goals, whereas only nine percent of young people report not having a very good idea of where to look for information. Black young people—both female (67%) and male (65%)—say they have an extremely or very good idea of where to look for information. White young people diverge somewhat by gender, with white males (70%) more likely than females (62%) to say they have an extremely or very good idea of where to look for information. Gender differences among Hispanic young people are minimal, with Hispanic males (63%) just somewhat more likely than Hispanic females (60%) to say they have an extremely or very good idea of where to look for information.

Just over three quarters (76%) report having looked for information, advice, or help with job, work, or career, with female respondents (79%) more likely than males (72%) to say they have looked for information. Among those who have looked for information, advice, or help with job, work, or career, the most popular source for information is online (60%)—with Google and other search engines being the dominant online resources cited. Teachers represent the second most frequently cited resource (43% of young people cite them as a resource).

The third most frequently cited resource is in-person visits to an organization or club (40%), followed by school counselors (39%), job fairs (33%), library (16%), and other vocational services at school (13%). Female respondents more frequently seek out information from school counselors (42% among female compared to 35% among males). Respondents feel largely positive about their information searches, with most searches focused on how long it takes to get the education/certification to have the job they are researching (68%), followed by how much those programs cost (52%) and current job openings (37%). Other popular searches include pay scales in different jobs (44%), current job openings (37%), and tests that match skills to certain careers (30%).

However, the focus groups revealed that some young people (ages 15-21) struggle to identify the resource or information levers that may have contributed to their ability to attain short-term educational goals and/or those that could enable them to take steps towards their future educational and work goals. This may be due in part to their stage of life. Young people (ages 15-21) are often still learning the processes by which they can identify what information they need and how to get it. This is a skill often learned in high school—whether to complete homework or school assignments or to seek out extracurricular, sports, or club opportunities—and refined through lived experience in higher education, work, and life more broadly. Although some young people likely have experienced exposure to education or career resources in some way, they may not yet understand the weight or potential weight of that exposure as it relates to future goals. In the absence of real-world experience navigating or seeking guidance/information, experience and active learning is the preferred method for young people getting information.

When asked to reflect on past experiences and choices that brought them to their present moment, young adults (aged 26-29) more readily point to information, resources, and individual people who cared for or supported them on their pathways. This group of young adults also recognizes the continued impact of networks and connections on their future success and the importance of continuing to build and be in relationships with people who are different from themselves. There is a critical opportunity to understand the moments in young people's lives that help them to transition from *I know I need connections to thrive* to *I know I need connections to thrive* AND *I know how to get or build those connections.*

> *"Without other people, when you are just depending on yourself, and you are trying to be completely self-sufficient and blocking others out, you are just surviving. If you reach out and have this diverse support system for everything you need, you can have all your needs met and you can be really thriving and be able to reach all of your goals rather than just surviving and trying to isolate yourself."*
>
> — LOS ANGELES, CA, WHITE FEMALE, 16–18, LOWER INCOME

As detailed in the next section, the conversations in some of the focus groups provided an opportunity for some young people to explore how connections on their pathways might be built by creating space for non-judgmental, open conversations—and allowing peer and near-peer exploration and listening. There is transformational potential in hearing how those in similar circumstances are thinking about their futures and navigating the process of determining where they want to go—and then getting there.

Young People See Opportunity in Conversation

"I was able to open up with you about a lot of stuff that I don't even talk to my mom or my family or friends about...I'll just be thankful that I came here and talked to you. It was nice talking to you, though...I feel like you were just like a mentor, let somebody ask you questions. I feel like we're on Oprah or something. Yeah, but it was nice."

— GARY, IN, BLACK FEMALE, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

This research provided space for young people to engage in meaningful, transformational conversations in real time. Many of those who participated in the focus groups and in-depth interviews repeatedly commented about the impact of this unique opportunity to speak at length about themselves and their ideas, hopes, and dreams.

Seventy-two percent (72%) of survey respondents describe their experience answering the survey questions about their future job, work, and career as positive, with nearly half (46%) saying their experience was very positive.

The structure of the focus groups intentionally elevated and centered youth voices above that of the adult moderator in the room. These structured conversations offered young people an opportunity to imagine their future and think concretely about what their next steps could be. They also allowed young people the space to think big in a low-risk setting, absent the judgment, stress, and pressure they sometimes feel when having conversations about their futures—if they even have an opportunity to have a conversation about their future at all.

Young people in these discussions placed importance on being asked what their lives will *be like* in the future, not what they want to *be* when they grow up. This experience was a rare opportunity for them to imagine and talk about their futures with their peers and near peers with little fear of judgment.

"Everything about this conversation stood out to me. I've never sat down in a group and actually done this."

— BELLE GLADE, FL, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

"Definitely thinking about my future and wishing there was something like this in my high school, someone asking these questions."

— NEW YORK, NY, HISPANIC MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

Young people find value engaging with peers and near-peers with different future pathways

In every group, there was an immense amount of diversity present in the participants' lived experiences and pathways and visions for the future, regardless of their race or gender. This diversity added to, rather than undermined, the sense of belonging that emerged in the groups. Participants' diverse experiences

Role Of The Moderator in Each Type of In-Person Research Discussion Among Youth

The in-person qualitative research included three primary types of research discussion:

1 In one type, *pathways exploration*, the moderator is a neutral adult who facilitates conversation among a group of six to eight youth participants.

2 In another type, *real-world workshop*, the neutral adult moderator facilitates a conversation among a group of 10-15 young people about young people's perceptions of language related to social capital. This discussion is followed by a short workshop in which a social capital curriculum is introduced by a staff member of a youth-serving partner organization. Immediately following the workshop, the group of young people practice networking and intentional relationship building in a real-world setting with professional adult volunteers. Following this networking session, the neutral adult moderator returns to debrief on the day with a small group of two to four young people.

3 Finally, in the *Intervention groups*, the moderator facilitates a group discussion with nine youth together, and then organizes the participants into small groups of three for peer and near-peer discussion of the pathway exercise. In this last model the adult has no direct involvement in the peer/near-peer discussion.

Youth had sincere, high-quality, and transformative conversations in *all* of these models.

and goals were critical to the transformative conversations that happened, especially in the Intervention groups' near-peer discussions. Young people are able to perceive, understand, and offer support from different vantage points. In these groups, young people often heard perspectives they had not considered and from which those around them had not been able to offer guidance or encouragement.

> *"I'm really inspired by all of you. I guess it is kind of taking a step back and looking at our lives; what have we been doing all this time; education, the future and just seeing that we are all very different, but we have similar holistic goals, and we all have our own individual path."*
>
> — ATLANTA, GA, BLACK FEMALE 16–18, MIXED INCOME

> *"Just everybody's different perspective, it gave me a lot of insight. And I was exposed to a lot of different, like, a lot of ways that other people think."*
>
> — NEW YORK, NY, BLACK MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

> *"It actually has you think and plan out what your possible dreams are and then share that with others and see what other ideas are that may be similar, but totally different. So, then you get a feel of what other opportunities are out there that maybe you hadn't thought of."*
>
> — YAKIMA, WA, WHITE MALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Black and Hispanic young people are more likely to have conversations that explicitly discuss the intersections of race and gender with their past lived experiences and future lives, while white participants are less likely to acknowledge—or are less aware of—their whiteness as it relates to their educational experience, aspirations, and future goals.

> *"It's good to see that other girls want Black women to move up in the world, and that I'm not the only person out there that's feeling that kind of pressure—like people want to keep you down."*
>
> — GREENVILLE, MS, BLACK FEMALES, 15–18, LOWER INCOME

Young adults (ages 26 to 29) also experienced belonging and comfort in the focus group

discussions; being in a mixed-gender setting did nothing to dampen the feeling of community that quickly emerged. These participants bonded through sharing their lived experiences and discussing things like their imagined future as parents, their hopes for their children, and their aspirations for their future selves.

"You see how we are sitting here, the six of us including yourself? So, 10 years from now when we are around 45, we should do a focus group reunion."

— NEW YORK, NY, WHITE MALE, 26–29, MIXED INCOME

"If you've ever traveled the world, you see old people out there just enjoying life."

"...she went to Vegas by herself. They don't care no more..."

"They're retired from a good job, obviously, because they just laying on the beach for weeks on top of weeks, and you got to put in the work just to retire..."

"I have a point about that too. I sort of feel like am I going to retire...But if I get there, I hope I'm still active, at a place where I'm passing on a generational wealth with the kids. I think that's really cool."

"Yeah. Just watching them, the seeds I planted blossom, you know...and just serving up some wisdom to my grandkids..."

— CHICAGO, IL, CONVERSATION AMONG BLACK FEMALES AND MALES, 26–29, MIXED INCOME

Focus group conversations yielded transformation and connection

Many young people feel a genuine sense of gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the conversation and appreciate what they learned from their fellow participants. Many left the conversations feeling relieved, reassured, and, in many ways, transformed.

"The whole thing just really woke me up from a quiet place, because I'm a very quiet person."

