**RESEARCH REPORT**
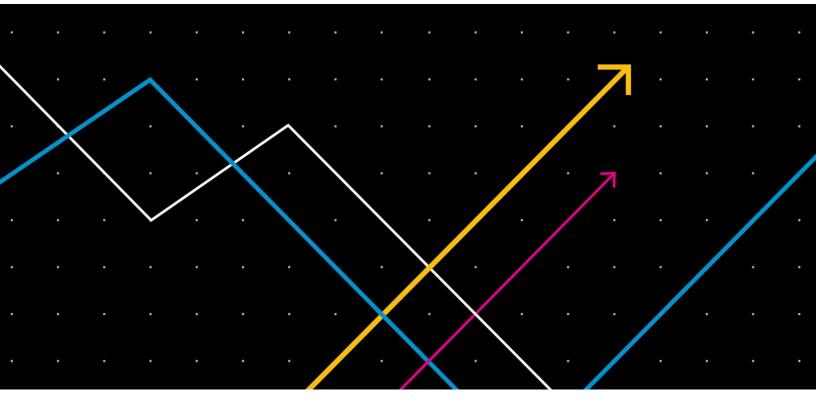
# Community-Based Workforce Engagement Supports for Youth and Young Adults Involved in the Criminal Legal System

**Findings from an Exploratory Scan**

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# Executive Summary

Stable employment is associated with significant short- and long-term benefits for youth and young adults (ages 16 to 24), but juvenile or criminal legal system involvement can create significant employment barriers, especially for young people (Ross et al. 2018; Weber 2021).[1] Engaging with supportive services in a community-based setting can help young people navigate and mitigate these barriers by accessing support to meet basic needs and set and achieve professional goals (Blum et al. 2021; De Nike et al. 2019). This report summarizes findings from an exploratory study of community-based workforce development programs that involved a nationwide survey and a series of 15 follow-up interviews with staff members from a subset of surveyed programs serving youth and young adults who have been adjudicated for or convicted of serious offenses. The programs we examined use a variety of strategies to serve their participants, including engaging in multisector partnerships, offering a wide range of workforce- and non-workforce-related supports, blending funding from multiple sources, and measuring progress and success. Though many programs are actively serving system-involved young people, they varied as to the extent to which services were tailored for this population. Our findings highlight the importance of providing flexible service models that can be adapted to meet participants' unique needs, particularly as they pertain to the barriers associated with legal system involvement and the young adult life stage. By developing a responsive program structure, building the organizational infrastructure to support program success, and engaging in strategic partnerships and collaborations, community-based programs can help young people involved in the legal system overcome barriers and identify and meet their employment and career goals.

## Key Findings and Considerations for Stakeholders

Providing flexible and holistic services that meet the employment and career needs of young people with criminal records requires designing programs intentionally, building and sustaining a supportive organizational infrastructure, and coordinating across a wide range of partners including employers and

legal system stakeholders. Key considerations for intentionally designing programs to facilitate workforce engagement among young people with criminal records include the following:

- Use an individualized, developmentally appropriate, and strength-based approach, including by collaborating with participants to identify resources and goals and allowing for extended engagement with participants if desired.

- Understand participants' experiences with trauma and mental health challenges and adjust program offerings and services accordingly.

- Offer wraparound support to foster successful workforce engagement, including by ensuring participants can meet their basic needs, such as child care, stable housing, food security, and mental health.

- Engage with participants on the nature of their legal system involvement to help them overcome related barriers. This can include helping them understand their criminal records, supporting them with complying with community supervision requirements, or addressing outstanding fines and fees.

- Tailor programs to meet the needs of specific participant subpopulations, including by collaborating with other community-based providers with complementary offerings.

Key considerations for building and sustaining a supportive organizational infrastructure include the following:

- Support a wider and more flexible array of service offerings by using a blended funding model that leverages resources from different sources (such as a mix of federal and philanthropic grants).

- Hire staff with similar life experiences as participants—such as juvenile or criminal legal system involvement, shared cultural and language backgrounds, shared neighborhood and community membership, experiences with systemic racism, and experiences with class and poverty—and provide staff training on positive youth development strategies and trauma-informed care.

- Address any gaps in data collection strategies that may limit practice and outcome documentation.

Key considerations for coordination across partners include the following:

- Engage with legal system actors, whether through formal collaboration or more informal relationship-building efforts.

- Engage employers as a key constituency for fostering participants' success, focusing on employer fit—including employers' willingness to change their practices to better retain employees and troubleshoot challenges.

- Collaborate with other local service providers to provide complementary services and engage in cross-referrals.

# Community-Based Workforce Engagement Supports for Youth and Young Adults Involved in the Criminal Legal System

This report details findings from an Urban Institute study to document the ways community-based workforce development programs are delivering services to youth and young adults (ages 16 to 24) who have been adjudicated for or convicted of serious offenses. Using information gathered from a nationwide survey and a series of interviews with staff from 15 community-based service organizations, the study aimed to inform the field by answering the following five research questions:

1. Which community-based programs with workforce development components serve populations that include youth and young adults ages 16 to 24 who have been adjudicated for or convicted of serious offenses?

2. What are the goals of these programs?

3. How are these programs' service models structured? What interventions and strategies do they include?

4. How do programs measure achievement of their goals?

5. What promising or effective strategies and interventions are these programs employing to serve the population of interest? What challenges are they facing?

Drawing on our data collection and analysis, we offer considerations for stakeholders seeking to improve community-based workforce supports for legal system–involved young people. The survey data, which include responses from 128 respondents from 41 states and the District of Columbia, offer a snapshot of the types of programs providing these services across the country. The semistructured interviews with providers from 15 programs enable us to more deeply analyze these programs' promising practices and their strategies for overcoming challenges.

In this report, we provide key takeaways from our review of relevant literature and then share findings from our analysis of survey and interview data. More specifically, we discuss the characteristics of community-based organizations that serve young people involved in the legal system, including their

program models, organizational structures, and partnerships and collaboration strategies. We conclude with key policy and practice considerations for community-based workforce-support service providers.

# Key Learnings from the Literature

The literature on emerging adulthood and workforce supports emphasizes the unique opportunities and challenges associated with this life stage, the importance of taking a contextual approach to understanding what young people need, and the promise of community-based supports to facilitate workplace readiness and engagement for youth and young adults involved in the criminal legal system (see appendix B for a more detailed summary of the literature). The following key points informed our approach for this study:

- **Emerging adulthood (ages 16 to 24) is a time of growth and transformation, as well as heightened risk of system involvement**. In addition, young people have many paths to adulthood, and structural challenges such as poverty and systemic racism can create significant barriers for people navigating those paths. Contact and involvement with the legal system, and being adjudicated for or convicted of more serious offenses in particular, can worsen those challenges. *This study focuses on strategies to support youth and young adults at a critical time in their lives and help them navigate the range of challenges associated with legal system involvement that can hinder workforce engagement.*

- **Access to a variety of community-based workforce development resources and supports can facilitate a stable transition to adulthood.** Community-based services grounded in positive youth development (PYD) principles and using a strengths-based and trauma-informed approach can promote success for legal system–involved youth.[2] *We focused on supports available in a community setting, not in an institution, and asked survey respondents and interviewees to provide information on the strategies they use to engage their participants.*

- **Workforce development programs vary widely, and ensuring the available resources match participants' needs is key.** Programs that target services to legal system–involved young people and provide culturally responsive, individualized services can best meet their participants' needs (Clifton, Boden, and Milton 2021; Vivrette, Herbert, and Liberman 2020). *This study is building on existing literature by collecting information from a wide range of programs around the country to better understand how they aim to meet the wide range of needs of their youth and young adult participants who are system involved.*

# Characteristics of Community-Based Organizations Serving Young People Involved in the Legal System for Serious Offenses

To learn more about community-based workforce development programs that serve legal system–involved young people, we engaged in two primary data collection strategies (see appendix A for a full description of our methodology). First, we conducted a nationwide survey of 667 community-based programs that provide workforce services and include youth and young adults in their participant bases, which we identified by compiling lists of organizations known to Urban and the Foundation and conducting an extensive key word–based web search. We received 128 survey responses for a response rate of 19 percent. Of those, the vast majority (124) are from organizations with participant populations that include people who have been involved in the juvenile or criminal legal systems. Second, we conducted semistructured interviews of staff from 15 of these programs. We selected programs for interviews based on their relevance to the focus of this study and to represent a diversity of program elements (including geography, participant base, program model, partnership structure, and organization type), with preference given to programs that had not been well documented in the literature. Programs selected for interviews were not a representative sample of all programs that participated in the survey.

