



Young parents and workforce development in a post-pandemic world

TOUCHSTONES TO GUIDE POLICY AND RESEARCH

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Who are young parents?

Approximately 3.6 million young Americans ages 18-24 are raising children, and another 900,000 in the same age range are non-custodial parents.¹ Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many young parents faced significant challenges in balancing their jobs and childrearing responsibilities with efforts to build additional skills and advance in their careers. As policymakers and workforce advocates prepare for a post-pandemic world, ensuring that skill-building policies are intentionally inclusive of this population can help to ensure a level playing field for all of America's workers, regardless of their age or parental status.

Demographically, roughly three-quarters of custodial (as opposed to non-custodial) young parents are female.² When it comes to race, approximately three-quarters are white, and 19 percent are Black. In terms of ethnicity, nearly one-third (31 percent) are Latinx; Latinx people can be of any race. Most young parents (87 percent) speak English well or very well. One-fifth speak a language other than English at home.

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Why do workforce policies matter for young parents?

Skill-building efforts are especially important for young parents, because their early embrace of parenthood often means their families are more economically fragile. In addition to adding significantly to household expenses, for example, parenthood sometimes causes young people to leave high school early and can constrain their ability to pursue higher-wage jobs that require significant training and education to obtain. For this reason, focusing dedicated attention on policies to better serve young parents can have an outsized impact, despite the fact that they represent a relatively small portion (5 percent) of the overall parent population.³

While these policies should center on workforce development and education, research shows that it is vital for them to also include the ancillary supports — such as childcare, tuition, and transportation assistance — that are necessary for young parents to attain their education and career goals. Research from the Urban Institute has found that “supports that help young parents balance work and education are important, as are those that enable parents not engaged in those activities to engage in them.”⁴ The same study found that young parents were most likely to be participating in vocational training or two-year degree programs (rather than four-year degrees), and that targeting parents while they are young is important in changing their economic trajectory of their lives.⁵

How do existing workforce development policies affect young parents?

A variety of federal and state policies in the United States support workforce development for parents and non-parents alike. Most of this legislation does not focus specifically on parents, though in some cases it may count parenthood as a factor in eligibility. The \$3 billion federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), for example, provides adult education and workforce development services for three distinct populations: Adults, youth, and dislocated workers. Pregnant and parenting youth are specifically named as an eligible population under WIOA youth services, and single parenthood is identified as a barrier to employment (thus granting eligibility) for WIOA adult services.

Other federal legislation that can support skill-building includes the Higher Education Act (which includes funding for Pell Grants), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) program, the Department of Labor’s American Apprenticeship Grants, and the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. However, while all of those programs *can* serve parents, only TANF serves *exclusively* individuals who have children — and because TANF funds can be used for four broad purposes, only a small share of those funds are used for workforce training.⁶ In addition, none of the programs are specifically focused on young parents in particular.

Given this landscape, it is perhaps not surprising that even in a pre-pandemic world, young parents faced uneven access to education and workforce development services. This access depended on their awareness of such programs, their ability to access and demonstrate eligibility for these programs, and their available time and energy for pursuing education and job training.⁷



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Yet young parents are particularly well-positioned to benefit from workforce development. By definition, they are early in their careers, meaning that investments made now in their human capital will pay off over a lifetime of work. They are also raising children, meaning that improvements in their own educational attainment will have positive trickle-down effects on the next generation's economic mobility.⁸

These factors will only increase in significance in a post-pandemic world, as policymakers seek to ensure that the youngest entrants to the workforce do not suffer lifelong economic consequences similar to those faced by workers in past recessions.⁹ To that end, policymakers and workforce advocates should work to ensure that policies are responsive to the particular needs and aspirations of young parents. The section below highlights key touchstones to keep in mind.

What touchstones should policymakers and skills advocates keep in mind when developing new policies?

Both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, policymakers will be called upon to take action in support of young parents and other constituents who are scrambling to find their economic footing. Three touchstones, based on proven strategies that can effectively serve young parents, will be crucial for policymakers and advocates to incorporate as they develop systems to help jobseekers find solid ground and build their future careers.

