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COVID Impacts on U.S. Youth Workforce System: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

Youth who are not engaged in school or work face many challenges as they transition into adulthood. In the U.S., federal policy provides funding and oversight to a complex, community-based system of workforce development for this youth population, as well as adults with barriers to employment. The COVID-19 pandemic caused extensive disruption to this system, as well as the overall employment and education sectors. This study examines the impacts of COVID on the delivery of workforce services to the youth population. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 61 respondents involved in planning and delivery of services in different regions of the U.S. Key themes from the interviews included: challenges of operating during the pandemic, adaptations to these challenges, and fears for impacts on young people. Although greatly impacted by the pandemic, respondents reported several innovations but continuing concerns regarding effects on vulnerable youth and widening societal inequalities related to poverty and race. Based on these data, we offer several ideas for further development in policy and practice to learn from the experiences reported.

Key Words: youth workforce development, disconnected youth, NEET youth, COVID, workforce policy

Word Count: 8964

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Introduction

The challenges of youth who are ‘disconnected’ from both education and employment are well known. If youth are not building needed skills during this critical development period, the risks of long-term disadvantage are severe (Lewis & Gluskin, 2018). Employment may be infrequent or sporadic resulting in ongoing financial instability. Risks of criminal justice system involvement may increase with further potential damage to family life. Because of these and other risks to economic and social well-being, many countries engage in significant policy, program, and practice efforts to help youth find a viable educational and employment trajectory with potential to gain the economic rewards of stable employment and the consequent social rewards.

COVID impacts have been devastating to many populations; disconnected youth are among those severely impacted. This is due to the impacts on employment overall (and in sectors where youth predominate), the temporary or permanent closure of schools and training facilities, the shift to remote learning, and the range of health, economic, and social burdens related to the pandemic. In this paper we report results from a study of the U.S. workforce development system serving the disconnected youth population. Study data were collected in the first year of the pandemic as it unfolded and, therefore, can identify how the system adapted (or did not) to meet the unexpected challenges.

Literature Review

Young people who are neither in school nor working have been termed ‘disconnected’ or more optimistically ‘opportunity’ youth (Burd-Sharps & Lewis, 2018). In many areas of the

world the term NEET (not in education, employment or training) is used to identify this population (Holte, 2018). Generally focused on adolescents and youth adults (approximately ages 14-24), their circumstances raise concern because of the potential for a very negative life trajectory in adulthood characterised by unemployment, poverty, homelessness and other forms of instability. Disconnected youth are nearly twice as likely to live in poverty, more than three times as likely to have a disability of some kind, nine times as likely to have dropped out of high school, more than twenty times as likely to be living in institutionalised settings as their connected counterparts, and, for young women four times more likely to be mothers (Lewis, 2020). These young people are at greater risk for lower future earnings, lower educational attainment, and potentially higher rates of criminal justice involvement than their peers, among other negative outcomes (Lewis & Gluskin, 2018). Similarly negative impacts of being disconnected from school and work (i.e., NEET youth) are reported in other countries (Fergusson, Horwood, & Woodward, 2001; Gutiérrez-García, Benjet, Borges, Ríos, & Medina-Mora, 2017; Baggio, Iglesias, Deline, Studer, Henchoz, Mohler-Kuo, & Gmel, 2015). These negative impacts are described as “scarring” effects by several scholars (Tamesberger & Bacher, 2021; Maguire, 2020; Ralston, Everington, Feng, & Dibben, 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic led recession, youth have experienced higher rates of unemployment than any other age group (Youth.Gov, 2021). Prior to the COVID-19 recession, U.S. teens (16-19), young adults (20-24), and prime-age adults (25-54) were generally faring well in the labor market at the onset of the recession (Congressional Research Service, 2020). The youngest age groups were hit hardest during the COVID-19 recession. For instance, from February to April 2020, 35 percent of teen workers and 30 percent of young adult workers lost their jobs, while older age groups job losses ranged from 11-to-16 percent (Engemann, 2020). At

the height of the crisis, the number of unemployed youths increased by almost 3 million, reaching 4.7 million in the second quarter of 2020 (Inanc, April 2021). This rise was mostly due to the large concentrations of youth in retail and hospitality jobs that were diminished due to COVID-related closures to contain the virus. Additionally, recent estimates show that youth unemployment was particularly high in parts of the country where states introduced stricter containment measures (Inanc, 2021).

The cumulative job loss was particularly felt among youth of color. Black and Hispanic workers and workers with lower levels of education experienced larger increases in unemployment rates between February and April (2020) compared to white and college-educated workers (Aronson & Alba, 2020). Asian American youth also experienced rising unemployment rates; during the first quarter of the pandemic, unemployment among Asian American male youth jumped from 5.4 percent to 23.9 percent and among Asian American female youth, the rate jumped from 7.0 percent to 25.8 percent (Inanc, 2021).