The majority of programs we surveyed and interviewed are community-based, nongovernmental nonprofits that provide direct services (see table C.1 in appendix C for an overview of surveyed programs). Most survey respondents (83 percent) work in nonprofit organizations. The majority of people we interviewed work in programs that provide direct services, and the range of program models and supports they described was wide. Two of the people we interviewed do not provide direct services, but rather work in organizations that serve in a coordination capacity among networks of service providers and employers, including securing funding and passing it through to direct-service-provider partners.

The primary themes we explored in the survey and interviews are organizational structure, program models, primary challenges, and promising practices for supporting young people who have been adjudicated for or convicted of serious offenses. The findings that follow are based on data from the survey and interviews and are organized around three central questions:

1. How do program providers structure their services to support workforce engagement among youth and young adults with legal system involvement in workforce engagement?

2. What organizational structures can sustain workforce-related program provision to youth and young adults with criminal records?

3. What types of partnership and collaboration can help workforce engagement programs serve youth and young adult participants who have criminal records?

This report concludes with a discussion of key considerations related to each research question.

## How Do Program Providers Structure Their Services to Support Workforce Engagement among Youth and Young Adults with Legal System Involvement?

To answer this question, we asked survey and interview respondents about the populations they serve, their recruitment models and participant engagement periods, their program offerings and job sector placements, and successes and challenges they encounter related to serving system-involved participants. Key findings about how program providers structure their services include the following:

- Nearly all surveyed programs indicated that they serve people involved in the legal system, although approximately half did not provide additional detail on the nature of that involvement.

- Nearly all surveyed programs include people ages 16 to 24 in their client populations, and most have a majority of clients of color. Some programs indicated that the collection of other participant demographic data was limited, and data on gender identity and sexual orientation were collected infrequently.

- Word of mouth is a central recruitment strategy for many programs, as are reciprocal referrals with other service providers and referrals from legal system agencies.

- Duration of participants' program engagement varies, but 6 to 12 months is the most common.

- Key service offerings include job search support, career readiness, and soft skills training, and many programs also offer work-based learning opportunities.

- Sector-specific considerations for job placement include local job availability, skill requirements, and criminal record barriers; food service and construction are common placement sectors.

- The community-based service providers we surveyed that serve legal system-involved youth and young adults support their participants as they navigate a variety of challenges related to legal system structures and practices that can hinder workforce engagement; these include

- burdensome fines and fees, supervision requirements, and the threat of community supervision revocation.

- Many programs also offer nonworkforce supports to foster participants' success. Young people with criminal records frequently confront instability in multiple areas of their lives, including housing, interpersonal relationships, and mental health; holistic service provision is critical in collaboratively solving problems with participants, including to support their workforce engagement.

- Mental health challenges and trauma are common among legal system–involved young people, and connecting participants to mental health support is a key element of many programs.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on community-based workforce programs, having created challenges and opportunities (box 2).

## PARTICIPANT BASE

The majority of survey respondents (60 percent) serve a participant population of fewer than 250 people. The remainder serve anywhere between 251 and 20,000 people each year. Several respondents who reported serving more participants noted that summer employment services drive their high enrollment numbers. Nearly all survey respondents serve youth and young adults ages 16 to 24, and many programs serve older adults as well. Most respondents (87 percent) serve a participant population with a majority of people of color, and nearly half (47 percent) serve a majority of Black participants, who are the largest participant population among the programs in our sample. For nearly 10 percent of programs, Latinx people make up the majority of participants.

Approximately 95 percent of survey respondents reported serving cisgender boys/men and cisgender girls/women, and nearly half indicated serving transgender (trans) and gender-nonconforming individuals.[3] Many respondents, however, were unsure whether they serve trans and gender-nonconforming participants. This indicates a gap in data collection and likely also in program design related to gender identity beyond the cisgender binary. Several staff members we interviewed mentioned they do not formally collect data on trans or gender-nonconforming identities. Similarly, of programs that reported serving legal system–involved participants, only 40 (of 120 that answered this question) reported collecting information on sexual orientation.

The vast majority of respondents (98 percent) reported serving participants who have been involved in the juvenile or adult criminal legal systems. Of the 124 survey respondents serving people who have system involvement, 115 provided estimates of the proportions of their participants in this

group. Of these, 41 percent (*n*=47) reported that the majority of their participants have been system involved. Box 1 summarizes findings from programs that offered additional information about the nature of participants' system involvement. Importantly, approximately half of surveyed programs that indicated they serve participants who have been system involved did not provide additional detail on survey questions asking about the nature of their participants' involvement, including whether they were incarcerated or placed on community supervision or what types of offenses are on their records.

BOX 1

**Survey Results on the Nature of Participants' Legal System Involvement**

We asked respondents who reported serving legal system–involved participants (*n*=124) to provide additional details about the nature of that involvement. About half of these respondents did not offer more information. Here is what we know about those that provided more information:

- About the same number of programs reported that at least some participants have been involved with the juvenile system (*n*=53) as with the adult criminal legal system (*n*=50).

- Many programs serve participants who have recently been released from a facility (*n*=43) and/or are currently on community supervision (*n*=51). For some programs, these populations made up the *majority* of their participants (*n*=21 and *n*=22, respectively).

- Of the programs that reported that at least some of their participants are referred as part of an alternative-to-incarceration program (*n*=31), 11 have a *majority* of participants referred as an alternative to incarceration.

- Of the programs that reported that at least some of their participants participate in programming as part of their community supervision conditions (*n*=30), 9 reported that a *majority* of participants participate as part of these conditions.

- About half of respondents did not report information about the seriousness of participants' system involvement; those that answered reported a spread, with some serving very few people with violent or felony convictions and some serving mostly people in this group.

- Twenty-nine programs reported that at least 70 percent of their participants have been convicted or adjudicated of a felony or violent offense.

Nearly a third of programs that serve legal system–involved participants (*n*=37) exclude people from participating depending on the nature of that involvement. Programs most frequently exclude people with certain kinds of convictions/adjudications (e.g., sex offenses, homicide); others limit

participation based on type of system involvement (e.g., people on probation supervision). Ten respondents were unsure whether their programs had exclusion criteria.

All our interviewees serve at least some legal system–involved young people, many focus explicitly or exclusively on this population. A few interviewees said that participants with legal system involvement constitute a relatively small proportion of their overall participant base and that they do not have formal service structures designed specifically for system-involved young people but rather take an individualized approach with these participants.

### RECRUITMENT MODEL AND ENGAGEMENT PERIOD

The survey also asked how programs that serve people who have been system involved connect with their participants. Participants are most frequently recruited through word of mouth and direct outreach, followed by referrals from other community organizations and referrals from social service agencies (table 1; see also table C.2 in appendix C for detailed survey data). Referrals from legal system agencies are common, although fewer respondents indicated that participation is a required part of participants' legal system involvement. Employers were the least commonly reported referral source.

TABLE 1
**The Five Most Commonly Reported Sources of Participant Referrals among Surveyed Workforce Development Programs Serving Legal System–Involved Participants**

|  | Yes (*n*) | Yes[a] (%) | *N*[b] |
|---|---|---|---|
| Word of mouth | 112 | 95 | 118 |
| Direct outreach recruitment by program staff | 108 | 92 | 118 |
| Referral from another community organization | 106 | 90 | 118 |
| Referral from a government social service agency | 105 | 89 | 118 |
| Referral from court, probation agency or correctional agency | 100 | 85 | 117 |

**Source:** Urban Institute survey of 128 organizations administered between March 2021 and May 2021.
**Notes:** [a] Percentage who answered yes out of all respondents who answered "yes," "no," or "unknown" for each item.
[b] Sum of all respondents who answered "yes," "no," or "unknown" for each item.

The interview data on how programs connect with participants largely mirror the survey findings. Most interviewees stressed the importance of word-of-mouth referrals. Nearly all interviewees have relationships with other local service providers that involve reciprocal referrals (such as homeless shelters and faith-based organizations) and some partner with local businesses that interface with potential participants (e.g., one interviewee described getting some referrals from a local gay bar). Some interviewees said they get direct referrals from legal system entities, both from collaboratively offering specific programs in partnership with legal system agencies as well as based on more informal

relationships with community supervision, district attorneys, and judges. Some programs primarily or exclusively receive postadjudication referrals, whereas others also have connections with legal system stakeholders who reach out to their program staff as part of alternative-to-incarceration or deferred adjudication options. Others said they get referrals from local schools, outreach via social media, and flyers. In general, interviewees stressed that referrals based on existing relationships—either between current and potential program participants or between program staff and other referring entities— were more effective than less personal approaches.