In each case, advocates and policymakers should be mindful that the enactment of strong policies should be supported with appropriate amounts of funding, guidance, and technical assistance to enable high-quality implementation at the state and local level.

- **Invest in accelerated pathways.** Strategies such as [Integrated Education and Training](#), Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), and [guided pathways](#) have demonstrated effectiveness in helping individuals with skill gaps to quickly prepare for in-demand jobs. Many young parents have such skill gaps, often because of limited educational attainment.¹⁰ Because many accelerated programs draw on employer input to design their curriculum and identify the industry-recognized credentials their participants should earn, these programs can also provide a level of insurance for participants to feel confident that their educational investment will pay off, even in an unpredictable job market. Investing in these programs can have a powerfully positive effect on the economic trajectories of young parents and their children, as illustrated by the example of Alberto Montes (see [page 5](#)).
- **Respond to evolving digital inclusion needs.** The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare (and further heightened) existing discrepancies in home broadband internet access, digital device access, and digital literacy skills. People of color are disproportionately affected by these disparities,¹¹ as are parents.¹² Given that many young parents are people of color, it is important to ensure that new policies to support education and workforce development in a pandemic-affected world help to *remedy* rather than magnify equity gaps. In particular, as adult education and workforce programs increasingly move to providing online



A Young Parent Success Story: Integrated Education and Training

Alberto Montes (pictured right), 24, had held jobs as an Emergency Medical Technician and in a family restaurant business, but with a wife and three children to support, he was always looking for greater opportunity.

One day it arrived — in the form of a flyer from his daughter's HeadStart program. "It said you could take an electrician course for free," Montes recalls. "I said, 'Why not?' Although I never in my life imagined being an electrician."

Montes's family was supportive, he says. "My dad pushed me to try it. He's a do-it-yourself kind of man. He said 'You should take advantage of this opportunity!' He even said if I needed supplies for the training he would help to pay for them."

The young father reached out to the Socorro (Texas) Independent School District's [Community Education Program](#), and was soon enrolled in the district's Integrated Education and Training program for electricians. "They were so friendly and so helpful. It was a total change in my life," he says, emphasizing the quality of the program's instructional staff as well as its non-academic support.

Once Montes completed the Socorro ISD program, he joined the local labor union, known as El Paso JATC. Today, he is in the midst of his first year as an apprentice, and has been employed for four months. "My next goal is to get my journeyman license. It's a five-year process," Montes says.

Already, however, the training has made a difference in his earning power. "When I worked as an EMT I was making \$8.50 an hour," he says. "Right now I'm earning \$9.85," and his wages will rise on a regular schedule as he progresses through the apprenticeship program.

Montes receives other benefits too: "I also have medical insurance for me, my wife, and three daughters, and [my employer] is even contributing to my retirement savings." Combining work with continued education makes for a demanding schedule, but Montes says his daughters — ages 5, 3, and a newborn — help to drive him. "They're my motivation to get up every day," he says with a laugh.





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classes,¹³ policies should include investments in professional development for program staff; digital devices and broadband access for staff and participants; and dedicated funding to support robust online program development, among others.¹⁴ Transitioning to an online format, especially one that is responsive to young parents' needs, requires far more than simply turning an in-person curriculum into a web-based lecture. Research has documented that more vulnerable and marginalized learners need specific supports in order to thrive in online-only education.¹⁵

- **Provide high-quality childcare.** It's so straightforward a solution that it may seem difficult to believe that most workforce programs *don't* fund childcare for their participants. But the siloed nature of public funding for early childhood education and care means that many workforce and adult education programs do not have the resources to provide such services, thus leaving young parents burdened with figuring out their own childcare arrangements. While program-level interventions such as case management services can help some individuals navigate the thicket of confusing systems and varying eligibility requirements, *policy-level* interventions can be a more powerful lever to expand access for thousands of families. Policymakers and skills advocates should create and expand investments in high-quality childcare programs for workforce development participants, including young parents.¹⁶ The impact of these investments can be substantial, as National Skills Coalition documented in *Broadening the Apprenticeship Pipeline*, a brief highlighting the role of affordable childcare in supporting access and retention in work-based learning programs.