The COVID-19 recession impacted industries in which youth workers are more likely to be employed. Young people are more likely to have jobs in the hospitality and leisure sectors, and the retail trade occupations – sectors and occupations that have most been devastated by the pandemic (Rodgers & Richard, 2020). Prior to the beginning of the pandemic, 18 percent of 16–24-year-olds were employed in “food preparation and serving related” occupations, 14 percent were employed in “sales and related” occupations, and 11 percent were employed in “office and administrative support” occupations (Rodgers & Richard, 2020). Given that most of these jobs were not able to be completed remotely, employment in these sectors plummeted. Young adult employment in the “food preparation and serving related” occupations contracted 33 percent in May 2020, as compared to 27 percent for adults (Rodgers & Richard, 2020). Similarly, young

adult employment in the “sales and related” occupations contracted by 33 percent, compared to 22 percent for older workers (Rodgers & Richard, 2020).

The pandemic has also been incredibly taxing on the social and emotional wellbeing of youth. According to a nationally representative survey of 3,530 youth aged 16-24, conducted by the Center for Promise at America’s Promise Alliance, youth are now more financially stressed, emotionally drained and facing substantial barriers to employment. Key findings noted the following (Flanagan, Margolis, Lynch, & Hynes, 2021):

- Nearly half (40.0%) of young people reported experiencing a sense of financial strain, with high levels of difficulty surviving financially, paying bills, and affording basic healthcare costs.
- More than two-thirds (67.8%) indicated that COVID-19 and the related economic recession have had some effect or a large effect on their work life (e.g., getting the job that they desire or achieving their career goals).
- 70.1% reported experiencing an elevated state of stress ‘about half the time’ or more, and more than one in three young people (34.5%) reported feeling this way ‘most of the time’ or ‘always.’

These findings were also more pronounced among youth of color. Perceptions of career barriers and their ability to hinder career goals were higher among youth of color; Latinx youth reported 24% more barriers, Black youth reported 20% more, and Asian youth reported 19% more barriers, than their White counterparts. This survey also showed that youth of color continue to experience discrimination in today’s labor market. Approximately half or more Asian, Black, and Latinx youth reported experiencing or anticipating discrimination in the workplace because of their race and roughly 40% or more Asian, Black, and Latinx youth report

having a harder time getting hired because of their race (Flanagan, Margolis, Lynch, & Hynes, 2021).

Because our study was conducted in the U.S., we have focused most of the literature review on the circumstances of disconnected youth in the U.S. We recognise, however, that concerns regarding disconnected youth, their potential negative trajectory, and the search for policy and program solutions are all shared by many countries across the globe. Recent research by the ILO has documented how the COVID-19 crisis has severely affected labour markets around the world, “hurting young people more than other age groups (p. 1).” Globally, youth employment fell by 8.7 per cent in 2020 compared with 3.7 per cent for adults with the impact more pronounced in middle-income countries. The NEET rate rose in many countries and has not yet returned to pre-crisis levels in most cases (ILO, 2021).

As noted earlier, the term NEET is used in many countries (although less so in the U.S.). Originating in the UK in the 1980s, there are debates about the exact definition (Mascherini, 2018) but it remains a key focus of policymakers concerned about the long-term prospects for these young people in the absence of interventions. Further discussion of the NEET concept in the European context is provided by Mascherini (2018). Scholars from across the globe have reported on the circumstances of NEET youth within their country, for example from Italy (Gaspani, 2018), South Korea (Park et al., 2020) and Sub-Saharan Africa (Cieslik, Barford, & Vira, 2021). There is variation across countries of course, and also within. Examining the UK, for example, Maguire (2021) identified that “where a young person lives determines variations in the level, length and type of support that they will receive if they are ‘NEET’ (p.10).” Moreover, she found that “each of the four UK nations increasingly operates on its own, as it attempts to resolve a shared issue, with little ongoing knowledge or policy exchange operating at a UK-wide

level.” European scholars documenting the COVID impacts on NEET youth warn of a potential “lost generation” (e.g., Tamesberger & Bacher, 2021; Maguire, 2020) without intervention.

Federal Workforce Policy and the Workforce System

In the U.S. the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is the primary federal workforce policy and includes a Youth Program to provide federal resources to states (and, in turn, local workforce areas) to deliver services to assist youth (out-of-school or in-school youth with barriers). WIOA’s Youth Activities Formula Grant program (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017) is provided to local agencies via Workforce Development Boards (WDB) and includes secondary educational support components, life skills development, work opportunities, paid internships and job shadowing opportunities.

All local workforce systems funded by WIOA serve young people—generally those ages 14–24. Some youth come from disadvantaged backgrounds and need extra supports and guidance to complete their education, gain skills, or find work (Eyster et al. 2016). Priority youth populations include those from foster care or justice systems, youth with disabilities, youth who are pregnant/parenting and youth who are homeless/runaway.