Survey respondents most frequently reported that their programs engage participants from six months to a year, and it is uncommon for programs to engage participants for longer than two years. Interviewees reported that the length of engagement varies across programs. Several explained that ensuring young people can engage indefinitely (including in moments of crisis or when the type of support they need changes) is an important part of maintaining trust with them, but that funding restrictions sometimes limit the duration of participation.

### SERVICE OFFERINGS AND SECTOR PLACEMENT

The workforce program elements that survey respondents most frequently reported involved job search assistance (including résumé development and interview preparation), career readiness, and soft skill development (such as teamwork, critical thinking, professionalism, conflict resolution, and communication) (table 2; see also table C.3 in appendix C for detailed survey data). Many survey respondents indicated their programs also provide nonworkforce supports as part of broader service offerings. The majority of programs provide case management services and assistance with transportation. Financial literacy and wealth-building, mentoring, and education supports were also frequently reported. Vocational rehabilitation, a type of program offered through public workforce systems to meet the needs of people with disabilities, was the least frequently reported offering. People with disabilities tend to be overrepresented in the legal system,[4] suggesting opportunities to better connect participants with disabilities with services targeted to their needs.

TABLE 2
**The Five Workforce-Related Services Most Commonly Reported by Workforce Development Programs Serving Legal System–Involved Participants**

|  | Yes (*n*) | Yes[a] (%) | *N*[b] |
|---|---|---|---|
| Job search assistance | 125 | 98 | 127 |
| Career readiness/"soft skills" | 122 | 97 | 126 |
| Job development/connections to employers | 117 | 93 | 126 |
| Career exploration/career planning | 113 | 93 | 122 |
| Job coaching or other job retention support | 111 | 90 | 124 |

**Source:** Urban Institute survey of 128 organizations administered between March 2021 and May 2021.
**Notes:** [a] Percentage who answered yes out of all respondents who answered "yes," "no," or "unknown" for each item.
[b] Sum of all respondents who answered "yes," "no," or "unknown" for each item.

Interviewees and survey respondents reported using a variety of programming delivery models. Several interviewees said hands-on, direct work experience and a "learning by doing" approach had been most successful with participants with legal system involvement. Interviewees described mixed experiences with online coursework: some said it has not been successful, whereas others said creating online learning and communication spaces has helped participants. Multiple interviewees said they engage participants in youth development and credible messenger work,[5] including by training participants to support one another and creating a pipeline for participants to become employees in their organizations. Eighty survey respondents indicated that they offer subsidized employment (table C.3). Most commonly, this consists of placement with external employers, but some programs use work crews and social enterprise jobs within their own organizations. The vast majority of survey respondents offer job placements as part of their workforce services. The types of occupations participants are placed in varied across programs (table 3), with the most common placements including food preparation/service and construction/extraction.

TABLE 3
**The Five Job Placements Most Commonly Reported by Workforce Development Programs Serving Legal System–Involved Participants**

|  | Yes (*n*) | Yes[a] (%) | *N*[b] |
|---|---|---|---|
| Food Preparation and serving related | 81 | 86 | 94 |
| Construction and extraction | 80 | 84 | 95 |
| Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance | 70 | 76 | 92 |
| Installation, maintenance, and repair | 66 | 71 | 93 |
| Production (e.g. factory work) | 63 | 71 | 89 |

**Source:** Urban Institute survey of 128 organizations administered between March 2021 and May 2021.
**Notes:** [a] Percentage who answered yes out of all respondents who answered "yes," "no," or "unknown" for each item.
[b] Sum of all respondents who answered "yes," "no," or "unknown" for each item.

We also asked which sectors programs tend to rely on to connect legal system–involved young people with employment. Multiple interviewees said they design their programs to build skills that are in demand in local industries (e.g., manufacturing or warehouse work), and several also mentioned the importance of finding jobs that pay a living wage and have benefits (e.g., information technology). They explained the importance of making sure that program training is tied to local employment options, including by teaching transferable skills and helping participants make connections with industries or fields that may be outside the scope of a program's available training options. Many interviewees described restrictions on where people with serious convictions are eligible to work, although one said they see more opportunities in certain sectors than they have in the past. They described the need to align participants' interests and goals with available jobs, and explained that "it just takes one success to break down barriers."

*It just takes one success to break down barriers.*
*—Workforce program staff member*

Interviewees reported connecting participants with employment opportunities across a range of sectors and job areas, including food preparation and service, landscaping, janitorial work, construction, agriculture, office jobs, trucking/commercial driving, hospitality, production and manufacturing, welding, health care, fitness and recreation, installation and repair services (including heating, ventilation, and air conditioning), and sales and customer service. As described earlier, some programs have also had success employing participants directly or with other service providers.

In interviews, a common theme regarding program models was finding ways to meet participants' needs by engaging them in multiple types of support. Interviewees from larger programs that provide a variety of services (including supports not directly related to workforce development) described the importance of having flexibility to support participants via different avenues, including switching program offerings or career tracks if the first one does not work out. Program offerings tailored to specific participant identities were rare; for example, very few organizations reported having specific workforce-related programs, services, or strategies explicitly designed for youth of color or LGBTQ youth. Some organizations offer specific programs or services for young people who are navigating specific situations, however, such as young people who are unhoused or who are parents. And although the COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges for meeting participants' needs, such as addressing

technology barriers to transition to virtual program offerings, it has also created opportunities (box 2 provides additional detail).

Most survey respondents who reported serving legal system–involved participants also offer support services related to system involvement. Ninety-eight programs talk with participants about employment gaps related to their system involvement and how to build on work experience that they gained while in a prison, jail, or other carceral facility. Eighty-four programs provide support for understanding juvenile or criminal records, and 65 offer support for clearing and/or expunging records. Among interviewees, the extent to which their programs target services for participants with serious offenses on their records varied. Several interviewees were not sure what proportion of their legal system–involved participants had more serious offenses on their records or explained that their service provision strategies were the same for all system-involved participants, regardless of which offenses are on their records. Additionally, some interviewees mentioned either general offense-based restrictions for program participation or sector-based limitations for placement based on participants' records.

**Challenges and Opportunities Related to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Nearly all survey respondents from organizations serving legal system–involved people (*n*=115) reported that the pandemic had impacted program operations. Most respondents reported that the pandemic had reduced employment opportunities, though respondents from 24 programs reported that employment opportunities had increased. A majority of programs (*n*=105) had shifted programs to a remote format, and most (*n*=100) had also created additional virtual program offerings. Moreover, interviewees described how they addressed challenges and took advantage of opportunities related to the pandemic. Key themes related to workforce service provision during the pandemic include the following:

- **Mental health.** Interviewees said mental health was a particularly acute problem as participants dealt with the stress of the pandemic. Additionally, some explained that the lack of face-to-face interaction with participants during the pandemic had made it more challenging to earn their trust. Increasing individualized engagement was one strategy for counteracting the additional pandemic-related stress.

- **Technology access**. Many interviewees explained that at the beginning of the pandemic, their participants lacked the technology (e.g., computers and tablets) or stable internet access and broadband connection needed to engage in virtual programming. Additionally, some participants did not have strong digital literacy skills or experience using technology, which complicated the switch to online programming and services. In response, some programs

taught participants to use technology while others chose not to switch to virtual programming. Supplying an internet stipend helped certain programs increase the accessibility of their online services. Importantly, some interviewees said participants' access to technology had increased because of changes they had made in response to the pandemic.

- **Service delivery strategies.** Some interviewees discussed the challenges they faced when they had to abruptly adapt their program materials and curricula to online platforms. These included navigating funding-contract changes to allow for more flexible service provision. Other interviewees reported that digital platforms increased participant engagement. The switch to virtual programming helped them connect with people over larger regions, reach additional participants, diversify communication mechanisms (e.g., texting), remove transportation barriers, and offer alternate platforms for programming and events (e.g., job fairs).

- **Coordination with partners.** Some interviewees from programs that primarily serve young people on community supervision said they have experienced low enrollment/referrals as the local community supervision population has dropped because of the pandemic. Similarly, because of the pandemic, some work sites were closed and employers were unable to accept placements, which limited employment options and work site engagement for program participants.

## ADDRESSING CHALLENGES SPECIFIC TO LEGAL SYSTEM–INVOLVED YOUNG PEOPLE

We asked interviewees to describe the primary challenges they face connecting legal system–involved young people to employment. Across the board, interviewees said this is a challenging population to serve for a variety of reasons. We have already discussed some challenges in this report (e.g.,, securing funding to serve this population and finding the right employer partnerships); this section focuses primarily on challenges related to legal system structures and practices and providing services to individual participants.

