Youth Engagement:
Good for Families, Communities, and the Economy

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This is one of a series of issue briefs dedicated to helping community leaders and policymakers bolster their campaigns and strategies with the economic case for equity. The issue briefs correspond with the 13 planks of the Marguerite Casey Foundation's Equal Voice National Family Platform. Additional issue briefs can be found at www.policylink.org/focus-areas/equitable-economy.

PolicyLink is a national research and action institute advancing economic and social equity by **Lifting Up What Works®**.

Marguerite Casey Foundation exists to help low-income families strengthen their voice and mobilize their communities in order to achieve a more just and equitable society for all.

Overview

The face of America is changing: more than half of Americans under age five are of color, and by 2044 we will be a majority people-of-color nation. But while communities of color are driving growth and becoming a larger share of the population, inequality is on the rise and racial inequities remain wide and persistent. Dismantling racial barriers and ensuring that everyone can participate and reach their full potential are critical for the nation's prosperity. Equity—just and fair inclusion of all—is essential to growing a strong economy and building vibrant and resilient communities. This issue brief describes how engaging youth benefits families, communities, and the economy.

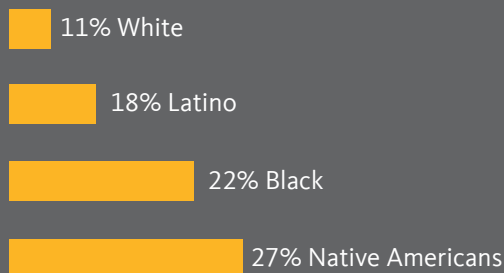## Why Youth Engagement Matters for All

Today's youth are tomorrow's workers, entrepreneurs, innovators, and leaders, but many face conditions that hamper their ability to take up these roles. The post-recession economy has not been kind to young people, leaving them with limited and low-quality employment prospects. While the current generation of youth is the most racially and ethnically diverse in the nation's history, youth of color and immigrant youth face the bleakest prospects in terms of quality employment.[1] Nearly 1 in 7 young people ages 16 to 24 are disconnected—neither working nor in school. Black, Native American, and Latino youth are disproportionally disconnected, and their communities are less likely to be represented in civic institutions.[2]

Youth engagement in the workforce as well as in civic institutions and political life is critical for developing the capacity of young people as leaders and decision makers and for cultivating a strong and inclusive economy. As American communities grow more and more diverse, ensuring that all youth are connected, supported, and empowered is essential to ensure their success and prosperity.

Economic Benefits of Youth Engagement

1 in 7

Young people ages 16 to 24 who are neither working nor in school

- 11% White
- 18% Latino
- 22% Black
- 27% Native Americans

5.5 Million

Total number of disconnected youth in the United States

$13,900

Annual taxpayer burden per disconnected youth

Sources: National Equity Atlas; America's Promise Alliance

The Economic Benefits of Youth Engagement

Youth engagement strategies bring about positive economic benefits, including the following.

- **Improved employment outcomes.** Work begets work: early employment experiences help youth enter the workforce. When analyzing the data for teens and young adults, the Brookings Institution found that teens ages 16 to 19 years who worked 14 to 19 weeks in a given year were 54 percent more likely to have a job the following year.[3] Summer jobs for youth are associated with increased high school graduation rates, improved job prospects, and higher earnings later in life.[4]

- **Increased educational attainment.** Ensuring that youth succeed at school is critical for developing a strong workforce prepared for the jobs of tomorrow. Closing the achievement gap between Black and Latino children and their White counterparts would add an average of $551 billion per year to the U.S. economy.[5] Research shows that youth engagement builds young people's economic potential by increasing their educational success and nurturing critical thinking skills. Young people engaged in community organizing report better grades and increased interest in attending college.[6] Young people who volunteer are 50 percent less likely to be disconnected from work and school.[7]

- **Improved programs and policies.** Studies show that involving youth in decision making benefits not only the youth involved but also the organizations and communities in which they participate. Groups that engage youth in meaningful ways can develop new skills and perspectives that make them more responsive to those they serve. In addition, significant youth involvement can increase an organization's credibility and help it make better use of its resources.[8] For example, through participatory budgeting processes, youth can redirect investments from underutilized programs into those that meet their needs and the needs of their communities.[9] When organizations and city governments engage youth in substantive program evaluation processes, as advisory committee members or as organizational board members, they can access networks and constituencies usually closed to them.

Key Challenges to Youth Engagement

To harness the talents of youth to build an equitable economy, several challenges must be overcome.