— LOS ANGELES, CA, MALE, 18–22, BUILD STUDENT

FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

Young People See Opportunity in Conversation

This research used a number of different adult to student configurations to facilitate and support spaces in which young people felt free to talk about their hopes, dreams, and futures. There is an opportunity to adapt and experiment with these conversation structures in order to build more spaces in which young people feel they can express themselves without judgment and learn from—and be inspired by—their peers.

Parents with lower incomes who participated in this research said that the focus groups provided a unique space to share their experiences, raise questions, and sometimes receive guidance or advice on raising teenagers and young adults. There is an opportunity to build and invest in interventions that provide spaces in which parents can learn about the value of career exploration and can themselves receive guidance about how they can best support their young people to meet their goals.

"Everyone in this room, they've made sense that things are getting better…speaking to everyone here gave me a positive outlook."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK MALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

Young people have a greater sense of connection after the group conversation, both with their fellow participants and also their community.

"That'll be beautiful. I'm going to bump into you one day, and you're going to be doing your thing, you feel me? I love stuff like that because everybody doesn't have the same path."

— CHICAGO, IL, BLACK FEMALE, 17–21, LOWER INCOME

Whether reassessing their occupational pathways, considering new options for jobs, work, or career, or feeling a renewed sense of motivation to continue on their current journey, many youth participants left these conversations changed.

"This gave you time to actually sit and think about your future, because usually we're just going. We're not thinking. It feels good to take that time."

— DOWNEY, CA, HISPANIC FEMALE, 17–20, HIGHER INCOME

Closing

Nearly 4,000 youth generously shared their life experiences and challenges and opportunities in their lives, as well as expressed their ideas and visions about their futures. It is these nearly 4,000 voices that are speaking through the content of this report.

These youth voices offer both opportunities and challenges for those working to improve young people's experiences of, and outcomes related to, education and work opportunity, and perhaps the biggest challenge, is to allow young people's voices to inform future programming design. There is an incredible opportunity to center a genuine awareness of young people's lives in future programming. To seize that opportunity, it is critically important to listen to what young people are saying.

Discrepancies often exist between the assumptions about young people's experiences, goals, and pathways for the future and what their experiences, goals, and pathways are in reality. Checking these assumptions is difficult and can even be uncomfortable. Yet, the opportunities that can be realized are not just for those people working to improve the lives of Black and Hispanic young people and young people from households with lower incomes—they are for these young people themselves.

"I hope this information is going to somebody that has got some power.

– ATLANTA, GA, BLACK MALE, 18–21, LOWER INCOME

Acknowledgements

This research project was an enormous effort that required a talented, dedicated team of researchers to accomplish.

The conceptualization and design of the research project was led by Amy Simon, Founding Partner of Goodwin Simon Strategic Research. Senior Researcher Michaela Leslie-Rule played a key leadership role throughout the project and brought her outstanding focus group moderation skills to this work, as well as her keen analytical mind and writing. John Whaley was the Senior Research Director for the project and did an amazing job of keeping the research on track and on time, as well as directing the national online survey of youth.

The research would never have been so successful if it were not for the team of dedicated, professional, caring, and highly skilled focus group moderators, and we give special thanks to: Isabel Balboa, Alana Black, Raul Chavez, Angelica DeGaetano, Naser Javaid, Michaela Leslie-Rule, Rebekah Orr, Amy Simon, and John Whaley.

Coordinating dozens of focus groups in rural, urban, and suburban areas across the nation is no small task, and special thanks go to Thaïs Arjo, Research Coordinator, for playing that important role.

Conducting the analysis and organizing the reporting of research findings was its own monumental undertaking. For their thought leadership and report writing, special thanks go to: Raul Chavez, Naser Javaid, Sara Knight, Michaela Leslie-Rule, Amy Simon, and John Whaley. For editorial support, thanks to Justin Adams and Sharon Pinkerton.

Pamela Morgan is a gifted cognitive linguistic analyst who brought her special talents and perceptions to this analysis and provided the research team with different ways of hearing and understanding the meanings underlying how young people and the adults in their lives were talking.

Special thanks go to the BUILD team for co-creating two youth focus groups in a very short time period. When the opportunity came to develop and test an intervention based on learnings from the research, they immediately stepped up to lead that work.

In addition, this research and analysis could never have been undertaken without the genuine, thoughtful, and engaged partnership of the Advisory Team Members. We want to share special thanks and gratitude to each of them for being willing partners with us on this journey.

Appendices

Advisory Team Biographies

Romero Brown
Principal, Romero Brown Consulting

Romero Brown is Principal for Romero Brown Consulting. Brown is a veteran in the field of youth development. He has more than 20 years experience in the nonprofit world, all of that time devoted to supporting at-risk youth. He is passionate in his efforts to help youth transform their lives for the better.

Through his consulting firm, Brown provides a variety of critical services for non-profit organizations designed to support operational excellence. He has helped build and strengthen local boards, designed critical strategies, staff development programs, and fundraising plans. In his past position as Vice President, Program & Youth Development Services, he led Boys & Girls Clubs of America's Good Character & Citizenship and Healthy Lifestyles programs and initiatives. Brown also guided the organization's Family Strengthening and Civic Engagement initiatives. Before joining BGCA, Brown served for five years directing Head Start and youth and teen development programs in Chicago. He spent another eight years working with children and teens at Boys & Girls Clubs of Chicago, where he earned a reputation for program development and management.

A noted youth advocate, he spearheaded numerous community collaborations and partnerships and helped found a neighborhood-based anti-gang organization. Nationally, Brown has played a significant role in addressing critical issues facing our nation's young people.

An in-demand youth development expert, he has provided consultation and support to President Jimmy Carter, Nickelodeon's 'Let's Just Play' Advisory Board, and non-profit youth development organizations across the nation. Brown's work has earned him several awards, which include the Congressional Award for Community Service, the Hidalgo Award for Service to the Hispanic Community, and the BGCA Outstanding Youth Development Professional Award.

Nate Cadena
COO, Denver Scholarship Foundation

Nathan Cadena currently serves as the Chief Operating Officer for the Denver Scholarship Foundation (DSF), overseeing all college access, scholarship and college success programs. Born and raised in Colorado, he grew up in similar circumstances as the many first-generation and low-income students he serves at DSF. Considering this, his work with DSF Students, within Denver Public Schools, is extremely valued personally. Prior to DSF, Nathan worked in education for over fifteen years within community colleges, universities, and nonprofit organizations. He has served professionally as a career counselor, professional trainer, advisor/instructor, financial aid administrator, and director of both college access and success programs. These various roles were with the Community College of Denver, Council for Opportunity in Education (COE), Daniels Fund, Front Range Community College, and Colorado State University. Nathan is a proud TRIO Alum, holds a certificate in Global Career Development Facilitation from the Community College of Denver, a Bachelor of Arts in social sciences from Colorado State University, and a Master of Education from Regis University. Nathan has enjoyed applying his background in education and non-profit work and is now excited to broaden his leadership experience and involvement in the Denver Community. Nathan continues to work and volunteer for the educational advancement of

Coloradoans of all ages, as he considers Colorado his permanent home. As a Colorado native, one may guess correctly that he is an avid Broncos fan and supports all other Colorado sports teams. In addition, he spends much of his personal time co-raising two daughters.

Mary Gatta, PhD
Associate Professor of Sociology, CUNY-Stella and Charles Guttman Community College

Dr. Mary Gatta joined the faculty as an Associate Professor of Sociology at Stella and Charles Guttman Community College at CUNY in August, 2015. Prior to her appointment at CUNY, Mary served as a Senior Scholar at Wider Opportunities for Women in Washington DC, and as Director of Gender and Workforce Policy at the Center for Women and Work, and Assistant Professor of Labor Studies at Rutgers University. In addition, she recently served on New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy's Labor and Workforce Development Transition Team.

At Guttman, Mary teaches social science courses and served as the Faculty Coordinator of *Ethnographies of Work*, a key component of Guttman's First Year Experience. The unique aspect of this course and her leadership role is ensuring that career education and information is embedded within the academic curriculum in order to better ensure student success at college and beyond. Students use ethnographic research methods and a social science framework to explore work and careers with a critical lens; along with mastering key job-readiness skills. She has published articles on this course and its impact on students' learning and understanding of professional careers.

Mary is a leader in research related to job quality, such as workplace flexibility for low-wage workers, workforce development programs and nontraditional job training for women. Her book *Waiting on Retirement: Aging and Economic Insecurity in Low Wage Work*, on the experiences of older low wage workers as they march toward a semblance of retirement, was released in October 2018 from Stanford University Press. Her latest book *Gentrification Down the Shore* (with Molly Makris) explores the connection between jobs, racial inequality, and seasonal gentrification and the experiences of long time residents in this beach-community city of Asbury Park, NJ. In addition to these books Mary has published numerous academic articles, policy papers, and op-eds.