Each state has a State Workforce Development Board (SWDB) and within most states there are multiple Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDBs). SWDBs are business-led and designed to help the governor develop and implement the strategic plan, designate local workforce investment areas, develop funding allocation formulas and state performance measures, and prepare annual reports. LWDBs include representatives of business, local higher education entities, eligible training providers, labor organizations, economic and community development agencies, state employment services, and vocational rehabilitation. LWDBs oversee implementation of local WIOA services, including youth services, often with assistance

from local youth standing committees (ETA, 2017a). Across the United States, American Job Centers (AJCs) provide career and employment-related needs to jobseekers, students, and businesses. How local workforce systems support their workforces varies greatly according to context and priorities (Eyster et al. 2016).

Youth Workforce System's Response to COVID Pandemic

As a result of the recession, state workforce systems responded in various ways to provide programs and services to meet the needs of their customers. Many AJCs had to readjust their delivery methods to provide employment services to jobseekers and needed to do so in the context of sudden massive unemployment. Due to the AJC closures, states used funding to transition to online and virtual education and training. In addition to transforming service delivery to a virtual model, workforce systems also streamlined the enrollment and referral process by creating fillable forms for online use with partner agencies (Workforce GPS, 2020).

As public workforce systems transitioned to delivery services virtually, youth jobseekers needed equipment to enroll in these services and emergency assistance services to respond to the pandemic. Workforce professionals reported providing laptops, computers, and other internet equipment to youth jobseekers in response to the pandemic (Workforce GPS, 2020). Given that WIOA is designed to serve low-income youth with education and employment barriers, providing computer and internet equipment, as well as emergency assistance services has been vital to the success of youth jobseekers. Six out of 10 youth lived in households that experienced a loss of employment income after COVID-19 and were more likely to be unemployed after COVID-19 than other youth (Youth.Gov, 2021). Therefore, providing and referring emergency assistance services related to housing, food insecurity, and internet and technology were key necessities for low-income youth jobseekers.

Methodology

The current study is designed to provide greater depth to understanding how workforce systems adapted to meeting the needs of vulnerable youth populations. Data from two related studies conducted in 2020-2021 are reported in this article. Both studies aimed to understand local workforce development systems that implement WIOA. SWDBs and LWDBs oversee the implementation of WIOA policies and work directly with businesses, local partnering agencies, as well as directly with consumers within localities. They are therefore uniquely positioned to provide insight into this complex system. Utilizing a qualitative methodology provided a way to elicit these experiences from participants.

Localities were selected to cover a range of geographic areas and represented large urban areas, smaller cities, and rural communities. Study 1 was primarily focused on non-urban settings whereas Study 2 was specifically focused on urban areas. Geographic diversity was purposefully sought knowing that employment trends, growth sectors, and resources (both financial and institutional) are very different in different states. The states selected represented all major geographic areas of the U.S. (e.g., the northwest, mid-Atlantic, upper Midwest).

Sample

For Study 1, the initial interview target was the Executive Director of the LWDB. Additional interviews were conducted with the Chair of the Youth Committee (or other youth specialist) and the Executive Director of the SWDB. For Study 2, the initial interview target was also the Executive Director of the LWDB. Additional interviews were conducted with the Chair of the Youth Committee (or other youth specialist). The SWDB was not a focus of Study 2. Information to identify WDBs and their contact person is available online (careeronestop.org).

Initial contact was made by email to the identified person of the LWDB to describe the study and seek participation.

Data Collection

Semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews were the primary data collection method. A total of 48 interviews were conducted with 61 interview subjects (in some cases the target interview subject wanted to include others with relevant expertise). Interviews were conducted by the first and fourth authors between April 2020 and March 2021 and they lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Most interviews were conducted by phone but three were conducted via video conference at the request of the participant. Despite beginning data collection early in the pandemic, we found no negative impact in securing participation of respondents.

Domains for the interviews included: past/current initiatives for youth populations; key partnerships and contracting processes; funding strategies; use of career pathways and sector strategies; mechanisms for engaging youth in policy/programming; and impacts of COVID. All interviews included the question: ‘Regarding COVID, what have been the effects or what do you anticipate will be the effects in regard to youth workforce development?’ Consistent with qualitative interviewing, probes were used to gather detailed information (e.g., ‘can you tell me more about that?’) and to gain further clarity and understanding about the information collected. Handwritten notes were taken during the interview. These notes were then edited immediately after the interview to capture any details that were not written down, and then transcribed for analysis. Interviews were supplemented by review of state strategic plans and local implementation plans.

Analysis

The focus of the analysis reported in this manuscript was data related to the impacts of COVID on the workforce system and the youth. A question on COVID impacts was asked in every interview. Additionally, respondents often raised this topic on their own or in relation to their response to a different question in the interview. Thus, all interview transcripts were reviewed for any responses related to COVID. These data were copied into a separate file. Broad sections of the text were included in this initial step to retain the context of the statement. Analysis then proceeded by organizing the data by thematic content. This included organizing the data into charts and matrices to identify commonalities and differences (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Several methods (as suggested by Lyons & Coyle, 2016) were utilised to enhance the validity of findings: triangulation of method; detailed notes and memos; multiple data analysts; and preparation of an evidence trail linking data, analysis, and conclusions. The University IRB reviewed and approved the study protocol.