*A lot of the battle is getting [participants] through one to two years of community corrections.*
*—Workforce program staff member*

Many of the primary challenges interviewees raised were directly related to adult or juvenile legal system policies and practices. One interviewee said, "A lot of the battle is getting [participants] through

one to two years of community corrections." Interviewees explained how participants' supervision requirements, including attending appointments with community supervision officers, doing random drug screenings, handling malfunctioning GPS monitors, and taking court-ordered classes, can prevent them from being available for and engaging in full-time jobs. They further explained that technical violations that result in jail time can particularly disrupt program and employment engagement and can require participants to go through a program multiple times to complete it. Moreover, they explained that requirements to pay fines and fees related to legal system involvement or school debt can put a lot of pressure on participants and force them to prioritize paying those off before they can dedicate resources to other essential needs. One interviewee told us, "It's a hard population to serve because they have so much hanging over their heads: probation costs, court costs, child support…Where do we start? Especially when they don't comply and then they go to jail."

*It's a hard population to serve because they have so much hanging over their heads: probation costs, court costs, child support…Where do we start? Especially when they don't comply and then they go to jail.*
*—Workforce program staff member*

Interviewees also brought up challenges young people face interacting with multiple agencies and providers simultaneously. One interviewee said a main challenge with partnerships between the various agencies and providers is that intervention strategies for young people can be siloed and their goals may not be coordinated (for instance, the interviewee explained that teachers may be primarily focused on educational outcomes, while mental health clinicians may be primarily focused on diagnosis and treatment). That interviewee went on to explain that nonclinical holistic life coaching can be most helpful for young people, but that their perspective was that this approach tends to receive less support and respect in the field than other more targeted strategies. Another person reported how challenging it can be for participants to navigate the many requirements of human services and workforce systems, including filling out forms, handling appointments, and navigating sometimes contradictory government information. They shared that having a navigator on staff to support participants through that process can help.

Moreover, program staff said challenges with mental health and well-being are common among their participants, which impacts their organizations' approaches to service provision. Several

interviewees said trauma and related triggers are particularly challenging, including for participants returning to their communities after incarceration. Some reported that in response, a big part of providing support is helping participants with communication and conflict resolution skills. Others mentioned the need to adjust benchmarks and performance metrics to account for the impact that trauma has on their participants' lives.

Several interviewees noted that young people with legal system involvement often experience significant instability in different aspects of their lives. They said securing and maintaining housing can be particularly challenging because young people can be more transient than older adults. A few interviewees mentioned challenges related to stability in participants' home environments and their relationships with others, including family and friend groups. One explained that participating in programming sometimes requires participants to make a difficult choice between different priorities and forces, such as participants who are or have been involved in groups or gangs. Another theme involved challenges maintaining participants' safety, including addressing interpersonal violence and substance use. One interviewee said they ensure job placements are in places where participants are not likely to encounter people who may harm them.

## What Organizational Structures Can Facilitate the Provision of Workforce-Related Programming to Young People with Legal System Involvement?

To answer this question, we asked survey and interview respondents about their staffing models, funding structures, program goals, and data collection and outcome measurement. Key findings include the following:

- Staff competency, particularly with positive youth development principles and trauma-informed care, is key for being responsive to participants' needs.

- Some programs use a credible messenger model in which staff and participants share lived experiences, which can involve hiring externally and/or from the participant base.

- It can be challenging to secure funding to provide support to young people with legal system involvement, and funding can carry restrictions that limit service provision flexibility.

- Leveraging funding from different sources can help community-based providers offer a range of services and enable them to extend engagement with participants.

- Programs' goals include individual-level outcomes, such as increasing skills or obtaining employment, and community-level outcomes, such as strengthening community connections.

- Data collection can inform program development, but workforce-development programs' capacity to collect and analyze program information varies widely.

### STAFFING AND CREDIBLE MESSENGER USE

Interviewees identified several key competencies among their staff members. Providing trauma-informed and culturally competent care came up most frequently, and several interviewees said their staff receive related training; gender-responsive care was also raised, although less frequently. Multiple interviewees mentioned the importance of using a PYD approach, and some also offer training on this approach. Interviewees from several programs also said it was important for staff to have mental health expertise to ensure participants have easy access to mental health services, and one interviewee said it was important for staff to have access to mental health care because of the challenges of their jobs.

About a third of interviewees explained that their programs use a credible messenger model in which staff members can connect with participants based on similar life experiences. These interviewees stressed that staff who have navigated similar experiences as participants, such as coming from the same neighborhoods or experiencing incarceration or having a criminal record, can have more credibility with participants, which can help earn their trust, particularly for positions involving street outreach and mentoring. These programs have incorporated various hiring strategies to support this staffing approach, such as aligning their staff with their participant populations across multiple dimensions (including hiring from the zip codes participants live in) and "banning the box," or not asking prospective employees whether they have prior convictions, for their own hiring processes.

Several programs also recruit current or former participants for staff positions, providing internal training and professional opportunities in youth development and mentorship roles. For example, one program is piloting a model for formerly incarcerated people to provide reentry support to recently released people. Another said it functions as a social enterprise to support workforce development for the youth development field and is working on launching a new program to employ legal system–involved young adults as staff members for an outdoor education program for young people. One interviewee said their program promotes some participants to middle managers and gives them formal training as supervisors and peer mentors, and another reported that about 15 percent of their staff are program graduates and that more have had similar experiences as their participants.

### FUNDING STRUCTURE

Nearly all surveyed programs receive some government funding, and most also receive philanthropic funding (see table C.1 in appendix C for detailed survey data). We asked interviewees about their

approaches to funding and sustaining their programs (table 4), and they shared successes and challenges they had experienced in this area.

TABLE 4
**Reported Sources of Funding for Community-Based Workforce Development Programs Serving Legal System–Involved Participants**

|  | Yes (*n*) | Yes[a] (%) | *N*[b] |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Government programs, contracts, or grants | 115 | 91 | 126 |
| Philanthropic grants or donations from foundations and similar entities | 104 | 83 | 126 |
| Profit/income from business/social enterprise operations | 39 | 32 | 121 |
| Payment from employers | 26 | 21 | 121 |
| Fees from participants | 7 | 6 | 119 |
| Other | 5 | 33 | 15 |

**Source:** Urban Institute survey of 128 organizations administered between March 2021 and May 2021.
**Notes:** [a] Percentage who answered yes out of all respondents who answered "yes," "no," or "unknown" for each item.
[b] Sum of all respondents who answered "yes," "no," or "unknown" for each item.

Interviewees said funding for services for legal system–involved young people can generally be challenging to find. They said this challenge is even greater when it comes to securing funding to support young people who may be involved in violence or other harmful activities but are not involved in the adult or juvenile legal systems and therefore are not eligible for dollars tied to system involvement. Some funding for supporting legal system–involved young people comes with more realistic time frames for successful outcomes and definitions of success that consider the additional challenges that young system-involved participants often face (for example, by focusing more on progress than on specific outcomes). What type of organization is providing services also impacts funding availability; public entities may have to navigate more red tape to be approved to apply for funding than private entities, and having status as an independent nonprofit can make organizations eligible to apply for certain competitive funding opportunities to support program offerings.

Consistent with the survey data, most interviewees said they use a blended funding model with two or more sources supporting their workforce development services, and some manage many funding sources simultaneously. Many said that large, mainly governmental, grants provide the bulk of the organizations' program support, but that supplementary flexible funding, which often comes from private sources, can be critical for providing supportive services that less flexible grants do not cover. One interviewee said they use private funds to support more intensive long-term follow-up, track related metrics, and then share that information back with government funders to make the case for increased support. The majority of interviewees said staying connected to participants in the long run is important, but several noted that available funding often does not support long-term (i.e., multiyear)

engagement with young people, requiring them to be creative to serve young people who want to remain connected after their initial program engagement. Having multiple funding sources and options can also help sustain engagement, such as when young people age out of eligibility for services associated with a given funding stream.

Interviewees provided additional context on specific funding sources, including federal funding, funding from or distributed by state and local governments, and private funding. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act was the most frequently mentioned federal funding source, and interviewees also reported receiving other Department of Labor grants such as YouthBuild and AmeriCorps as well as Department of Justice grants, including through the Office of Justice Programs. Program staff explained that large federal grants often anchor program funding but tend to be more restrictive in terms of what they cover, and unpredictability from year-to-year grants means programs can be left scrambling to adjust with their other funding sources. In addition, several interviewees reported that federal grants require a certain level of internal infrastructure to manage because their requirements (for example, to report grant progress) can be administratively cumbersome.

Many of the programs we spoke with also receive funds from state and local sources. State and state-distributed funding include dropout prevention dollars, funding from departments of social services, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families dollars, and funding from state legal systems. Some programs also receive funding from local sources, including city or county governments. One interviewee said local funding is one of the most important streams of support because it can help solidify relationships with grantors in the community who are closer to the work being done. Importantly, several interviewees said getting resources from local workforce boards is challenging.