Noel Ginsburg
Founder and CEO, CareerWise Colorado

Noel Ginsburg is the founder, CEO, and Board Chair of CareerWise Colorado. He is an appointee to the Colorado Workforce Development Council and has chaired several boards including: the Mile High United Way (twice), and the Allied Jewish Federation of Colorado. Noel was a founding board member and past president of Colorado I Have A Dream and the Colorado Advanced Manufacturing Alliance. Additional board service includes: the Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce and president of the Denver Public Schools Foundation. Noel has received the MLK Social Responsibility Business Award in 1995, the Daniel L. Ritchie Award for Ethics in Business in 1998, the 2001 Leadership Denver Outstanding Alumnus Award, the 2012 Goodwill Community Leader Award, and the Anti-Defamation League's 2016 Civil Rights Award.

In 1980, while still at the University of Denver, Noel founded Intertech Plastics, a manufacturer of medical and consumer goods products. Intertech employs nearly 200 people out of two facilities and operates 24/7.

Michael Lee
Director of Programs, Destiny Arts

Mike Lee is the Director of Programs at Destiny Arts Center, where he works to provide programmatic oversight for center-based work and school and community sites. Mike has been with Destiny since 2019. Born and raised in Oakland, Mike believes that investing in young people is one of the most valuable things a society can do and is committed to ensuring that Oakland maintains safe spaces for creative expression and youth development.

Before joining Destiny, Mike developed and expanded youth programming at YR Media (formerly Youth Radio). He formalized their workforce development program by expanding its budget and forging key relationships with quality employer partners and developed a restorative justice program at the organization. Mike has over 15 years of experience developing and managing programs in social services and youth development, including international experience working with systems-engaged young people in Germany. In addition to his work at Destiny, Mike provides training through A Better Way and Fred Finch Youth Center on best practices for working with transition-age youth. Mike founded a local charitable group, Give Oakland, which provides support during the holidays for Oakland Head Start programs. Mike holds a bachelor's degree in Social Work from San Francisco State University.

Jane Margolis, EdD
Senior Researcher, UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies

Jane Margolis is a Senior Researcher at UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. Since 1994, her work has focused on the underrepresentation of females and students of color in computer science education. Margolis is the lead author of two books on this topic: *Unlocking the Clubhouse: Women in Computing* (MIT Press, 2002), which examines the gender gap in computer science at the college level; and *Stuck in the Shallow End: Education Race, and Computing* (MIT Press, 2008), which focuses on the low numbers and experiences of African-Americans, Latinos, and females in computer science at the high school level. In 2016, Margolis was awarded as a White House Champion of Change for her work around equity and inclusion in CS education in our public schools. She is the PI on major NSF grants about democratizing computer science knowledge at the K-12 level. Her current research focuses on elevating student voice about engagement, identity, and agency in high school computer science. Margolis views her work in computer science as a window into the larger issues of segregation and the reproduction of inequality.

Brandon Nicholson, PhD
Founding Executive Director, The Hidden Genius Project

An Oakland native, The Hidden Genius Project's Founding Executive Director Brandon Nicholson has always felt a deep sense of commitment to promoting equity in the public realm, particularly in the education space. Prior to joining The Hidden Genius Project, he conducted research, evaluation, and analysis across a range of key social policy areas. Brandon has conducted substantial research in the areas of education and youth development, with a particular focus on issues of equity and access in K-12 education for underserved populations. He has considerable experience investigating linkages among race, class, and youth development.

Andrea M. O'Neal
Senior Coach, Career Prep Program, Management Leadership for Tomorrow

Andrea M. O'Neal brings nearly 20 years of experience across social enterprise and global Wall Street to champion institutional equity and the economic advancement of historically disenfranchised communities. Andrea brings a deep body of knowledge and field practitioner work acquired during more than a decade of high impact program design and delivery, with a specialization in programs and curricula serving Black, Latinx, and Native undergraduates. As a senior nonprofit professional, leadership strategist, and coach, she has helped launch thousands of early career professionals of color into high-trajectory workplaces. Prior to her transition to nonprofit, Andrea enjoyed a successful career in investment banking, including: four years abroad in Europe and Asia, direct-promote Associate training at the Wharton School, and deal teams for some of the world's premiere IPOs. Andrea has also long been on the front lines of mission-critical conversations related to racial equity in business, workplace culture, and intersectional identity. Her work has been featured on Bloomberg TV, Business Insider, Uptown Magazine, Levo League, and in several industry conferences.

Additionally, she serves as an Equitable Futures research advisory committee member for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Chair of the Board of Directors for the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA), Steering Committee of the Center for the Study of Slavery & Justice (CSSJ) at Brown University, a StartingBloc Fellow for social enterprise, President-Elect for the Inman Page Black Alumni Council of Brown University, and the Ambassadors' Program for the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Business Economics from Brown University, hails from Atlanta, and resides in Brooklyn.

Roz Pierson, PhD
Partner, Luminas LLC

Dr. Pierson is Partner at Luminas. Roz is a social scientist skilled in qualitative and quantitative research methods. Her specific expertise is in global comparative research design and analysis in healthcare, healthcare technology, health policy, financial services, and general consumer and physician research; she has conducted research in over 30 countries. Roz's strength is infusing analytic insights into the research process that connect social and behavioral outcomes to strategic business goals and objectives in order to develop more effective brand positioning and enhanced understanding of healthcare professionals', patient, client, or customer experiences and relationships. Her expertise in social science research is complemented with over 27 years of research experience in social marketing, health and health care communication, foundation and non-profit issues, and consumer behavior.

Prior to joining Luminas, Roz was Senior Vice President, Healthcare Practice Lead and Healthcare Policy Lead at Nielsen, Senior Vice President at Harris Interactive, and Vice President at TNS Global. Roz has written and presented several journal articles, including a recent research study on healthcare ethics that appeared in JAMA – Internal Medicine and a Physician-Patient linked study for the Texas Medical Center, Health Policy Institute.

Roz is a former NIH and Stanford Medical School Dissertation Fellow, an Adjunct Professor of Sociology at the University of California – Santa Cruz, and Adjunct Professor of Communication Research at DePaul University in Chicago. She has served on the OECD's Global Expert Panel on Patient Experience. Roz holds an M.A. and Ph.D. in Communication from Stanford University and a B.A. in Journalism (Advertising) from the University of Wisconsin – Madison.

Melissa Risteff
CEO and Co-Founder, Couragion

Melissa Risteff co-founded Couragion in 2015—a women-owned, educational technology social enterprise that is generously supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF), AT&T Aspire, and the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade. Melissa is the Principal Investigator (PI) of Couragion's NSF research.

Couragion provides career literacy and workforce development solutions for educators, students, and advocates that bridge the nation's education, skill and labor gaps. Couragion fuels the talent pipeline by improving the awareness and perception of high demand career pathways, thus boosting both the number and diversity of individuals who pursue STEM-related careers.

Melissa was an early evangelist and thought leader for the 'future of work.' She started her career at General Electric and Sun Microsystems where she was a Six Sigma Black Belt and ran software engineering and analytics organizations. She went on to lead product, strategy, marketing, and services organizations in the educational technology, business analytics, and enterprise collaboration sectors. Melissa has a master's degree in Computer & Information Technology Management from the University of Denver and a bachelor's degree in Marketing from Bentley University.

Melissa is an Achiever, Activator, Arranger, Maximizer, and Strategic who thrives on challenge, purpose, and connection. When not focused on education transformation, you can find her in the Pilates studio, on the trail, in the kitchen, or traveling the globe (43 countries and counting). Connect with Melissa on LinkedIn and Twitter! Read her blog STEM Crossings, recently named as one of the top 100 blogs in STEM!

Ayele Shakur
CEO, BUILD

Ayele Shakur is the CEO of BUILD.org and brings almost three decades of experience as an innovator in urban education. BUILD.org is a national nonprofit whose mission is to use entrepreneurship to ignite the potential of youth from under-resourced communities and propel them to high school, college, and career success. BUILD.org is headquartered in the San Francisco Bay Area and has regional offices in Oakland, New York, Boston, and Washington DC.

Before becoming CEO in 2018, Ayele served as the founding Regional Executive Director for BUILD Boston for seven years. Prior to BUILD, she was President and CEO of the Boston Learning Center. A veteran classroom teacher, Ayele taught for eleven years in the Los Angeles area and in the Boston Public Schools and co-authored the book *Boost School Performance – A Parent's Guide to Better Grades Fast*.

Ayele is the recipient of the 2012 Boston Celtics Heroes Among Us Award and the 2007 Boston Children's Museum's Great Friend to Kids Award. From 2014-16, she served as Chairwoman for the Boston NAACP Education Committee. She is a 2017 Barr Fellow, a distinguished group of outstanding nonprofit leaders in Boston, and in 2018 became part of the GK100 Most Influential Black Bostonians. From 2015 to present, she has co-chaired the Opportunity and Achievement Gaps Task Force for the Boston Public Schools, which is an appointment by the Boston School Committee. She also serves as an advisor to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Equitable Futures Initiative.

Ayele is a motivational speaker and a former blogger for the Huffington Post. Her writing has also been featured in The Hill, WBUR, and Entrepreneur Magazine. A native of Boston, she holds a bachelor's degree in Business Management from Boston University and a master's degree from Harvard's Graduate School of Education.