Findings

Three core themes were identified from review of the COVID-focused responses: (1) challenges, (2) adaptations, and (3) continuing fears. Challenges referred to the various circumstances that arose related to COVID that made the work with youth more difficult. Adaptations were those actions taken by the workforce system to continue the work and develop innovations. Continuing fears were those concerns respondents still held regarding the potential negative impacts on youth.

Challenges

Respondents spoke about a variety of challenges that impacted the youth directly and impacted their ability to provide services to youth. Several responses were common across

multiple respondents and consistent with other early reports in the literature. Others were specific to a locale or otherwise unique to the respondents' experience.

Some of the more common challenges included: (1) Broadband internet is not comprehensive in the state and therefore some youth populations were missing out on remote training or employment opportunities. (2) COVID restrictions did not allow the type of work that is typically offered (e.g., group classes). (3) Many of the certifications that are offered require hands-on learning that is not possible in an on-line environment. (4) Online/remote learning requires a lot of motivation that may not be a strength of the youth population served.

Challenges were sometimes located within the employers. For example, employers may be reluctant to take health risks by providing work opportunities for the youth population that they would otherwise provide. Certain industries were especially hard-hit and employment opportunities could rarely be replicated in a remote modality. The hospitality industry was particularly noted in this regard. This sector generally does provide multiple opportunities for early-stage workers. With a near-total shutdown a large proportion of opportunities was curtailed. The hospitality sector is particularly prominent in some regions of the country; therefore, youth populations were differentially affected based on their locality.

Other issues were related to transportation access (e.g., some youth were afraid to take the bus system), access to opportunities (e.g., some youth were in the pipeline for an opportunity that is now halted), or specific circumstances (e.g., for youth waiting to get in a training program, they may need a required drug test, that will now expire).

Issues related to youth recruitment were also mentioned. Respondents often noted that youth recruitment is a challenge even in the best of times and has now been exacerbated by

COVID. One respondent noted that ‘you cannot replace human interaction.’ Although workforce systems appear adept at the tools available through social media, ‘Tik tok and other media are not a substitute’ for human engagement. In addition to initial recruitment, ongoing engagement of youth was also noted as a challenge: e.g., it was much more challenging to work with youth through ‘tele’ models; youth were not used to such models and staff had to creatively work to keep them engaged.

Some respondents also commented that in such precarious employment circumstances, ‘many people will jump at work’ rather than training. Training requires an investment of time and a level of commitment in return for an anticipated employment opportunity that advances economic prospects. But in times of economic uncertainty people can be reluctant to invest their time and are more likely to take whatever employment opportunity may be available. While understandable, this is also a frustration for workforce personnel aiming to guide young people on a career path. It was also noted that although the focus of their work is on *youth* employment, many young people bring needed essential financial resources to their household.

A few also noted the impact of other forces not specific to youth. One respondent noted that the COVID stimulus check (i.e., emergency payments from the federal government) may have negatively impacted youth interest in engaging in workforce activity. Another noted the intersection with school closings. Thus, a single mother with a child learning at home, may stay at home instead of going to work.

One respondent stated that COVID has ‘affected it [youth engagement/workforce planning process] in every way’ and described feeling the effects ‘exponentially’, further stating that youth programs are about the relationship and so COVID is impacting youth workforce on every level. Another respondent similarly stated, ‘COVID impacted our ability to recruit.’

Youth recruitment has been ‘incredibly challenging’ during COVID time. She reported that her city was in more of a lockdown than many other places and that the city was highly dependent on tourism. ‘We have training programs in these areas [tourism]. Maybe there will be a pent-up demand for these services [post COVID]. It’s been really hard. Everyone’s tired. Tired of working at home.’

One respondent added the specific challenge of trying to find youth placements by stating that virtual placements are difficult to secure for youth, which is especially due to adults taking jobs they normally wouldn’t during the pandemic. The same respondent also spoke to how she thought youth would be eager to have everything be virtual, but that they have not seen that at all, and in fact have seen the opposite. ‘It’s about the face to face...we miss out on so much.’

Adaptations

Overall, respondents reported they were ‘pushing the envelope on how to stay connected’ and ‘doing the best we can, trying to adapt.’ One respondent gave credit to the contracted youth provider, ‘they were able to pivot in the summer, as best we could to offer something’. In a practical sense, a SWDB reported ‘we put out guidance immediately, to local areas, that money is still there, and can be used for support services, LMI [labor market information], financial literacy.’