- **High rates of unemployment and underemployment.** Young people were the hardest hit by the economic crisis, and it fundamentally transformed their short- and long-term employment opportunities.[10,11] The Bureau of Labor Statistics recently reported that the youth unemployment rate was 2.1 percentage points lower in July 2015 than it had been a year earlier.[12] However, Black and Latino youth are still significantly more likely than their White peers to be disconnected: 22 percent of Black and 18 percent of Latino youth are neither working nor in school, compared with 11 percent of White youth.[13] Unemployment and sporadic employment among teens have been shown to negatively impact their employment, hourly wages, and earnings in their early 20s.[14]

- **Organizations and programs that do not meet the needs of youth.** Programs created for youth that are designed by adults are not always effective or efficient.[15] Adult-driven programing is based on the rationale that adults, because of their experience and knowledge, know how to best help youth.[16] But young people who use adult-driven services may not feel that their voices are being heard and respected, which is an important element of developing informed opinions and learning to engage in meaningful discussions. Studies have shown that both the degree and the duration of youth participation are greater when participants feel considered, respected, and empowered, while programs that treat young people as passive participants or only superficially involve them in decision making are less likely to produce beneficial outcomes for their constituents.[17]

- **Organizational inability to engage young people.** Organizations need to build infrastructure that encourages authentic engagement with youth and educates them on relevant issues so they can be active decision makers rather than token representatives. Because youth are often marginalized from community decision making, negative stereotypes may thrive in the minds of the staff who serve youth and in the community at large.[18] The most disadvantaged youth, who could derive the greatest benefit from meaningful community engagement, may also face the greatest barriers to getting involved.

Strategies to Support Youth Engagement

State and local policies like those described below can be used to strategically support and enhance youth engagement.

- **Expand access to academic enrichment and job-training programs.** High-quality youth development programs can help youth build the skills to participate in the 21st century economy. Youth participating in these programs often have access to opportunities to develop leadership skills, for example, by leading projects or designing aspects of the program. The YouthBuild program, for instance, combines academic enrichment with workforce training, project-based service learning, and leadership development opportunities for low-income youth across the country. Researchers have calculated that every dollar spent on a YouthBuild student produces an average return of $7.80 over the course of the student's life. For students with criminal records, the return increased to a range of $10.90 to $43.80, based on the direct and indirect cost savings associated with reduced recidivism.[19]

- **Create structures that enable youth to inform the work of organizations and governments.** Youth advisory groups or committees establish an intentional structure for youth to propose solutions to address the issues that affect their lives and, in many cases, to implement these solutions in partnership with adults. The City of Boston, for example, has established a participatory budgeting process that allows all of the city's youth to inform investments in their community by voting on how to spend $1 million of the city's capital budget.[20]

- **Engage and empower youth to advocate for policy and systems change.** Youth are experts on their own experiences. As such, they are often best positioned to identify the changes that need to happen in their communities for young people to succeed. Advocates, organizations, and governments can help youth develop their capacity to address important issues through policy and systems change. For example, California's Alliance for Boys and Men of Color organizes hundreds of youth of color every year to advocate to their state representatives for policies that promote the success of boys and men of color in California. In 2015, 20 bills prioritized by the Alliance in the areas of education, health, employment, and safety and justice were signed into law.[21]

- **Include youth at all levels of organizations and institutions.** Intentionally including young people at all levels of an organization or institution—as staff, leaders, and board members—expands their access to economic opportunities and ensures that organizations are responsive to the needs of young people. Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Boston has institutionalized this representation by designating four seats for youth on its board of directors, providing equal representation for each of the major racial and ethnic groups in the community.[22]

Equitable Growth in Action
Philadelphia Youth Commission

Established in 2008 as the result of a ballot initiative, the Philadelphia Youth Commission enables 21 youth from across the city to represent and advance a youth agenda in city government. The Youth Commissioners have regular monthly public meetings on different subjects related to their four subcommittees: Public Safety, Health and Wellness, Education, and Workforce Development. Funded by the City, the Youth Commission represents Philadelphia's youth in public hearings, advises city leadership and other decision makers on issues affecting youth, and develops strategies in partnership with these stakeholders to improve the lives of Philadelphia's youth. This strategy has institutionalized a meaningful role for young people in the City of Philadelphia.

Sources: Philadelphia Youth Commission

Learn More

- [Connecting Youth and Strengthening Communities](#) A report on the relationship between civic engagement and economic opportunity. (Opportunity Nation)

- [Opportunity Nation](#) Working to close the opportunity gap and expand economic mobility.

- [ACT for Youth](#) Resources, technical assistance, and training related to youth development.

- [National League of Cities, Institute for Youth, Education, and Families](#) Helping city leaders build better communities.

- [Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative](#) Helping young people transition successfully from foster care to adulthood.

Acknowledgments

Notes

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