Many interviewees said they also receive support from private sources. Several mentioned the United Way in addition to support from foundations, and some also receive funding from banks and larger corporations trying to promote their services among marginalized groups. Fewer interviewees mentioned receiving individual donor support and/or payments from employers. Programs that receive private funds all agreed they provide flexibility that is critical for filling service gaps that other large funding sources do not cover. Several program staff said they were interested in seeking more private support but that it can be more challenging to find and secure than grants stemming from requests for proposals from the federal government and other public sources. The vast majority of program services are provided free of charge, and most include some type of monetary compensation for participants. Staff at certain programs said that in the infrequent instances where they charge tuition, the tuition can be waived or adjusted based on participants' ability to pay. Moreover, one respondent said their

program is run as a social enterprise but that the focus is primarily on the value to participants' learning and growth and secondarily on profitability.

## GOALS AND MEASUREMENT

Survey respondents from programs that serve legal system–involved participants more frequently defined program completion based on securing employment than on other stability measures. The most prevalent program outcome goals were job placement, skill growth, and job retention. Ninety-three programs reported that they also seek to advance broader community goals, which were most commonly associated with increasing employment and strengthening community connections. The least commonly reported community goal was increasing entrepreneurship.

The most common metrics programs serving legal system–involved participants collect are gender, race and ethnicity, and age (see table C.4 in appendix C for detailed survey data). Survey respondents reported collecting a wide range of additional information about participants, including level of education, housing status, parental status, immigration status, and disability status. Few programs reported collecting metrics on participants' sexual orientation, which is similar to our finding that programs collect limited data gender identity beyond binary categories. The most common metrics on participation that programs collect are skills improvement and participation in career planning. In addition, nearly all track enrollment and employment, and fewer track how long participants who do not complete their programs participate (table C.4).

Moreover, the programs have varying capacity to collect data and collect data on different metrics. Some collect little to no data, whereas others invest heavily in collecting data from participants before, during, and after participation and reach out to alumni to collect and assess data on longer-term outcomes. Several reported using specific case management systems such as Efforts to Outcomes or Salesforce to track program data. Most interviewees who talked about data systems said they collect metrics to comply with funding requirements, including Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act performance metrics. Several said they also track separate metrics on their own for internal measurement purposes. In addition to required reporting to funders, some interviewees said they share program data with other stakeholders, including through newsletters and other materials. A few interviewees said they were working on more effectively sharing data and program metrics with their local community more broadly.

Program metrics that interviewees commonly said they collect include outreach interactions, program enrollment, attendance, retention, case notes, participants' engagement with education and related achievements, connections to employment, and how long participants sustained employment.

One program staff member emphasized that soft skill development, including leadership and teamwork, is the most critical outcome they look for. Some interviewees said they closely track participants' wages and have specific wage and economic mobility targets they try to achieve. Some programs also track metrics specific to legal system involvement, including record clearing and recidivism. Fewer interviewees said they monitor outcome metrics at the community level to understand how their services may be connected to more aggregate outcomes such as local employment or recidivism rates; one mentioned that those metrics are largely qualitative, and another explained that family-level outcomes were the closest proxy they collect for larger-scale outcomes.

Interviewees' organizations collect and disaggregate data in different ways and at different degrees. Some interviewees confirmed their organizations track participants' race and gender and disaggregate those categories to track participation; fewer disaggregate their data by demographic characteristics for outcome metrics, limiting their ability to examine whether success varies by participant subgroup. Some said they do not disaggregate their data at all, be it for program participation or outcome metrics. Some interviewees mentioned metrics they would like to capture, including retention data and overall measures of participants' well-being that are not tied to legal system involvement.

## What Types of Partnership and Collaboration Can Help Workforce Engagement Programs Serve Youth and Young Adult Participants Who Have Criminal Records?

To answer this question, we asked survey and interview respondents about the partnerships they foster and the various stakeholders they collaborate with. Key findings include the following:

- Cross-sector collaboration was one of the most common themes that emerged for successfully serving system-involved participants, including collaboration with other service providers, legal system stakeholders, and employers.

- Collaboration with other service providers can ensure participants receive complementary supports.

- Partnerships with staff from legal system agencies can be created through formal agreements or informal relationship building and can help young people connect with services and avoid additional system involvement.

- Employers are key partners for work-based learning opportunities, although establishing the right fit and ensuring clear communication is key for success.

**TYPES OF PARTNERSHIPS**

Of survey respondents, 83 percent reported that their organizations participate in formal partnerships, and the types of partnerships vary (figure 1; see also table C.1 in appendix C). Partnerships with community-based organizations were most frequently reported, followed by partnerships with government agencies/offices. Partnerships with employment/career services and criminal legal system agencies were the most common government partnerships. Some programs partner with the juvenile legal and child welfare systems, although these were less commonly reported.

**Types of Partnerships between Community-Based Workforce Development Programs Serving Legal System–Involved Participants and Other Organizations**



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**Source:** Urban Institute survey of 128 organizations administered between March 2021 and May 2021.
**Notes:** The 106 survey respondents who answered "yes" to having formal partnerships were asked what types of partnerships those were. Fewer than six respondents skipped or answered "unsure" for each partnership type. Three selected "other" and wrote in the following answers: "employers and industry groups," "other intermediaries," and "universities."

Interviewees unanimously stressed the importance of partnerships and collaboration to their ability to effectively support their participants' workforce development needs. These include partnerships with schools and government human service agencies, employers, other service providers, funders, and legal system stakeholders. Many interviewees explained that they maintain regular contact with other local organizations that serve similar participant bases to provide complementary

services or referrals. Although a few said their programs have formal contractual partnerships to provide specific services to partner organizations, these relationships are more informal for most programs. Several described that they lean on other organizations that provide tailored services to serve specific participants, including Spanish speakers and LGBTQ participants. Interviewees also stressed the importance of coordinating services with other organizations, and one said they are careful not to duplicate services or make young people repeat the same process (e.g., filling out benefit enrollment forms).

## PARTNERSHIPS WITH LEGAL SYSTEM STAKEHOLDERS

Many interviewees stressed the importance of developing good relationships with legal system stakeholders, including police, judges and attorneys, and community supervision officers to best serve system-involved young people. Several interviewees said they need to educate those stakeholders about available services and supports, emphasizing that legal system decisionmakers may not be aware of local community organizations that can support court-involved young people. Developing a good rapport with those stakeholders can also garner the trust needed for them to make referrals, which they sometimes do as an alternative to deeper system involvement.

Interviewees described specific considerations related to maintaining working relationships with different legal system stakeholders. More than a third of interviewees said they have partnerships and collaborate with local police departments. These include receiving referrals from police, having police participate in programming, holding a career fair focused on law enforcement jobs (emphasizing opportunities open to people with criminal records), collaborating on community listening sessions centered on young people engaged in programming, and receiving funding from police departments to support programming. One interviewee is weighing whether to continue collaborating with the police, however, because many participants have had negative experiences with law enforcement. Several interviewees had developed relationships with judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and community supervision (i.e., probation and parole) officers, who call on them to participate in certain cases by advocating for young people and providing services. They said maintaining these relationships and cultivating trust with system stakeholders, particularly judges, can enable them to help young people avoid further charges or incarceration. But this collaboration can have challenges. One interviewee said these relationships create extra pressure to help participants stay out of trouble because they will get a call directly from the judge if anything happens involving their participants. Another was frustrated that probation officers sometimes refer young people to their program to "check a box" without providing supplementary support for their success.

Some programs reach out to employers and establish networks of organizations that can participate in workforce-related programming and hire program participants. Determining employers' hiring needs and sector fit is a key part of establishing partnerships. Programs engage in outreach to employers differently, including by maintaining relationships with professional associations. Some said they frame partnerships as opportunities for employers to give back to their communities and described reciprocal supportive relationships (e.g., helping with local businesses' community events). Many interviewees stressed the importance of determining whether an employer interested in partnering is a good fit, including whether they understand and are prepared for the potential challenges and opportunities associated with participant placements, and gauging their willingness to hire people with different types of offenses on their records.

Another common theme was the importance of creating relationships that benefit employers and the workforce programs. Some interviewees have ongoing relationships with employers who accept participant placements, and some have formal agreements with employers in a "dual customer service model" in which the employer is also a customer along with the participant. Several programs have strategies for minimizing employers' perceived risks of participating, including subsidizing wages and benefits and educating employers about the services their programs offer participants to support their success (including intervening when challenges arise). Several interviewees said that some employers that accept participant placements are open to feedback about how to improve hiring and retaining people with criminal records; in these situations, program staff coach employers on how they can better facilitate participants' success. Fewer interviewees described taking a more limited approach to engaging employers; these interviewees focus mostly on the initial placements rather than ongoing support or coaching. Many interviewees stressed the importance of establishing and maintaining strong communication channels with employer partners.