The adaptations and innovations that respondents mentioned tended to be more unique to their settings. This included, for example, *enhanced engagement in meeting basic needs* (for example, a new partnership with United Way to provide food boxes because of COVID loss of jobs). Several respondents reported *going an ‘extra mile’ to serve youth*. In one example, a respondent reported that a youth with disability had finally found a work experience, when

COVID hit and limited transportation. The provider went out and bought the youth a bike so he could go to work. In another example, the respondent reported that a case manager applied for private funding on her own so she could order food for her clients, drop them off and then have virtual lunches with them. This has allowed her to maintain relationships with youth. This respondent said, ‘we don’t have funding that’s flexible to do these unique things’ and talked about how being able to have flexible funding might allow them to think outside of the box in this way to try and meet the difficulties presented by COVID.

In regard to stated challenges of working with youth remotely, respondents also described adaptations. They spoke to the ideal youth workforce programming/activity space as being in person and ‘relational’ and it being ‘tough to do that in [a] remote world right now.’ Nonetheless they were ‘trying to bridge that now. Trying innovative efforts, virtual job shadows, remote work experiences and tutoring mentoring remotely.’

Several comments were related to *adapting to a virtual environment/strategizing about in-person*

For example:

- We are working with those doing virtual-only to try to bring back some needed in-person, maybe in a 1:1 format.
- [Career and Technical Education] had some funding to start a summer bridge program; bring students back to finish up requirements left undone in spring.
- We got funding for [addressing the] digital divide. Particularly in work with schools, there have been impacts on enrollment/retention. Adapted our incentives – if you connect for one hour [shorter than previously], and do assignments, you get \$50.

- We have a strong skilled trades program, partner with unions. Because some of the work can be outdoors, we tried to expand. Since then, we do hybrid: classes inside and can do the work outdoors.
- Switched to virtual support. Online training modules. Built a ‘bot’ that pops up when you go to any page. It’s interactive. Built in collaboration with Microsoft. People can get answers quickly.
- Initially on lockdown we had issues on connectivity. Now an uptick among youth. They’re coming into centers. Because of our outreach.

Some positives that came out of COVID were also identified. These responses tended to come from those interviewed later in the pandemic. These included: (1) the cost of technology was scaled down, became free; (2) employers started reaching out, creating some momentum; (3) learned to incorporate more tech into the work; (4) youth feelings of isolation caused them to want to get back out; (5) opened up new options – e.g., ‘Opened up dialogue for retail to be more of an option again. Working with stores more now because they’re hiring.’ In another example, the respondent noted that their city is known to be very strong in the hospitality industry and ‘good at delivering concierge customer service in hospitality industry.’ They are now trying to pivot this approach to IT, using concierge customer service, with a goal to work with IT industries not located locally. ‘With COVID, [we] learned we can work remotely’ and, therefore, they can do remote work for Silicon Valley tech companies and make a livable wage.

COVID led to some specific COVID-related employment opportunities. This included activities related to COVID tracing, distribution of personal protective equipment, and later to supporting vaccination centers. A related effect was that these employment activities, ‘Helps

young people be connected, not just for themselves... continued to ensure how youth can contribute to the community.’

This respondent spoke more broadly about efforts to adapt and need for additional adaptation: ‘As [the] world is shifting to tech systems, certainly there are access gaps. Not only have tools but now, how to use them. How we respond to needs. The workforce landscape is going to shift. It’s not going away. Entry level work from home. We should incorporate it. Still trying to work out. Team of youth workers. Really centers young people. Supporting equity and addressing workforce gaps. We look at employer partners to join us in how we support young people.’

Fears

Most of the fears that respondents spoke about were related to concerns about potential long-term prospects for youth, pointing to acute concerns about the impact of COVID on their economic wellbeing and career prospects. First of all was the observation that ‘When employment is high, it is even higher for young people’ and that ‘Youth who are already hard to serve are going to get harder to serve.’ Disproportionate impacts on youth of color were also noted (e.g., ‘pandemic exposed disparity for BIPOC populations’). Furthermore, a respondent expressed concerns about how COVID further burdened some youth living in distressed home environments, suggesting the need to ‘get some youth out of the house, [because] some are not in good home situations. COVID really did unveil some of what youth deal with’ in their home environment. Several inequities were identified (e.g., ‘Youth aren’t going to school; that will emphasise inequities.’) and the recognition that ‘Ripple effects will carry on for some time. Last recession, took a long time to get out of that.’

Discussion and Recommendations

Respondents spoke of a wide range of COVID impacts, the efforts to address the challenges, and continuing fears about the impacts on the youth population. These are in addition to the many personal challenges of the youth served by workforce systems (Collins, Spindle-Jackson, & Yao, 2021). Some of the respondents' observations would certainly be expected and are consistent with the ways in which many populations across the globe were affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Other observations were more specific and added greater nuance to our understanding of the impacts on the workforce system and the youth it serves.