Nathaniel Smith
Founder and Chief Equity Officer, Partnership for Southern Equity
Nathaniel Smith serves as Founder and Chief Equity Officer of the Partnership for Southern Equity (PSE), which *advances policies and institutional actions that promote racial equity and shared prosperity for all in the growth of metropolitan Atlanta and the American South*. Among PSE's notable accomplishments was the creation of the American South's first equity mapping and framing tool, the Metro Atlanta Equity Atlas, and co-authoring numerous reports including: "Growing the Future: The Case for Economic Inclusion in Metropolitan Atlanta" and "Employment Equity: Putting Georgia on the Path to Inclusive Prosperity." PSE also led a coalition of diverse stakeholders to support a $13 million transit referendum that expanded Atlanta's metropolitan transit system into a new county for the first time in 45 years.

Smith's advocacy activities were instrumental in the ratification of a 15 percent set aside of Atlanta Beltline Tax Allocation District (TAD) dollars for the development and maintenance of affordable workforce housing within the Atlanta BeltLine Planning Area—$250 million dollars over the 25-year lifespan of the Atlanta BeltLine TAD.

A child of the Civil Rights Movement and an Atlanta native, Smith holds a Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies from Morehouse College and a Master of Science from the New School.

Among his many accomplishments, *The Huffington Post* honored Nathaniel as one of the eight "Up and Coming Black Leaders in the Climate Movement" in 2017. Nathaniel was also designated one of the 100 "Most Influential Georgians" by *Georgia Trend* magazine and named to the Grist 50 by *Grist Magazine* in 2018.

Heartwired Approach

With the generous support of the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research and Wonder: Strategies for Good developed *Heartwired: Human Behavior, Strategic Opinion Research and the Audacious Pursuit of Social Change,* a strategy guide for change-makers. The Heartwired approach to research focuses on the ways that emotion, values, beliefs, identity, and lived experiences combine, and often collide, to shape people's attitudes and behaviors. This includes:
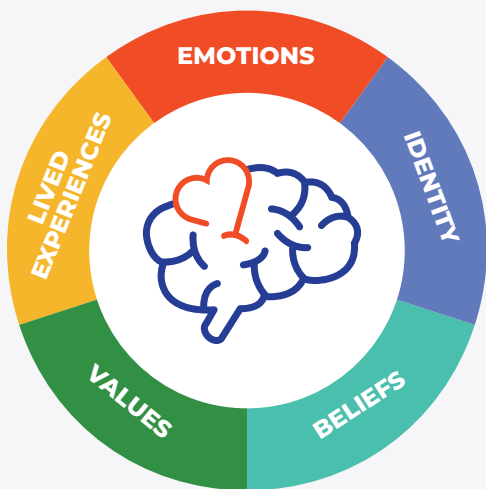
EMOTIONS: The feelings that human beings have in response to the stimuli both within and around us are complex. Our emotions typically drive our behavior. So emotion interacts with reasoning. In most instances, people make instinctive moral judgments and then develop moral reasoning to back up their instinctive reaction. This dynamic means we have to understand emotions to understand our research audience's behaviors and world views.

IDENTITY: Self-identity is how a person sees himself or herself in relation to the world around them. It is an incredibly powerful factor in how we experience the world. We are all driven to make decisions that align with our sense of self. When we do not, we experience uncomfortable cognitive dissonance. While each of us has a single identity, that identity incorporates many facets such as gender, race, ethnicity, profession, family and social roles, political affiliation, and faith as well as traits such as being hard-working, fair-minded, educated, and more. Each of us places different weight upon each facet of our identity, and that relative weight can change based on circumstances and the moment we are at in our lives. For example, someone may see herself as a young woman, sister, and daughter; when she marries and has children, she also sees herself as a wife and mother. Those facets of our identity that we prioritize have greater impact on our decision-making. Internal conflict on social issues is often the result of a moral tug of war between different facets of a person's identity.

LIVED EXPERIENCES:
The events and relationships a person experiences in their life combine with the meaning that they assign to those experiences to shape how they think about the world and social issues. What is important is not just what we experience, but how we understand it and how we make sense of it for ourselves. The way we interpret and remember events—the narrative we construct around them—is just as important as what actually happened. Each of us assigns meaning to our lived experiences that shapes our reactions and subsequent behaviors.

VALUES: Values are ideals that individuals hold about what is good or bad, right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate. Values influence emotional reactions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Values are often shared broadly within a culture or community. A person's values help them to make meaning in their lives and weigh the importance of their actions and decisions. When a person feels that an issue position or action is aligned with their values, they are able to feel a sense of ease and contentment. If those values are contradicted, people experience a sense of dissonance and incongruence, which interferes with their capacity to support that issue position or take that action.

BELIEFS: Beliefs are ideas that people hold to be true. People make their way through life building a set of assumptions about how the world works. Our beliefs are shaped by our identity, our lived experiences, and our values—they are not simply shaped by facts. When we have a lot of experience with something, our beliefs are deeper and more nuanced. When we have little to no experience with something, we tend to fill in the knowledge gaps (often inaccurately) based on isolated experiences, the little information that has come our way, or by spontaneously constructing analogies to things that feel similar to the thing we are pondering. Whether we have deep or scant knowledge, our beliefs are further shaped by our identity, our lived experience, and our values. In other words, facts alone do not shape beliefs.

For more information about the Heartwired research approach, how it has been implemented in successful social change campaigns, or to download the strategy guide, visit heartwiredforchange.com.

Research Methodology

Recruiting and screening process for research participants

GSSR has extensive experience conducting qualitative and quantitative research among youth and adult audiences. For the focus groups and in-depth interviews, we work with specialized recruiters in each location to contact, screen, and recruit potential research participants. To reach potential participants, these local recruiters rely on their existing participant database. In some instances, they would also use a list of registered voters in the area that we provide. Recruiters also work with schools and local community-based organizations to reach potential recruits, along with posting ads on social media, and distributing flyers at schools, shopping malls, or community centers. Potential recruits are offered a financial incentive if they qualify and attend. Once recruits arrive at the focus group facility (or hotel in locations where no facility exists), they are re-screened to ensure they qualify for the groups. We over-recruit to ensure that a sufficient number of participants show up and are qualified to participate. Any recruits who are dismissed after re-screening receive the same financial incentive as participants who are seated.

For the online survey, potential respondents are invited to participate from several panels of respondents maintained by an online survey vendor. While these panels typically comprise an extremely diverse cross-section of respondents, they are somewhat less statistically representative of the nation's population than properly designed and conducted telephone surveys. Online users tend to be slightly younger, less rural, more educated, and have higher incomes than the U.S. population as a whole. However, those population differences are decreasing over time as more and more people in the U.S. are now online. Online surveys also fit people's increasingly digital lifestyles, especially now that the surveys can be designed to allow respondents to complete them on mobile devices. For young people in particular, online surveys can be an excellent methodology, as the overwhelming majority of young people are online. In addition, there is some research showing that young people may be more honest in their responses to surveys when they are answering an online survey as compared to when they are asked to reply to questions by an interviewer in person or via phone.

To participate in the survey, in-depth interviews, or focus groups, parents or guardians of research participants under age 18 are required to provide their consent for their minor children. In each case, these parents or guardians are provided with a financial incentive—in addition to the financial incentive provided to their children. For the in-depth interviews and focus groups, parents and guardians are required to accompany minors to the facility and sign a consent form in person.

Research methods employed

Individual in-depth interviews

Seven in-depth interviews were conducted with young people ages 15 to 20 in November 2018. Three interviews were conducted in Gary, Indiana (two with Black females and one with a Black male), and four were conducted in Albuquerque, New Mexico (one with a Hispanic female, two with Hispanic males, and one with a white male). These interviews allowed us to develop a more in-depth understanding of how young people think and talk about their identity formation, how they relate it to their education and work goals, and the challenges they face in achieving those goals.

In-person focus groups

A total of 57 in-person focus groups were conducted across the country from November 2018 to June 2019. The groups included four types of research participants:

1. Youth: Black, Hispanic, and white youth ages 15 to 21: 42 focus groups total, with 35 among youth from households with lower incomes or a mix of income levels, and seven among youth from households with higher incomes
2. Young adults: Black, Hispanic, and white young adults ages 26 to 29: three focus groups
3. Parents/Guardians: Black, Hispanic, and white parents/guardians of youth ages 15 to 21: seven focus groups total, with four among those from households with lower incomes or a mix of income levels, and three among those from households with higher incomes
4. Adult influencers: Black, Hispanic, and white adults who work and/or volunteer with youth ages 15 to 21: five focus groups

Each focus group discussion was designed to be comprised of participants of the same race who did not know each other. Participants in younger youth groups (ages 15-21) were also of the same gender. Groups among adults were mixed-gender. There were generally six to nine participants in a group. Each group was moderated by an adult of the same race or ethnicity as the participants, and the conversations were always participant-driven.

One exception to this race-matched moderator approach described above is the two BUILD focus groups, which were mixed-race/ethnicity and mixed-gender and included some youth who knew one another, as well as having different adults moderate different portions of the discussions.