# Key Considerations for Policy and Practice

We asked interviewees which engagement strategies are particularly important for supporting workforce engagement among young people involved in the legal system, and they offered the following recommendations:

- **Use an individualized, holistic, trauma-informed, and strength-based approach**. The most common strategy is to take an individualized approach to meet young people where they are, collaborate with participants to understand their needs, and help them meet their own goals.

Supporting participants' personal and professional growth is central to this strategy, and program staff said they use an assets/strengths-based approach to foster confidence and self-esteem and that they emphasize character development and decisionmaking skills. Several interviewees emphasized the importance of designing services and programs that are trauma informed, healing centered, and culturally competent, and of ensuring staff are trained in these areas. More broadly, a common theme across interviews was the importance of respecting participants, collaborating with them to establish goals and understand their needs, and earning their trust to effectively provide support.

- **Build an intentional and supportive learning environments to foster growth**. This includes being willing to be flexible by changing supports and program involvement as needed. A core part of this strategy is proactively staying connected with participants by doing things like having weekly contact or communication and following up with street outreach if they lose touch or do not show up. Interviewees stressed that this approach demonstrates consistent care and support, which fosters trust and rapport with participants. Many also stressed the importance of offering a hands-on learning experience to further engage with youth. They also mentioned using credible messenger and peer mentoring models to connect with participants. Having resources and supports available for participants' ongoing needs (e.g., child care or food assistance) as well as moments of crisis (e.g., an emergency fund or mental health support) is also important.

- **Match program structures to participants' diverse needs**, including the need for income, the need for access to local jobs, educational and health care needs, and the need for wraparound supports. Interviewees had different perspectives on which elements of workforce program design or structure are most critical for supporting young people with legal system involvement. A few described the importance of finding ways for participants to become quickly connected with income sources or baseline jobs to alleviate the stressors of meeting their basic needs, and then engaging them in longer-term training or certifications that more closely align with their goals. Others mentioned the importance of steering participants toward living-wage jobs and trades, doing career assessments to identify options based on their interests, and helping young people think about long-term career goals instead of focusing only on short-term income needs. There was widespread agreement among interviewees about the importance of wraparound mental health and substance use disorder treatment support, as well as the benefit of coordinating service provision across partners. Another theme related to participant engagement was understanding participants' individual needs as well as the needs of their families and designing services for them holistically.

- **Directly engage with participants to address barriers related to their legal system involvement.** Some interviewees explained that their programs work with participants to understand and address legal system records and any remaining associated obligations. One discussed running background checks on participants and taking the time to talk them through their records. They said this can be particularly helpful because many participants do not know what is on their records or what the charges or convictions mean. Another discussed checking for warrants and accompanying participants to police stations or court to help them deal with any outstanding issues (e.g., warrants, fines, fees), which in some instances can help avoid incarceration. Another interviewee has staff members visit youth participants who are incarcerated to demonstrate consistent care and support. Other interviewees help young people meet requirements related to their legal system involvement, including complying with community supervision requirements or paying fines, and collaborate with community supervision officials so young people do not get revoked.

Drawing on the promising practices interviewees shared, we offer the following additional key considerations on programming and services, organizational structure, and partnerships and collaboration for community-based workforce programs serving young people with legal system involvement.

- **Incorporating best practices, including allowing for flexibility and individualization, can facilitate positive outcomes.** There is overwhelming support—both in the literature and among the staff who participated in data collection for this project—for using individualized approaches to meet the needs of and serve legal system–involved young people. Strategies proven to work for this population include providing trauma-informed, healing-centered, and culturally competent care and using positive youth development and strength-based approaches (see appendix B for an overview of related literature).

- **Understanding the local labor market and collaborating directly with employers can facilitate positive employment outcomes for participants.** Ensuring program offerings align with available employment options and that employers are prepared to be good partners to facilitate positive outcomes for young people with criminal records is essential for fostering participants' success.

- **Flexibility with funding streams and requirements is helpful for engaging legal system–involved young people.** Though large federal and government grants tend to provide the bulk of the funding for workforce programs, securing a diverse pool of funding streams can offset limitations associated with federal/government requirements. Receiving additional funding

from foundations and philanthropists can mitigate restrictions including those related to the length of participation/participant engagement or allowable types of nonworkforce supports.

- **Collecting and disaggregating data can enable programs to identify strengths and areas for improvement.** Identifying and tracking measures for success can help programs determine how to develop and evolve, including by ensuring services are leading to positive outcomes for all demographic groups in the participant population.

- **Juvenile and criminal legal system stakeholders, employers, and direct service providers can collaborate to foster young people's success.** While employers are a key constituency, determining fit is important, including their willingness to engage with legal system–involved young people and improve their hiring and retention practices. Policymakers can also play a key role by creating pathways for young people to avoid system involvement and removing employment and other barriers associated with having a criminal record. Funders can also support this work by providing resources designed to meet the unique needs of community-based organizations. This work is challenging, but these stakeholders can collaborate to improve individual-level and system-level outcomes.

By incorporating these considerations, community-based workforce service providers and their many partners can play a pivotal role connecting legal system–involved young people with the supports they need to overcome barriers and succeed in the workplace, as well as in other areas of their lives.

# Appendix A. Methodology

The study's methodology was designed to identify programs across the country that are using promising and effective strategies to help legal system–involved youth and young adults ages 16 to 24 avoid or reduce detention or incarceration and enter employment. Urban's mixed-methods approach for this study, which was conducted between July 2020 and September 2021, involved: (1) using key literature from the field to inform the research approach (including survey and interview questions); (2) fielding a survey to identify a range of programs that fit the study criteria; and (3) conducting a series of virtual interviews to gain in-depth perspectives from a subset of programs and identify cross-cutting themes.

## Survey

To gather information about the range of workforce programs that serve youth and young adults who have been adjudicated or convicted of violent or other serious offenses, we conducted an exploratory survey. Our criteria for including organizations in our survey outreach were that they (1) offer programs were based in the community (not in an institutional setting), (2) included youth and young adults in their service population, and (3) did not explicitly exclude participants based on legal system involvement in their descriptive materials. First, the Urban team compiled a list of 100 to 200 community-based programs that staff from Urban and the Annie E. Casey Foundation were familiar with. This list was expanded through extensive web searching using key words and feedback from alumni advisors from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Juvenile Justice Youth Advisory Council. This process led to a final survey sample of 667 community-based workforce support organizations across the nation. The survey was conducted using Qualtrics online survey software, and included a range of questions about respondents' organizations, including their program models and goals and their participant populations. The survey was tested and then fielded to 667 people for roughly a two-month period from March to May 2021. We received 128 responses, for a 19 percent response rate (table A.1). It is important to note that the survey was designed primarily to identify promising practices—with the initial goal of including 100 programs—rather than to document the structures and practices of a representative sample of workforce development programs. Because we built the list of potential survey participants from a variety of sources, nonresponses may owe to many reasons, including outdated contact information.

**TABLE A.1**

**Sample Size and Response Rates for Our Survey of Workforce Development Programs**

| Surveys sent | Surveys 100 percent completed | Surveys partially completed[a] | Surveys completed | Response rate |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 667 | 112 | 6 | 128 | 19% |

**Notes:** [a] Partially completed surveys were those between 50 and 99 percent complete. These surveys were included in final response rates and survey analyses.

# Interviews

From the full pool of 128 survey respondents, we selected 20 programs to invite to participate in semistructured follow-up interviews to learn more about their structures and approaches to serving system-involved youth and young adults. Programs were selected based on their relevance to the focus of this study, with preference to programs that had not been well documented in the literature. Programs were selected to represent diverse approaches, such as different models of program delivery, strategies to engage with partners, participant demographics, and regions of the country, and not to represent the field more broadly. We contacted potential interviewees over email and invited them to participate in hour-long interviews via Zoom. Staff members from 15 programs responded to our outreach and agreed to participate in interviews, which took place in August and September 2021.

Interviews generally focused on the criteria based on which each program was selected to participate and key questions for the thematic analysis, and on general information about each organization. Interview data were captured in typed notes, which were then analyzed thematically by the main topics included in the interview protocol. Multiple team members reviewed the coded data to verify completeness. Our flexible, semistructured approach to the interviews enabled us to follow up on particularly relevant findings from individuals' survey responses and created space for interviewees to share what they thought was most important, but it meant we did not consistently ask each interviewee every question in the interview protocol. Therefore, the thematic analysis is limited to the subset of interviewees who spoke about each particular subject and is not necessarily reflective of all 15 interviewees.