Nearly all societal institutions and organizations have been faced with challenges in the wake of COVID. Indeed, it was not only the youth population (and their families) that were affected by COVID but also all the sectors of the workforce system (employers, schools, training programs, etc.) and the individuals within them (who faced illness, death, and other challenges). From the data, we highlight two key named challenges: youth recruitment (and continued engagement) and reluctance of youth to invest time in training during conditions of employment scarcity. This latter challenge poses a very human response although it may not be the best in the long run. Particularly when youth may be counted on within their family to bring financial resources into the household, it is important to recognise the necessity of the immediate income. This illuminates the interaction between workforce development and broader social welfare systems. More robust social welfare systems that provided a reasonable level of economic well-being to poor households would allow the young person the opportunity to invest in their future. Conversely, without a strong social welfare system, young people will often be caught in this bind, resulting in choices that may have limited long term benefit.

Youth engagement is a perennial issue for this population. Workforce professionals have long faced challenges to engage youth in services and keep them engaged in working toward the credentials, certificates, and experiences that lead to good employment outcomes and substantial economic well-being. Disconnected youth often experience considerable amounts of instability including lack of adequate supports, financial hardship, housing instability, criminal justice issues, and substance abuse issues, among other factors, that hinder their ability to navigate and succeed in youth workforce programs (Zaff, Ginsberg, Boyd, & Kakli, 2014). It is important to understand these issues in order to determine the best supports and services that can help these youth thrive in a rapidly changing labor market.

Many personal, family, community and neighborhood characteristics may put youth at risk for disengagement from services, either individually or in combination. Disconnected youth have an increased likelihood of being young parents; young women among this population are over four times as likely to be mothers as their connected counterparts, 25.2 percent versus 6.0 percent (Lewis, 2020). Research shows this can impede success in youth workforce programming. A 2015 evaluation of Project Rise - a program that served 18-to-24-year-olds who lacked a high school diploma (or the equivalent) and had been out of school, out of work – found childcare needs as the single most important factor in impacting outcomes, including a participant’s ability to engage in the program. Results showed that custodial parents had lowest attendance rates, fewer internship placements and lower rates of GED certificate attainment (Manno, Yang, & Bangser, 2015). Thus, current federal attention to the broader issue of childcare may be beneficial to the youth workforce. This observation again invites international comparisons (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016). Countries with stronger and more affordable childcare systems than the U.S. put up one less barrier to sustained employment for young people.

While the importance of in-person engagement echoed across interviews, so too did the adaptability of both youth and staff. Given the continuing uncertainty surrounding COVID's transmission and multiple waves in different countries and regions, this cornerstone practice principle of "adaptability" is an important takeaway and will remain central to workforce efforts in the near future. As reported, workforce systems identified several adaptations – some large, some small – to try to continue and advance their work while under constraints related to mobility, communication, and technology, among others. Adaptations were often unique to the local settings; employment opportunities, service providers, core partnerships can vary by setting. Commonly, respondents described the importance of flexible funding in order to be innovative. In some settings, funding was available (or became available) to expand technology access. Sustained evaluation efforts must continue to monitor the range of new practices that have developed in the wake of COVID. Learning from these experiences is essential as localities institute new ways of working and discard others that may not be sustainable. An optimistic scenario may identify COVID-inspired needed improvements to workforce systems that work better for young people and result in better outcomes.

Core partnerships within localities also were noted as crucial by respondents. Partnerships are always key to workforce development. Localities require engagement of employers, training programs, educational institutions, community supports, and other resources, in addition to youth. Adaptability in the wake of COVID in many cases prompted increased flexibility, access and innovation within existing programming and through the building of new partnerships. Potentially these enhanced partnerships might be sustained as good practice as we learn to live with COVID. One area in particular that will be important to sustain, is the linkage with support services that address basic needs (e.g., food security). While much of the crisis moment of

COVID has passed, many youths and their families will continue to live in poverty. Ensuring basic needs are met will increase the likelihood that youth can benefit from workforce programming opportunities.

Additional adaptations named employment opportunities that arose in the course of the pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some workforce systems report having positive results in placing youth in COVID-19-related employment opportunities such as COVID testing, PPE distribution, and vaccination sites. As these opportunities have started to wane from the decline in COVID cases, workforce systems can use these experiences to pivot to other health care measures. Health care career pathways have long been a key sector in many regions. Pandemic-oriented employment may lead to further opportunities in health care systems and public health more generally. Also noted, was respondents' recognition that remote work might prompt workforce providers to engage in planning for careers that are not location specific (some customer service tech jobs, for example). Overall, respondents demonstrated some creative thinking regarding how the COVID disruptions might open up some new employment sectors.

In regard to fears expressed, we found the perspectives of respondents to be informed and instructive regarding threats to youth well-being. Many of the respondents are on the frontlines of the work and well-versed in the risks youth face. They know that even in the best circumstances it is challenging to engage youth and that youths face numerous barriers to success. Several respondent comments identified the potential long-term damage to young peoples' lives if robust intervention is not provided. These sentiments echo the numerous research findings that have documented the challenges of disconnected/NEET youth and how these challenges have been exacerbated by the pandemic in the U.S. (Flanagan et al., 2021) and globally (Bacher and Tamesberger, 2021; Maguire, 2020). Policymakers across the globe must

be called upon to provide the needed resources to meet youth needs, offer relevant programming, link youth to sustainable jobs in strong employment sectors, and, more generally, place workforce development for youth high on the policy agenda.