Endnotes

- 1 Nathan Sick, Shayne Spaulding, and Yuju Park, Understanding Young-Parent Families: A Profile of Parents Ages 18 to 24 Using the Survey of Income and Program Participation (Urban Institute, Washington DC: 2018). Viewable at: https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/96691/understanding_young_parent_families.pdf. The remainder of statistics in this brief pertain to the 3.6 million custodial young parents in particular.
- 2 Ibid. (All statistics in this paragraph are drawn from the same source.)
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Nathan Sick, Carolyn Vilter, and Shayne Spaulding, Young Parents Making Their Way Combining Education and Work while Parenting (Urban Institute, 2019). Viewable at: https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/101093/young_parents_making_their_way_combining_education_and_work_while_parenting_2.pdf
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Nevertheless, states that choose to use their TANF funds in innovative ways can make significant strides in providing skill-building programs and ancillary supports for young parents and other qualified individuals. For an example, see Brooke DeRenzis and Kermit Kaleba, Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative: How TANF can support skills for low-income parents, and how policymakers can help (National Skills Coalition, 2016) <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/how-tanf-can-support-skills-for-low-income-parents-and-how-policymakers-can-help.pdf>
- 7 For more on each of these issues, see: Young Parents Making Their Way Combining Education and Work while Parenting (Urban Institute, 2019). Viewable at: https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/101093/young_parents_making_their_way_combining_education_and_work_while_parenting_2.pdf
- 8 Parental education is significantly correlated with children's later economic mobility. See, e.g., Tom Hertz, Understanding Mobility in America, (Center for American Progress, 2006). Viewable at: https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/kf/hertz_mobility_analysis.pdf
- 9 See, for example, Hannes Schwandt and Till von Wachter, "Unlucky Cohorts: Estimating the Long-Term Effects of Entering the Labor Market in a Recession in Large Cross-Sectional Data Sets," (Journal of Labor Economics, Vol. 37, Number S1, 2019). Viewable at: <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/701046?journalCode=jole>
- 10 For example, this Urban Institute study found that more than 50 percent of young parents had a high school education or less. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/101093/young_parents_making_their_way_combining_education_and_work_while_parenting_2.pdf
- 11 See Applying a Racial Equity Lens to Digital Literacy (National Skills Coalition, 2020). Viewable at: <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/Digital-Skills-Racial-Equity-Final.pdf>
- 12 See The New Landscape of Digital Literacy (National Skills Coalition, 2020). Viewable at: <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/New-Digital-Landscape-web.pdf>
- 13 Learn more about the pandemic's effect on adult education and workforce development programs and services in this NSC blog post: <https://nationalskillscoalition.org/news/blog/covid-19-shines-a-spotlight-on-digital-skills-updates-and-key-questions-for-advocates-and-policymakers> and in the Skilled America podcast episode 5, "The Digital (Learning) Divide" <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/news/blog/listen-to-skilled-america-podcast-episode-5-the-digital-learning-divide>
- 14 Leticia Lewis and Molly Bashay, "Digital Fluency for a Resilient Economy," (Software.org and National Skills Coalition, 2020). Viewable at: <https://medium.com/national-skills-coalition/digital-fluency-for-a-resilient-economy-38bf4a9e569c>
- 15 Amanda Briggs, Semhar Gebrekristos, and Shayne Spaulding, Supporting Community College Learners Online, (Urban Institute, 2020). Viewable at: <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/supporting-community-college-learners-online>
- 16 Depending on their local context, policymakers may want to consider investing specifically in early care and education programs that use a two-generation lens to serve parents and children together. Learn more about this approach: <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/two-generation/what-is-2gen/>

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