# Limitations

Data collection for this study occurred in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic and multiple natural disasters, including hurricanes, when many community-based organizations had limited capacity to

engage in external research projects. This may have impacted engagement throughout data collection efforts, including survey participation and availability for interviews. Leaving the survey open longer than initially planned and allowing additional flexibility for when interviews could be completed partially mitigated these challenges. These issues may also limit the extent to which information represents prepandemic program operations, although some survey and interview questions asked about issues before and after the onset of the pandemic, which helped us identify relevant changes. In addition, there may be systematic differences between study participants and nonparticipants. For example, for both the survey and the interviews, potential participants may have declined to participate because of a lack of organizational capacity, which may be a more pressing challenge in programs with fewer staff members.

# Appendix B. Key Learnings from the Literature

The literature on emerging adulthood and workforce supports emphasizes the unique opportunities and challenges associated with this life stage, the importance of taking a contextual approach to understanding what young people need, and the promise of community-based supports to facilitate workplace readiness and engagement for legal system–involved youth and young adults.

## Emerging Adulthood and Pathways to Navigate this Transition

**Emerging adulthood (ages 16 to 24) is a time of growth and transformation, as well as heightened risks of system involvement.** It is a period of discovery and transition that can reinforce patterns established in adolescence or serve as a turning point for change (Scales et al. 2016). At the same time, young adults are often navigating major life transitions related to education, employment, and identity formation; changing relationships with peers, family, significant others, and sometimes children; and can be navigating unique health needs, such as the onset of mental health conditions (IOM and NRC 2015; Kessler et al. 2005). Providing adequate supports for young adults during this transitional stage of life is critical, but workforce development and related professional development support programs that target this age group have historically been few in number and limited in scope (Scales et al. 2016).

Young people have many different paths to adulthood, and structural challenges, such as poverty and systemic racism, can create significant barriers along those paths. Young people begin to self-identify as adults at different ages, depending on when they have achieved a level of independence, when they have determined elements of their identity, and whether they have participated in risk behaviors (Nelson and Barry 2005). Moreover, the sequence in which milestones are achieved can impact mental and physical health (Roberson et al. 2017), and taking on adult roles prematurely may inhibit important developmental areas (Munson et al. 2013). Reaching key milestones is also more challenging for young people who face significant systemic barriers in life (IOM and NRC 2015), including those related to structural racism. Young people of color, particularly Black, Latinx, and Indigenous young people, are more likely than their white peers to come from low-income households because of intergenerational effects of systemic oppression that have reinforced racial inequity, such as redlining and discrimination in health care and housing (IOM and NRC 2015; Spievack et al. 2020). In

addition, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous young people are more likely to experience bias and discrimination, which have been linked to more negative outcomes in education and employment (IOM and NRC 2015; Quintana and Mahgoub 2016). Furthermore, young people of color ages 16 to 18 face structural barriers in accessing early work opportunities, which are positively associated with job quality in adulthood (Briggs, Spievack, and Blount 2019).

**Contact and involvement with the criminal legal system creates barriers to transitioning to stable adulthood, and being adjudicated for or convicted of more serious offenses can increase those challenges.** Young people are more likely than people of other ages to become involved in the legal system, which can have lifelong consequences for their well-being and success (Jannetta and Okeke 2017). Research shows that formerly incarcerated people are almost five times more likely than the general public to be unemployed (Couloute and Kopf 2018). In addition, only 30 percent of reentering youth and young adults obtain either educational placement or employment within one year of release (Abrams and Franke 2013). Furthermore, young adults are overrepresented throughout the legal system, have higher-than-average recidivism rates, and are more likely to commit serious offenses (Pirius 2018, 2019).

# Promising Practices for Community-Based Workforce Support Programs

**Having access to a variety of community-based workforce development resources and supports can facilitate a stable transition to adulthood.** Community-based organizations can play a unique role in enhancing the likelihood of youth engagement and success (De Nike et al. 2019). Research shows that when youth and young adults feel connected to their parents, peers, communities, and schools, they benefit in numerous ways, such as improved mental health and self-esteem and decreased substance use and violent, risk-taking activities (Blum et al. 2021). It is imperative to build social capital and foster community engagement to increase the number of positive peers, networks, and resources young people can draw upon for support, as well as to facilitate their community integration (Nemoy 2013). Moreover, situating workforce development programs in community settings has benefits such as enabling connections with mentors, employers, and community resources (Spaulding and Blount 2018).

**Community-based services that are grounded in positive youth development principles and use a strengths-based and trauma-informed approach can promote success for legal system–involved young people.** The PYD approach is intentional and prosocial, engaging young people by promoting

emotional investment, employing positive relationships, and recognizing them as young people with promise rather than problems (Butts, Bazemore, and Meroe 2010). It is an iterative framework that can look different in different programs.[6] Research has shown that using PYD principles to focus on strengths and young people's potential for success can promote academic achievement and psychological well-being and mitigate the negative effects of trauma and adversity (Catalano et al. 2004; Vivrette, Herbert, and Liberman 2020). Importantly, people convicted of serious offenses have often experienced trauma, and they may therefore benefit from comprehensive services that pair workforce development support with counseling and other supports (SAMHSA 2014). Adopting trauma-informed, healing-centered practices and providing an environment rooted in safety, empowerment, collaboration, trust, and respect can benefit legal system–involved young people, the staff who work with them, their families, and their communities (Bloom 2013; Fallot and Harris 2009; Skinner-Osei et al. 2019).

## Supporting Legal System–Involved Young People with Community-Based Workforce Supports Is Critical

**Workforce development programs vary widely, and ensuring available resources match participants' needs is key.** Studies have found that paid work experience, combined with high-quality career and technical education, can be an effective tool for engaging young people in the short term while giving them valuable skills and labor market experience that can improve their earnings over time (Heinrich and Holzer 2011). In addition, workforce programming that combines practical skills training, exposure to in-demand employers, and access to specialized trainings tend to be more effective and have a more positive impact on employment (Almeida, Behrman and Robalino 2012; Kluve 2010). It also is vital for young people to receive supports and programming in ways that they can use and are culturally relevant and logistically feasible (De Nike et al. 2019). Workforce development, education, and job training programs that serve young people of color or young people from low-income communities must understand their unique cultural and social contexts, strengths, and challenges and effective strategies for serving them. Challenges can include trauma and mental health issues, and effective strategies include giving young people access to leaders and mentors who reflect their backgrounds and facilitate trust. These mentors can help young people transition to adulthood and can expand their possibilities, strengthen their resilience, and enable them to effectively negotiate the challenges and opportunities of adult life (De Nike et al. 2019; Sulimani-Aidan 2017).

**Programs that target services to legal system–involved young people and provide culturally responsive, individualized services can best meet their participants' needs.** Legal system–involved young people are more likely to have mental health and substance use problems, to have disabilities, to identify as LGBTQ, and to have experienced violence and/or another type of traumatic event (Davis, Sheidow, and McCart 2015; Irvine and Canfield 2016; Nader 2019; Schiraldi, Western, and Bradner 2015; Vander Stoep, Evens, and Taub 1997). Legal system–involved young people benefit from access to trauma-informed, healing-centered, and queer-affirming programs and services. Establishing culturally responsive practices can mitigate the effects of disparity and disproportionality that persist in the legal system (Vivrette, Herbert, and Liberman 2020). Programs that target their services to particular groups, such as people with legal system involvement, often provide critical workforce development interventions that ensure some underserved or marginalized groups have the supports and opportunities they need to enter and succeed in local labor markets (Clifton, Boden, and Milton 2021). Evidence also shows benefits of providing flexibility in accessibility and timing of services for legal system–involved people. A 2018 study found that workforce development program participants who had recently experienced incarceration sometimes needed more time to settle in to new work environments than those without such involvement before getting comfortable and being willing to actively engage in services. Because of this, program staff mentioned spending more one-on-one time with those participants to increase their interest and engagement (Sattar 2018).

# Appendix C. Survey Data Tables

The following tables present data from the Workforce and Juvenile Justice survey which was fielded from March 4 to May 10, 2021.