We have particularly emphasised how workforce systems responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by shifting their resources to address basic needs and supports for youth jobseekers. As noted earlier, young workers, a key WIOA target population, are more likely to experience higher rates of unemployment than any other age group. Additionally, most of these youth are likely to live in a household that experienced a loss of employment income after COVID-19. Therefore, it became necessary for workforce systems to provide emergency support services such as food and housing assistance. A broader social safety net is also needed so that such emergencies can be prevented.

Workforce systems providing emergency support services are even more vital for youth jobseekers as states are lifting pandemic-related state of emergencies programs and services (such as eviction moratoriums, rental assistance, and unemployment benefit programs). Given that youth workers are likely to live in homes that experience pandemic-related job loss, WIOA youth are also more susceptible to the loss of these protections. Moving forward, SWDBs and LWDBs will have to determine the short, middle, and long-term impact of the pandemic on these households and allocate support services accordingly. Overall, more robust attention to addressing the basic needs of low-income families would also serve to allow youth greater engagement in workforce services. In comparison to other advanced economies, the U.S. lacks a robust social safety net (Russell, 2018). Consequently, U.S. youth may be at a marked disadvantage to other youth living in wealthy countries.

The digital divide exposed the need for long-term solutions from both state and local governments, the private sector, and workforce systems. Bridging the digital divide also prepares youth jobseekers for the workplace of the future, which is likely to include some virtual component. State and local governments are key players in addressing this, as broadband access in high-poverty areas can require legislative action. Since most workforce boards have required seats for elected officials, workforce systems will have to deliberately engage these board members to enact broadband access legislation and/or resource allocation.

Research has shown that the most effective job trainings are connected directly to in-demand sectors rather than stand-alone trainings not aligned with employer needs (U.S. Department of Labor et al., 2014). Along with job skill programs, apprenticeships and community college partnerships in the workforce systems are also important partners as they provide job-skill trainings, postsecondary education and credentialing, and apprenticeship opportunities. In building skills for the new economy, business leaders can work within the workforce system to better recruit and align new talent into the new apprenticeship opportunities. Similarly, the community college system provides an important post-secondary education and job training link between youth and needs of employers as businesses open up. In each of these cases, workforce systems will need to collaborate with employers, community colleges, and job training providers to build skills for the new workforce. Sophisticated systems of apprenticeship and vocational training have long been lacking in the U.S. in comparison to the premiere models well-established in other countries, notably Germany (Haasler, 2020). It would be beneficial if the major disruptive force of the pandemic sparked further efforts to develop these types of rigorous training.

We also recognise that the pandemic is still occurring. While many sectors of the economy have opened up, and employment numbers have increased, the threat of the pandemic persists. In the immediate context, vaccination rates are variable in different localities; low vaccination areas are seeing a rise in COVID cases. The varying state incidences of COVID-19 cases, including upticks in the COVID-19 Delta and Omicron variants and differing state vaccination rates, have resulted in varying labor market conditions and the ability for local workforce systems to respond to effectively. This same variability in pandemic policy responses and impacts on employment can be observed internationally. National governments have taken various approaches to containing and managing the pandemic (Migone, 2020); variable responses continue in response to new virus mutations.

Local workforce systems are the focus for this discussion, due to the nature of the pandemic being more pronounced and varied at the local level. Local challenges include the impact to specific sectors during the pandemic. For instance, though the “hospitality, retail, and food preparation and serving related” sectors were most impacted by the pandemic, youth jobseekers were able to find employment in local sectors that remained open by state and local leaders. Pandemic-proof-and-adaptable employment sectors have an important role in the ability of the workforce systems to successfully navigate youth jobseekers into continued employment. This also highlights the importance of government leaders and their role in setting the parameters for business and the various industries in their state.

Disconnected youth are not a monolithic group, and they face different paths toward employment and education. However, evidence demonstrates that cumulative risk factors such as chronic homelessness, incarceration and criminal justice involvement coupled with lack of supports, seriously impede productive engagement in youth workforce programs among this

population (Zaff, Ginsberg, Boyd, & Kakli, 2014). Disconnected youth are more than twenty times as likely to be living in institutionalised settings (such as correctional facilities or residential health facilities) as their connected peers. Additionally, almost one in five disconnected black boys and young men are living in institutionalised group quarters of some kind, attesting to continued racial disparities in the criminal and juvenile justice systems (Lewis, 2020).