We structure the focus group moderator guide and discussion content with great intentionality to ensure that youth feel comfortable sharing personal aspects of themselves in the room. The focus group moderators are highly skilled professionals who have been trained in the Heartwired approach to focus group moderation, which involves using deep listening skills and facilitating in a style that enables youth to open up.

> **Round 1 focus groups:** The first round of in-person focus groups allowed us to better understand how key constituencies personally experience—or in the case of adult participants, view—youth identity formation and its relation to education and work goals. We conducted 34 in-person focus groups from November 2018 to February 2019 in ten different locations (including rural and urban areas) in nine states: California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, New York, and Washington. Twenty-five (25) of the focus groups were conducted among Black and Hispanic youth of all income levels and white youth from households with lower incomes ages 15 to 21 with a variety of career goals and life aspirations. Four of the groups were conducted among Black and Hispanic parents or guardians of youth ages 15 to 21 of all incomes and white parents or guardians of youth ages 15 to 21 with lower incomes. Five of the groups were conducted among Black, Hispanic, and white adult influencers (people who work or volunteer with youth ages 15-21 five or more hours per week).

> **Round 2 focus groups:** The second round consisted of 15 in-person focus groups conducted in May and June, 2019, in six different locations (including urban and suburban areas) in California, Illinois, Maryland, and New York.

> Two of these groups were conducted among Black youth ages 17 to 20 from households with lower incomes (one male group, one female group) in Baltimore, Maryland. Seven additional groups were conducted among Black, Hispanic, and white youth ages 17 to 20 from households with higher incomes in California, Illinois, Maryland, and New York. Three focus groups were also conducted among Black, Hispanic, and white parents of young

people ages 15 to 21 from households with higher incomes. These groups explored identify formation themes similar to the Round 1 groups and allowed us to better understand the differences that exist between how youth from households with lower incomes and youth from households with higher incomes form identity around education and work goals.

Three focus groups were also conducted among Black, Hispanic, and white young men and women ages 26 to 29 who grew up in households with lower incomes but are now middle- or higher-income. These groups, which were separated by race but were mixed gender, provided an opportunity to look back on the identity formation process and identify key inflection points in young people's life pathways.

Intervention focus groups: We also conducted six Intervention focus groups in three locations in California (Downey, Oakland, and Sherman Oaks) in June 2019 among Black and Hispanic young people and white young people from households with lower incomes ages 16 to 18. There were nine participants in each of these groups, and in addition to the larger adult-moderated group, discussion participants were also put in to peer-peer triads—sets of three participants of the same age—to generate small group discussions about each of their pathways. These groups explicitly explored themes related to social capital and allowed us to better understand how young people understand and value relationships in pursuance of their education and work goals.

BUILD networking focus groups: Two focus groups—one in Los Angeles, the other in San Francisco, California—were conducted in conjunction with BUILD, an organization that is "dedicated to proving the power of experiential learning through entrepreneurship and igniting the potential of youth in under-resourced communities." Participants were ages 18 to 22 in Los Angeles and ages 17 to 18 in San Francisco; all groups were mixed gender and included participants from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. While not everyone in each location knew each other, participants were more familiar with each other in the BUILD groups compared to previous focus groups we conducted. Like the Intervention focus groups, these groups also explored reactions to and messaging around social capital. They also included three distinct components:
· A (much shorter) adult-moderated focus group;
· A social capital curriculum created and presented by BUILD staff; and
· A real-world opportunity to network with near-peer professionals in an informal, non-judgmental setting.

Online focus groups

We also conducted two multi-day focus groups in late August 2019, with one group entirely in English and the other primarily in Spanish. Both groups included participants ages 15 to 21 from households with lower incomes alongside some participants ages 26 to 29 who grew up in households with lower incomes but are now middle- or higher-income.

In addition to exploring identity formation and education and work goals, the online focus groups allowed us to explore the roles information, advice, and help play in young people's lives, including information and advice from near-peers.

In the English-language group there were a total of 30 participants from 12 states across the country: California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, New Mexico, New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas. There were a total of 12 Black participants (nine females, three males), nine Hispanic participants (six females, three males), and nine white participants (six females, three males). Fourteen of the participants had at least some college education.

In the Spanish-language group there were a total of 24 participants from nine states across the country: California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, New Mexico, New York, and Texas. This group had 13 Hispanic female and 11 Hispanic male participants, and nine had at least some college education.

Qualitative focus group discussion structure

With the exception of the BUILD and Intervention focus groups, the majority of the qualitative sessions among youth followed the structure summarized below. The parent and adult social influencer groups followed a similar structure with questions adjusted for adults. This summary shows the purpose for each section of the protocol, along with examples of the kinds of questions asked in each section.

I. Welcome/introduction

Purpose: create a safe space; explain confidentiality and that discussions are strictly for research purposes; initial self-introductions by participants.

- Confidential & anonymous
- Encourage to disagree/speak your mind; no right or wrong answers
- If at any point you have any questions, ask
- Video/audiotape/camera for observers in other room, etc.
- Initial participant introductions (one at a time)
  - First name, age
  - Who lives with you in your home? (Tell me a little about them.)
  - Tell me about school or work.

II. Word associations

Purpose: explore associations with job, work, and career; understand the language they personally use in discussing these subjects

- On the lines or spokes coming out of each circle, please write down whatever words or phrases come to mind related to the word *job*. Anything that pops into your mind, whatever it is, write it down. Just like popcorn, a popcorn machine–whatever pops to mind. And then do the same with *work*.
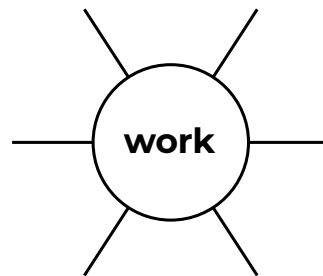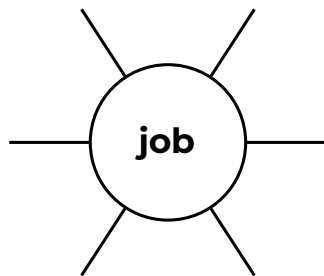
- On this handout is another word: *career*. Just like before, please write down whatever words or phrases come to mind for you related to the word *career*. Anything that pops into your mind, whatever it is, write it down.
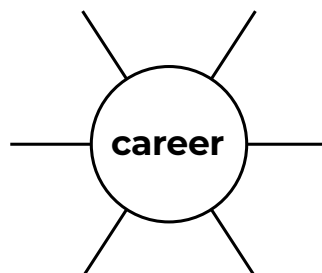
III. Self-description
Purpose: understand how they identify themselves, both in general and/or as part of a racial, ethnic, or cultural group; mirror the language they use to describe themselves (e.g., Mexican, Latino, or Hispanic) throughout the remainder of the discussion.

- I want to know more about you and how you see yourself, how you would describe yourself. On the lines on this paper, please write down some of the words or phrases you would use to describe yourself.
- Now, here please write down how you would describe your gender, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, or other parts of your background.
- What words did you write down to describe yourself?
- How did you describe your race, ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, or other parts of your background?

IV. Painting a picture of their future
Purpose: bring the discussion back to work and then have them describe their future at different ages.

- Imagine yourself when you are 25 years old. What is your life like? What are you doing? Where do you live? How do you spend your time? How do you make money? What is important to you? Paint a picture for me.
- What about when you are 45 years old? Paint a picture for me. What is your life like? What are you doing? Where do you live? How do you spend your time? How do you make money? What is important to you?

V. Navigating the path toward future work
Purpose: explore in what ways they understand (or not) the pathways, opportunities, requirements, and challenges to get themselves to the place(s) they want to be; in what ways they do or do not connect their own interests, strengths, and lifestyle goals with what it takes to have the kind of job/ work/career they would like to have; and explore their perceptions about the role of education/ school in achieving their goals.

- On this handout is a curvy path with blank boxes that you can fill in—kind of like a game of Life. Imagine that you are walking on this path. At one end of the path write the kind of job, work, or career that you would like to do someday. That is your goal. Now write down where you are starting from. Now take a few minutes and fill in the spaces for me, describe how you might get from where you are now to where you want to be. What do you imagine are the steps or things that have to happen in order for you to get there? You can start anywhere. Feel free to include any things in your life that led you to where you are now.
- What are the specific things, experiences, knowledge, or people that you imagine would help you get there, to the end of your own pathway? Add those to your drawing—either in the boxes of your own personal path or outside the path.
- Tell me more about the kind of education, school, training, or certification you feel you might need during your pathway?
- Several of you have said *support* is important. Tell me about support—what does support look like? When someone is being supportive, what are they doing?
  - When someone is NOT being supportive, what does that look like? What are they doing that is not supportive?
- Take another look at this pathway you have written down. Take a moment to write down–what are some of the barriers or challenges you might face? What are some things you might have to do, overcome, or avoid in order to stay on this pathway you've written down here?

VI. Influencers on work perspectives
Purpose: explore who influences their ideas about work and future, and in what ways.