TABLE C.1
**Summary of Characteristics of Survey Respondent Programs**

|  | Yes (N) | Yes[a] (%) | N[b] (N) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Region[c]** |  |  |  |
| South | 46 | 36% | 127 |
| West | 46 | 36% | 127 |
| Northeast | 29 | 23% | 127 |
| Midwest | 27 | 21% | 127 |
| **Organization type** |  |  |  |
| Nonprofit | 106 | 84% | 126 |
| Other | 9 | 7% | 126 |
| Public Agency | 6 | 5% | 126 |
| For-profit | 5 | 4% | 126 |
| **Funding sources** |  |  |  |
| Government programs, contracts, or grants | 115 | 91% | 126 |
| Philanthropic grants or donations from foundations and similar entities | 104 | 83% | 126 |
| Profit/income from business/social enterprise operations | 39 | 32% | 121 |
| Payment from employers | 26 | 21% | 121 |
| Fees from participants | 7 | 6% | 119 |
| Other | 5 | 33% | 15 |
| **Partnerships** |  |  |  |
| Community-based organizations | 102 | 98% | 104 |
| Schools or other education/job training providers | 94 | 92% | 102 |
| Government agencies/offices | 91 | 90% | 101 |
|     Employment/career services | 79 | 87% | 91 |
|     Criminal justice | 68 | 80% | 85 |
|     Health and human services | 66 | 78% | 85 |
|     Juvenile justice | 55 | 65% | 84 |
|     Child welfare | 40 | 52% | 77 |
|     Other | 5 | 45% | 11 |
| Employers or industry groups | 91 | 88% | 103 |
| Other | 3 | 43% | 7 |

**Notes:** [a] Percentage who answered yes out of all respondents who answered "yes," "no," or "unknown" for each item. [b] Sum of all respondents who answered "yes," "no," or "unknown" for each item. [c] Region counts include each state for multistate programs; percentages add up to more than 100 percent.

TABLE C.2

**Survey Results on Referral Sources of Programs with Legal System–Involved Participants**

|  | Yes (N) | Yes[a] (%) | N[b] (N) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Referral source** | | | |
| Word of mouth | 112 | 95% | 118 |
| Direct outreach recruitment by program staff | 108 | 92% | 118 |
| Referral from another community organization | 106 | 90% | 118 |
| Referral from a government social service agency | 105 | 89% | 118 |
| Referral from court, probation agency or correctional agency | 100 | 85% | 117 |
| Referral from educational institution(s) | 92 | 81% | 114 |
| Referral from the public workforce system (e.g., job centers) | 89 | 76% | 117 |
| Referral from community supervision agency | 82 | 72% | 114 |
| Referral from mental health provider | 73 | 65% | 112 |
| Referral from substance use treatment agency | 69 | 61% | 114 |
| Required participation related to justice system involvement | 61 | 54% | 112 |
| Referral from employers | 51 | 45% | 114 |
| Other | 6 | 55% | 11 |

**Notes:** [a] Percentage who answered yes out of all respondents who answered "yes," "no," or "unknown" for each item. [b] Sum of all respondents who answered "yes," "no," or "unknown" for each item.

TABLE C.3

**Survey Results on Workforce-Related Offerings of Programs with Legal System–Involved Participants**

|  | Yes (N) | Yes[a] (%) | N[b] (N) |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Workforce program elements* | | | |
| Job search assistance | 125 | 98% | 127 |
| Career readiness/"soft skills" | 122 | 97% | 126 |
| Job development/connections to employers | 117 | 93% | 126 |
| Career exploration/career planning | 113 | 93% | 122 |
| Job coaching or other job retention support | 111 | 90% | 124 |
| Professional development (networking events, career fairs, professional workshops, etc.) | 111 | 88% | 126 |
| Work-based learning (e.g., apprenticeships, internships) | 106 | 87% | 122 |
| Job training (technical/specialized/occupational skills) | 102 | 82% | 124 |
| Job placement | 101 | 81% | 125 |
| Sector-based training | 82 | 69% | 118 |
| Transitional jobs/subsidized employment | 80 | 65% | 123 |
| Customized or incumbent worker training | 49 | 43% | 115 |
| Vocational rehabilitation (for individuals with disabilities) | 32 | 28% | 114 |
| Other | 15 | 65% | 23 |
| **Subsidized employment (*n*=80)** | | | |
| Placement with willing employers external to your organization's programs | 71 | 92% | 77 |
| Your organization's program work crews | 48 | 62% | 77 |
| Your organization's social enterprise jobs | 43 | 56% | 77 |
| Other | 1 | 20% | 5 |
| **Job placement sectors (*n*=100)** | | | |
| Food Preparation and serving related | 81 | 86% | 94 |
| Construction and extraction | 80 | 84% | 95 |
| Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance | 70 | 76% | 92 |
| Installation, maintenance, and repair | 66 | 71% | 93 |
| Production (e.g. factory work) | 63 | 71% | 89 |
| Transportation and material moving occupations | 54 | 61% | 88 |

| | Yes (N) | Yesª (%) | Nᵇ (N) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Healthcare support occupations | 49 | 56% | 87 |
| Office and administrative support occupations | 38 | 45% | 84 |
| Personal care occupations | 37 | 45% | 82 |
| Sales and related occupations | 37 | 44% | 85 |
| Healthcare practitioners and technical occupations | 36 | 42% | 86 |
| Security occupations | 33 | 42% | 79 |
| Computer and mathematical | 24 | 29% | 83 |
| Management | 17 | 21% | 80 |
| Educational instructions and library | 16 | 19% | 85 |
| Arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media | 16 | 20% | 81 |
| Business and financial operations | 14 | 18% | 79 |
| Other(s) | 9 | 60% | 15 |

**Notes:** ª Percentage who answered yes out of all respondents who answered "yes," "no," or "unknown" for each item. ᵇ Sum of all respondents who answered "yes," "no," or "unknown" for each item.

## TABLE C.4

**Survey Results on Program Participation Metrics and Demographic Characteristics Collected by Programs Serving Legal System-Involved Participants**

| | Yes (N) | Yesª (%) | Nᵇ (N) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Program participation metrics** | | | |
| Improvement in soft skills/career readiness | 101 | 90% | 112 |
| Participation in career exploration/career planning | 101 | 90% | 112 |
| Number of participants obtaining of a certificate, certification, degree, license, or other credential | 100 | 89% | 112 |
| Job retention/length of time in employment | 97 | 88% | 110 |
| Job characteristics (e.g., wage, hours, benefits) | 96 | 86% | 111 |
| Number of participants receiving educational credentials (e.g., GED, high school diploma, college certificate or degree, etc.) | 96 | 84% | 114 |
| Recidivism (e.g., re-arrest or new conviction/adjudication) | 73 | 67% | 109 |
| Receipt of services your program referred participant to | 66 | 61% | 109 |
| Number of participants securing housing or other self-sustainability measure | 62 | 56% | 110 |
| Improvement in literacy/English language skills | 59 | 55% | 107 |
| Other | 3 | 33% | 9 |
| **Participant demographic characteristics and circumstances** | | | |
| Gender | 118 | 100% | 118 |
| Race and ethnicity | 116 | 98% | 118 |
| Age | 115 | 100% | 115 |
| Level of educational attainment | 114 | 97% | 117 |
| Employment and/or income history | 102 | 89% | 115 |
| Housing status | 99 | 87% | 114 |
| Parental status (e.g., do they have minor children) | 97 | 84% | 116 |
| Citizen/immigration status | 86 | 76% | 113 |
| Disability status | 80 | 75% | 107 |
| Relationship status (e.g., married, dating) | 78 | 68% | 114 |
| Reading level | 64 | 58% | 111 |
| Information about parents/caregivers | 53 | 50% | 105 |
| Sexual orientation | 40 | 37% | 107 |
| Other (please specify) | 4 | 44% | 9 |

**Notes:** ª Percentage who answered yes out of all respondents who answered "yes," "no," or "unknown" for each item. ᵇ Sum of all respondents who answered "yes," "no," or "unknown" for each item.

# Notes

1   Dianna Miller, "Teen Employment Has Many Benefits," Youth First, July 4, 2017, https://youthfirstinc.org/teen-employment-many-benefits/.

2   The positive youth development (PYD) framework posits that all youth have the capacity to achieve positive outcomes when given the necessary opportunities, supports, and relationships (Butts, Bazemore, and Meroe 2010).

3   This survey option also included genderqueer and nonbinary identities.

4   Jennifer C. Sarrett, "Addressing Intellectual Disability in the Justice System," Scholars Strategy Network, https://scholars.org/contribution/addressing-intellectual-disability-justice-system.

5   The credible messenger model employs staff members who can connect with participants based on similar life experiences. For more information, see the Credible Messenger Justice Center at https://cmjcenter.org/approach/.

6   Kristin Anderson Moore, "Why Positive Youth Development Works," Child Trends, April 11, 2016, https://www.childtrends.org/blog/why-positive-youth-development-works#:~:text=PYD%20is%20also%20pro%2Dsocial,will%20engage%20in%20problem%20behaviors..

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