Racial disparities existed before COVID and were exacerbated in many ways reported here. Prior to the pandemic, there was a sizable number of young people not connected to school or work. Pre-pandemic reports show that close to 11.7 percent of Americans ages 16 to 24 were disconnected in 2018 (Lewis & Gluskin, 2018) - approximately one in nine young people not in school and not working (Lewis, 2020). This problem becomes more acute when looking at youth of color. In 2018, Native American youth had a disconnection rate of 23.4 percent, the highest among the country's five major racial and ethnic groups. Black teens and young adults had the second-highest disconnection rate, 17.4 percent, followed by Latino (12.8 percent), white (9.2 percent), and Asian (6.2 percent) young people (Lewis, 2020).

The unique history of the U.S. with regard to race heightens the risk for certain racial groups and requires a policy response that infuses racial equity into further workforce services. Other countries have their own histories that result in disadvantage for specific groups and must also address the resulting inequities in focused ways. In many European countries, migrant populations, for example, require specific efforts to engage in workforce initiatives (see, Sweden, for example, Manhica, Berg, Almquist, Rostila, & Hjern, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic demanded innovative, adaptive efforts from all sectors. Youth workforce staff responded to the precarity of the pandemic by re-envisioning internships and

work placements and identifying ways to remain engaged with young people despite the virtual learning spaces necessitated by the pandemic. From applying to grants that would fund delivery-based meals to encouraging youth to keep up their individual meetings with case managers to re-envisioning virtual spaces and outreach, workforce development staff identified ways to maintain their goals of supporting young people despite the demands of the pandemic. These efforts can continue to serve as a blueprint for future workforce development activities. Firstly, with the pandemic far from definitively over, there is a need to take stock of the efforts that were successful during this time and to assess how to enhance their effectiveness on an ongoing basis. Secondly, data illustrated that youth were not as eager for remote settings as staff initially thought. Understanding the efforts that youth were receptive to despite the changing platforms will be an important way to identify what workforce activities can continue to meet youth needs in precarious times.

Multiple entities that influence and interact with the workforce system were affected by the pandemic. Partnerships continued to be a crucial mechanism for success within the field, with the pandemic illuminating the necessity for communicating across disciplines to identify holistic ways to continue to serve youth. Managing across partners is therefore a potential opportunity for the field moving forward. Ongoing efforts rooted in streamlining and formalizing partnerships will benefit youth workforce services not only in the wake of the ongoing pandemic, but on an ongoing basis.

Finally, we highlight this experience of adapting to the challenges posed by COVID and its economic effects provides an opportunity to recognise the fundamental importance of a workforce development system and to elevate attention to it in our national policy conversation. Prioritizing youth will be pivotal for an equitable recovery from this crisis. Federal efforts must

strengthen the nation's youth workforce development system in order to support youth and their communities in recovering from the COVID-19 crisis. The Biden administration unveiled the American Jobs Plan - a \$2.65 trillion proposal that will help upgrade and repair the nation's physical infrastructure, increase investments in manufacturing, research, and development, and help expand long-term health care services (Committee for Responsible Federal Budget, 2021). Education and workforce development are a significant part of this proposal. Key strategies that are particularly geared toward supporting career readiness for youth and young adults include: targeting workforce development opportunities in underserved communities, strengthening the capacity of the existing workforce development and worker protection systems, and creation of a National Youth Employment Program. This initiative would support summer and year-round employment activities for youth, as well as support services such as transportation and childcare (National Association of Workforce Boards Blog , n.d.). This specific focus on youth is particularly needed. The COVID-19 pandemic-related education and employment policy responses has been bifurcated, in which the youth have been targeted for secondary educational engagement and adults have been targeted for employment engagement. As a result of these bifurcated approaches, youth have been left youth out of targeted workforce development initiatives. Given the unique needs and challenges faced by youth jobseekers, future policy efforts need to center workforce development policy on the youth population, rather than general workforce development policy that includes youth-related initiatives.

In addition to the American Jobs plan, the American Rescue Plan, also known as the COVID-19 Stimulus Package also provided important supports for youth. These included (Bird, White, & Parton, 2021): (1) Increasing and expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit, which helped keep young workers (including non-custodial parents and those without children) out of

poverty and is important for this population since many young people work as cashiers, home health aides, delivery people, and other essential workers are more likely to be youth and young adults; (2) Extending unemployment insurance enhancements from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act so youth and young adults, including working high school and college students, can access unemployment relief; (3) Eliminating harmful provisions in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), so young people will not lose these basic benefits to access food. These, and other, policy efforts must continue to prioritize the employment and education needs of youth and young adults.

Addressing the circumstances of disconnected youth has become a major focus of policy in many countries over the last few decades. The numerous effects of COVID have brought increased attention as the potential negative impacts on young employment that pose grave threats to individual youth and society. As policymakers in many countries aim to adjust or enact new programs to strengthen employment prospects for young people, this is a time for renewed research focus to understand the strengths and limitations of various approaches. It is also a time that is ripe for international comparisons to further identify the importance of context.

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