- Are there people whose jobs you find interesting or that appeal to you?
  - Who are they?
  - What kind of work do they do, and what feels interesting for you about it?
- If you were to have a job that you feel is a *good job*, what words would you use to describe it to me? What about it makes it a *good job* for you?
  - Tell me what your ideal job, or work, or career would look like.
- If you were to have a job that you feel is a *bad job*, what words would you use to describe it to me? What about it makes it a *bad job* for you?

VII. Navigating barriers along the way
Purpose: explore how they navigate structural barriers—including systemic racism, misogyny, stigma, etc.—both personally and with advice from others.

- Thinking about how you described yourself earlier in our discussion, do you feel like your race or gender or ethnicity helps you, limits you, some of both, or has no real effect, in terms of getting where you want to go in your life?
- Are there certain things you need to navigate or things you have to manage in certain ways, deal with in certain ways?
- How do you do that?

VIII. Self-efficacy and belonging
Purpose: understand how they perceive their own strengths and weaknesses and the alignment of those qualities with the kind of work they like or dislike. In this section, we expect that the youth will reference teachers/school or other education-related experiences. If they do not, we will probe on it.

- What are the things that you enjoy? What are the things that you feel you are really good at, that you have as strengths?
- Now focusing on friends and family...Are there people in your life who tell you that you are good at this or that, that you have this or that as a strength? People who build you up?
- What are the things that you feel you are not so good at, things that are harder for you or that you feel you don't do as well at?
- Now thinking just about your friends, do you feel that your friends help you to accomplish your own personal goals, get in the way of you accomplishing your goals, or that they don't really have an impact on that one way or another?
- Thinking about your family, do you feel that your family is helping you to accomplish your own personal goals, gets in the way of you accomplishing your goals, or that they don't really have an impact on that one way or another?
- Now let me ask you, generally, do you feel that you have people in your life—family, friends, teachers, other people—who have their own goals, expectations, hopes for you—or not really?

IX. Conclusion
Purpose: identify which aspects of the discussion are most prominent or important for the participants.

- We've talked a lot–when you are headed home, what will you be thinking about from our discussion? What will be on your mind, what will you be wondering about?

Qualitative analysis

To aid our in-depth analysis of the qualitative data, we video recorded each focus group discussion and created a detailed transcript of each two-hour conversation. In addition, we transcribed the hand-written entries from handout exercises—e.g., the word association exercises and the self-descriptions participants wrote down—conducted during each discussion. Furthermore, we produced an extensive quote library (500+ pages) containing illustrative quotes from the focus group participants organized into thematic areas.

We then used these qualitative resources to conduct an in-depth analysis, using team meetings and Advisory Team meetings to share observations, suggest hypotheses, consider implications, and make meaning of the data. Importantly, our analysis took place iteratively as the focus group discussions were taking place over time, to ensure our analysis and corresponding hypotheses evolved to reflect our latest thinking.

Online survey

We conducted an online nationwide survey in September 2019 that integrated and expanded upon our qualitative findings from the focus groups. The survey was conducted among 3,545 young people ages 15 to 21 and includes:

- 495 white females and 583 white males
- 486 Black females and 451 Black males
- 499 Hispanic females and 398 Hispanic males
- 158 Asian-Pacific Islander females and 146 Asian-Pacific Islander males
- 26 Native American females and 23 Native American males
- 109 females and 46 males who identify with two or more ethnic groups

This survey helped to quantify the qualitative results and allowed us to further explore issues of identity formation and education and work goals and refine our findings, especially as they pertain to race and gender.

Survey sample

The following charts show responses for the online survey's demographic questions.

FIGURE 38: RACE & ETHNICITY (SELF-ID)
What is your race or ethnicity? Check all that apply.

FIGURE 39: COUNTRY OF BIRTH

Were you

Racial breakdown   BLACK   HISPANIC   WHITE

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

Overall: 94%

Born in the United States
FEMALE   90   99
MALE   91   97

Born in another country   **6%**
FEMALE   1   2   9
MALE   3   2   8

FIGURE 40: ADULTS IN HOUSEHOLD

Growing up, have you lived with your: (Check all that apply)

Racial breakdown   BLACK   HISPANIC   WHITE

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

Overall: 93%

Mother
FEMALE   9   95
MALE   90   94

Father   **67%**
FEMALE   50   71   75
MALE   55   67   78

Grandparent   **21%**
FEMALE   17   23   23
MALE   13   18   23

Other   **17%**
FEMALE   14   16
MALE   14   17

Guardian   **3%**
FEMALE   1
MALE   3

Education level of parent/guardian

Racial breakdown   `BLACK`   `HISPANIC`   `WHITE`

0%   20%   40%   60%

Overall:40%

High School or Less, Mother
FEMALE   35   42   47
MALE   38   38   47

38%

High School or Less, Father
FEMALE   30   38   56
MALE   30   35   47

36%

High School orLess, Guardian
FEMALE   33   47   62
MALE   17   20   35

31%

Some College, Mother
FEMALE   33   33
MALE   25   30   32

25%

Some College, Father
FEMALE   23   28   33
MALE   18   26   26

24%

Some College, Guardian
FEMALE   15   20   47
MALE   13   17   35

27%

College Degree or More, Mother
FEMALE   17   24   31
MALE   22   26   37

34%

College Degree or More, Father
FEMALE   17   26   40
MALE   22   35   50

26%

College Degree or More, Guardian
FEMALE   20   23   27
MALE   24   40   50

FIGURE 42: COUNTRY OF BIRTH

Were your parents or guardians

Racial breakdown BLACK HISPANIC WHITE

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

Overall: 75%

Born in the United States
FEMALE 53 9194
MALE 54 8892

One parent born in US, one born in another country
8%
FEMALE 4 4 16
MALE 4 3 14

Both parents born in another country
15%
FEMALE 2 5 30
MALE 3 6 28
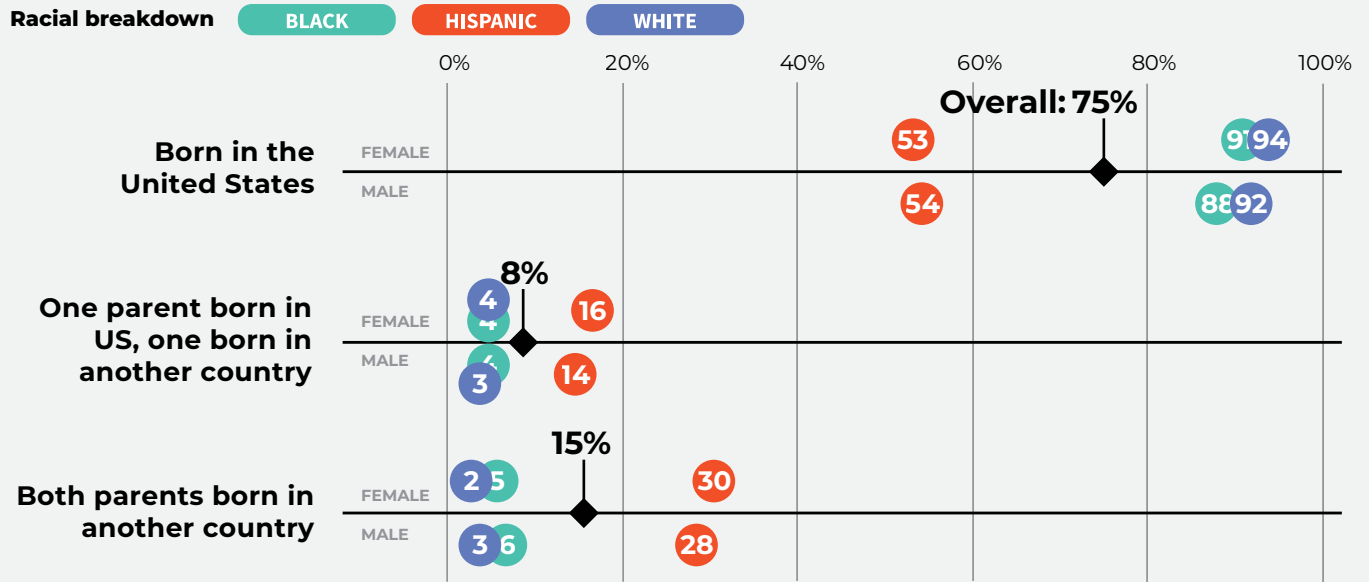
FIGURE 43: LANGUAGES AT HOME

Growing up, what language or languages have been spoken in your home?

Racial breakdown BLACK HISPANIC WHITE

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

Overall: 88%

English
FEMALE 71 98 9
MALE 69 97 96

Spanish
9%
FEMALE 2 2 29
MALE 1 2 31
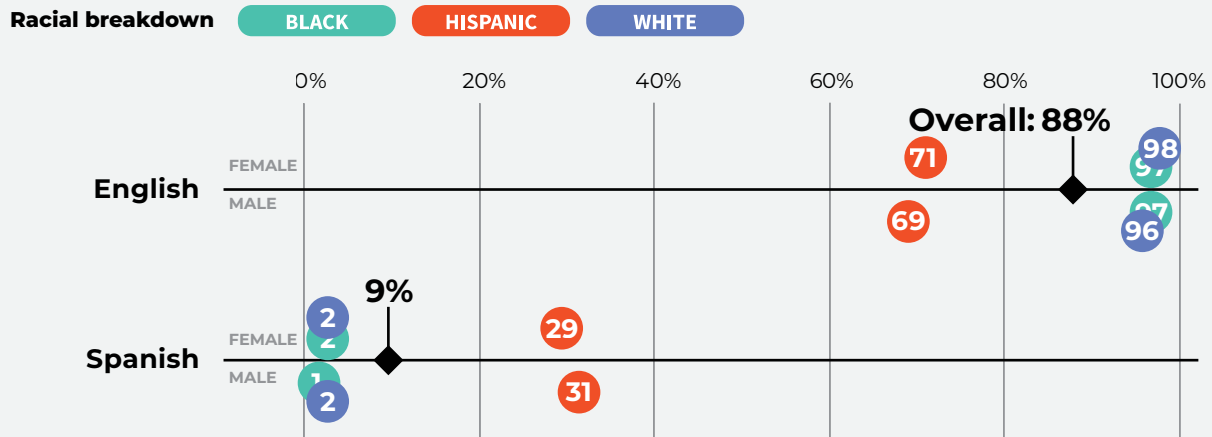
Growing up, what language or languages have been spoken in your home? Second language:

Racial breakdown   **BLACK**   **HISPANIC**   **WHITE**

Spanish

Overall: 54%

FEMALE — 57 (White), 65 (Black), 65 (Hispanic)
MALE — 56 (White), 61 (Hispanic), 62 (Black)

English

26%

FEMALE — 5 (White), 11 (Black), 33 (Hispanic)
MALE — 4 (Black), 14 (White), 37 (Hispanic)

French

4%

FEMALE — 0 (Hispanic), 10 (Black), 12 (White)
MALE — 0 (Hispanic), 11 (Black), 11 (White)

Chinese

3%

FEMALE — 0 (White), 0 (Hispanic)
MALE — 1 (White), 4 (Black)

Arabic

2%

FEMALE — 0 (White), 0 (Hispanic), 4 (Black)
MALE — 3 (White)

German

1%

FEMALE — 0 (Hispanic), 7 (White)
MALE — 0 (Black), 0 (Hispanic), 3 (White)

Hindi

1%

FEMALE — 0
MALE — 0

Korean

1%

FEMALE — 0
MALE — 0, 2

Japanese

1%

FEMALE — 1
MALE — 1

FIGURE 45: LIVING AREA

Do you live in a:

Racial breakdown BLACK HISPANIC WHITE

0% 20% 40%

Large city with 500,000 or more people
Overall: 31%
FEMALE 16 34 37
MALE 32 32 37

Smaller city
19%
FEMALE 17 21 24
MALE 14 18 23

Suburb
25%
FEMALE 2 21 30
MALE 23 25 6

Small town
11%
FEMALE 1 11 14
MALE 9 10 1

Rural area
10%
FEMALE 4 10 18
MALE 5 6 17

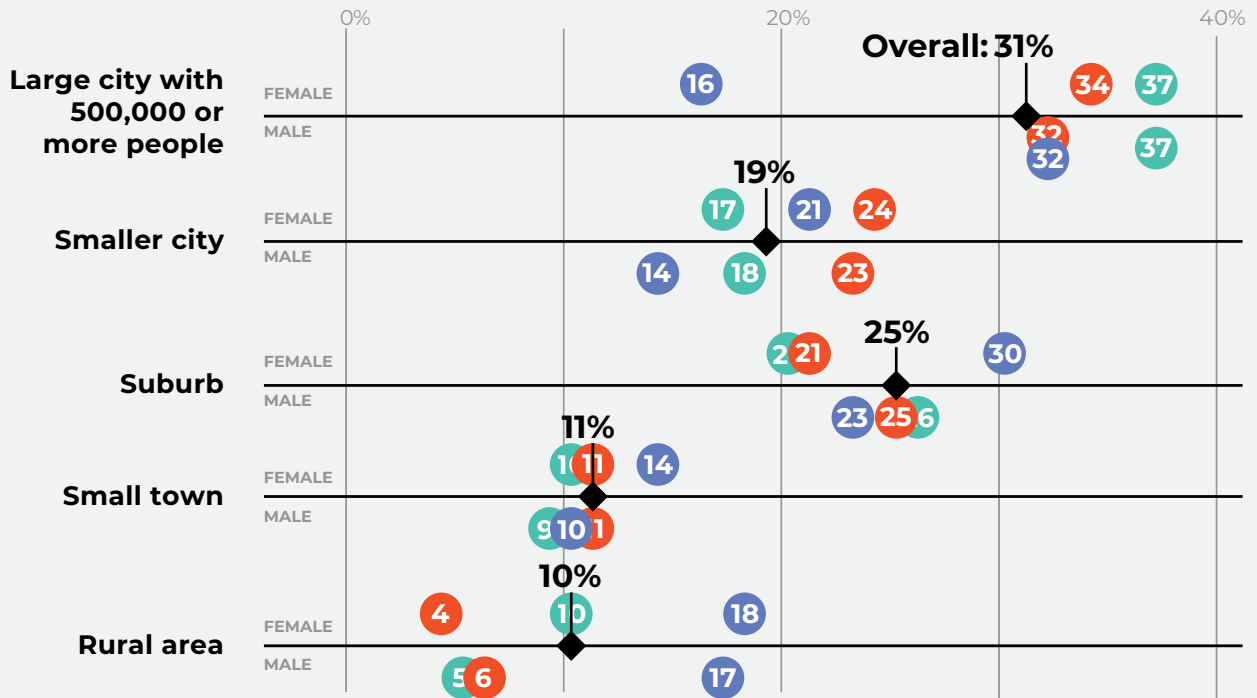## FIGURE 46: INCOME LEVEL GROWING UP

Thinking about your household growing up, how would you describe your income level?

Racial breakdown BLACK HISPANIC WHITE
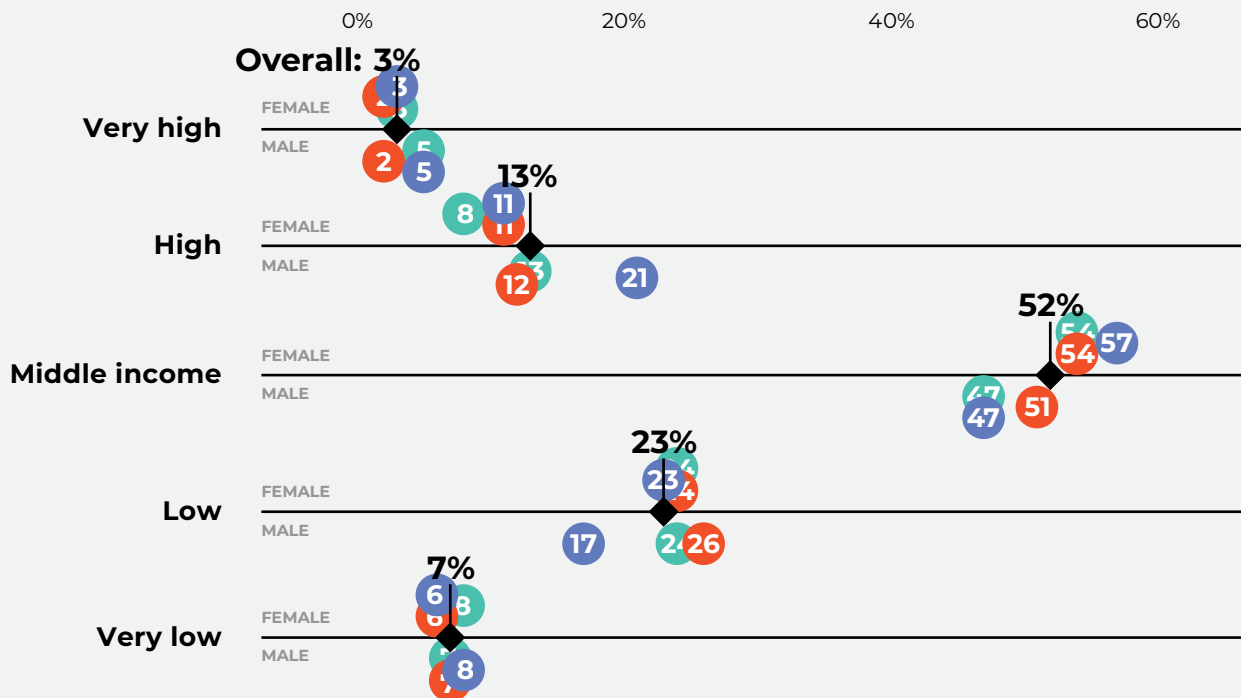

0% 20% 40% 60%

Very high
Overall: 3%
FEMALE 3
MALE 2 5 5

High
13%
FEMALE 8 11 11
MALE 3 12 21

Middle income
52%
FEMALE 54 57
MALE 47 51

Low
23%
FEMALE 23 4
MALE 17 2 26

Very low
7%
FEMALE 6 8
MALE 8

Thinking about your household growing up, was your home owned or rented? Select all that apply.

Racial breakdown BLACK HISPANIC WHITE

Owned
FEMALE — 41, 47, 64
MALE — 48, 52, 70
Overall: 54%

Rented
FEMALE — 37, 51, 56
MALE — 28, 46, 48
44%

Unsure
FEMALE — 4, 5, 8
MALE — 5, 5, 8
7%

Did you live in a

Racial breakdown BLACK HISPANIC WHITE

Apartment
FEMALE — 21, 32, 37
MALE — 22, 30, 37
Overall: 29%

Condominium
FEMALE — 5, 8, 8
MALE — 5, 7, 8
7%

Single-family home
FEMALE — 50, 55, 72
MALE — 53, 53, 67
59%

Mobile home
FEMALE — 6, 8, 8
MALE — 7, 8, 8
8%
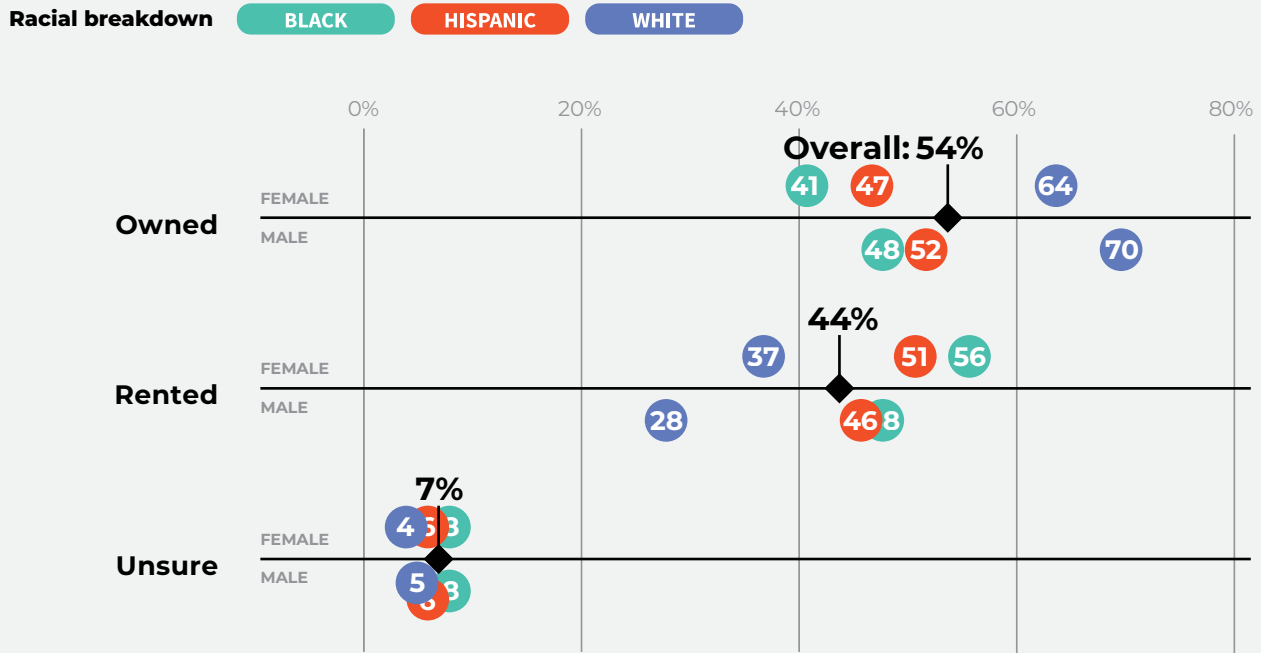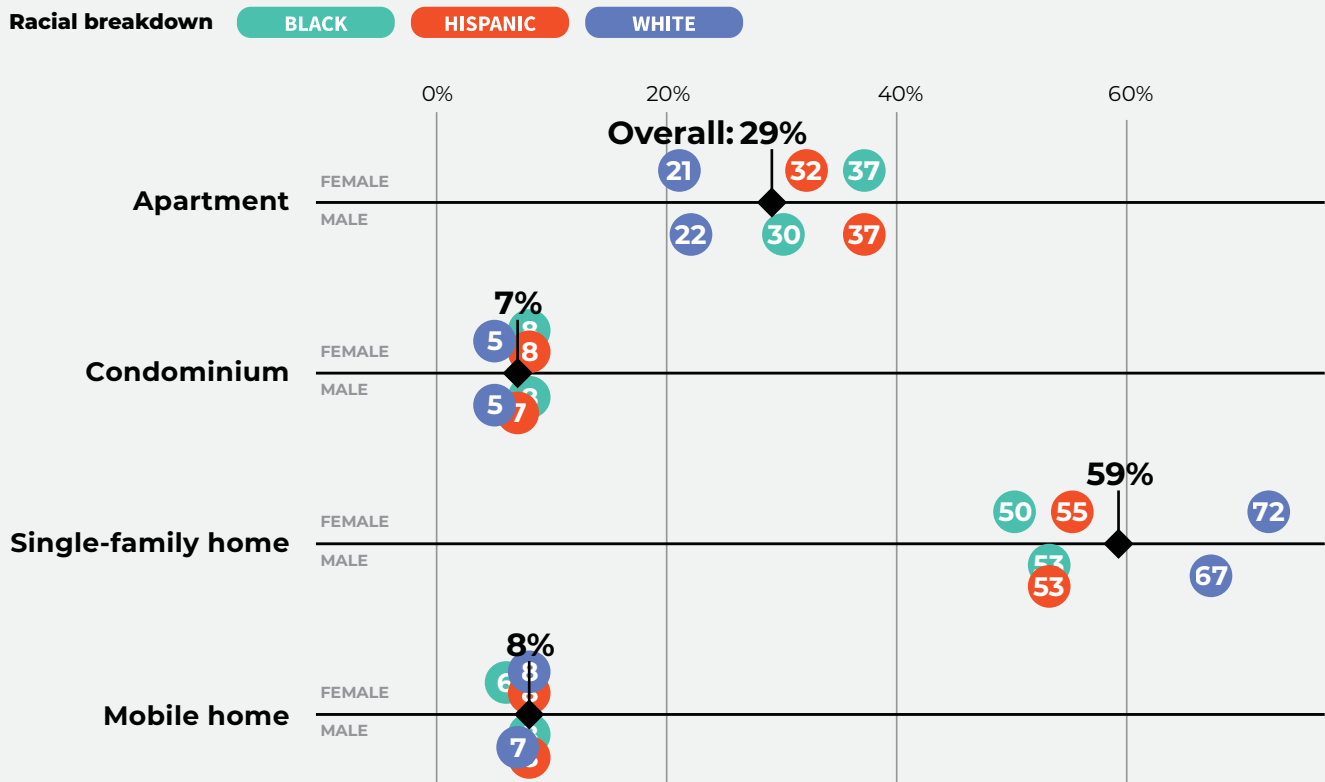
FIGURE 49: COMPUTER

Did you have a computer in your home?

Racial breakdown `BLACK` `HISPANIC` `WHITE`

Yes

FEMALE — Overall: 83% — 80, 91

MALE — 75, 80, 88

No

FEMALE — 14% — 9, 17, 17

MALE — 9, 18
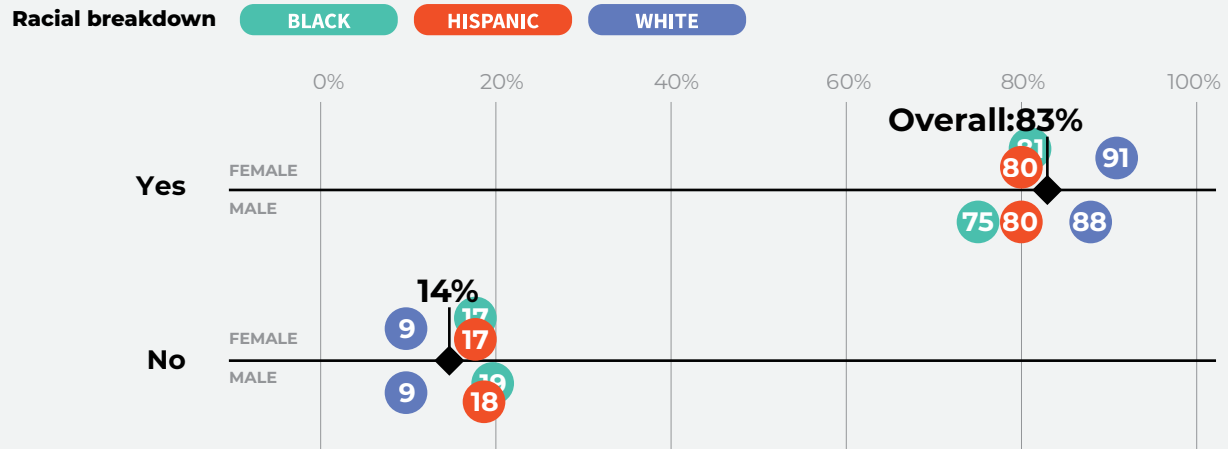
**equitable
futures**

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