

Youth Employment Report



2023 – 2024



WASHINGTON
Workforce
Training & Education Coordinating
Board



Executive Summary

As we navigate a world shaped by changing demographics and evolving economic trends, it's becoming clearer than ever just how crucial it is for young people to explore career options and gain real-world experience early on. With a lower birth rate and the Baby Boomer generation retiring, the labor pool is shrinking fast. On top of that, immigration rates are expected to drop, making this challenge even more pressing.

The need for young people to start thinking about their careers and gaining hands-on experience has never been more urgent. A tight labor market, characterized by persistent job vacancies, highlights the urgent need for skilled workers across industries. Businesses are increasingly seeking individuals with practical skills and industry-relevant knowledge. Early career exploration and work-based learning programs can equip middle and high school students, and young adults, with these essential competencies, positioning them for success in the 21st-century workforce.

This year's Youth Employment Report highlights the following takeaways:

- First, youth employment is recovering as the pandemic recedes, and labor force participation is rising.
- Second, high school graduation rates are at the highest levels in 10 years.
- However, youth wages are not increasing at the same rate that wages for older workers are growing.
- Finally, overall enrollment at Washington's community and technical colleges continues to drop, as does enrollment at many other higher education institutions.

By engaging in hands-on experiences, internships, and apprenticeships, young people can gain valuable insights into a wide range of career pathways, identify their passions and strengths, and develop interpersonal skills such as problem-solving, communication, and teamwork. These experiences not only enhance their employability but also foster a sense of purpose and direction.

To capitalize on this opportunity, workforce development professionals and policymakers must work together to promote early career exploration and work-based learning. This includes:

- **Expanding Access:** Ensuring that all young people have access to quality work-based learning programs, regardless of their socioeconomic background or geographic location.

- **Strengthening Partnerships:** Fostering strong partnerships among schools, businesses, and community organizations to create meaningful work-integrated learning opportunities.
- **Providing Comprehensive Support:** Offering students comprehensive support, including career counseling, job placement services, and financial aid, to facilitate their transition into the workforce.
- **Promoting Employer Engagement:** Encouraging employers to create high-quality internships and apprenticeship programs to help build a stronger pipeline to younger workers through meaningful learning experiences that reflect actual skills needed in the work world.

Recognizing the importance of youth participation in the workforce, and the significant barriers many young people face, youth were prioritized in the 2024-28 state strategic workforce plan, Talent and Prosperity for All (TAP). In doing so, the Workforce Board and its partners recognize that improving opportunities for young people to successfully transition into adulthood is crucial for building a prosperous and thriving society. By investing in comprehensive education and career-focused training programs, Washington's youth can be equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to secure stable employment and financial independence.

Introduction

Youth engagement in the workforce development system is a pivotal aspect that requires immediate attention from workforce development professionals and policymakers. As demographic trends, including lower birth rates, an aging population, and lower immigration rates, indicate significant shifts, the integration of youth into the workforce becomes essential for sustaining economic growth and addressing the labor market's evolving needs. Put simply there are fewer youth in the U.S., now and into the foreseeable future, making participation of all youth increasingly critical to our labor force. Also noteworthy is the shift in the racial and ethnic makeup of youth, with an increasing proportion identifying as Hispanic, Black, Asian, or multiracial. These groups have faced additional challenges and barriers to achieving economic success, which must be addressed.

Investing in comprehensive education and workforce development systems is crucial. These systems must be designed to equip young individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in an ever-evolving job market. This includes not only foundational academic skills but also technical competencies and interpersonal skills such as critical

thinking, communication, and teamwork. Given the rapid adoption of disruptive technology, including AI, in the workplace, these core competencies will be more important than ever in the future.

Demographic Challenges

The current labor market faces significant demographic challenges, and young workers will need to participate in the workforce in a more significant manner to help alleviate these disruptions. Declining birth rates and an aging baby boomer population transitioning into retirement age have resulted in a shrinking workforce. According to the World Bank, the global fertility rate has decreased from 3.2 births per woman in 1990 to 2.3 in 2022.¹ This trend is especially pronounced in developed countries, leading to labor shortages. The U.S. posted a fertility rate of 1.7 births per woman in 2022, down from 2.1 in 1990.² The 2.1 figure is especially important, as it represents the break-even threshold, meaning that anything above this level results in population growth while levels less than 2.1 means that each subsequent generation will be smaller than the previous one, leading to an overall decline in population. This decline can have far-reaching consequences for a nation's economic and social structures.

Furthermore, anticipated lower immigration rates in the coming years are expected to exacerbate the issue. Immigration has been a key driver of population growth in the U.S., particularly among younger age groups. While the fertility replacement rate focuses on natural population growth, immigration rates can also significantly contribute to maintaining a healthy workforce.

Low Youth Engagement

Despite the pressing need for workers, and a general proliferation of “help wanted” signs aimed at entry-level employment, youth engagement in the workforce remains low across the United States. This lower labor force participation rate continues a decades long decline among 16- to 24-year-olds. Since peak participation rate of 77.5% in July 1989, youth labor participation has steadily declined to 61.8% in July 2019 and 60.4% in July 2024 following a substantial COVID-19 dip in 2020.³ The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted young workers, particularly those aged 16-24 in Washington as it did around the country. State unemployment rates for these age groups surged to historic highs in 2020,

¹ World Bank, (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN>)

² World Bank, (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=US>)

³ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, (<https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2024/youth-labor-force-participation-rate-at-60-4-percent-in-july-2024.htm>)

peaking at 26% for 16- to 19-year-olds and 16% for 20- to 24-year-olds.⁴ While the subsequent recovery has been significant, with unemployment rates dropping to 13% and 10% respectively in 2023, the enduring impact on youth employment remains a pressing concern. Policymakers must prioritize strategies to address the unique challenges faced by young workers, including targeted workforce development initiatives, apprenticeship programs, and youth employment subsidies. Many young people face barriers to entry, including inadequate access to education and training, limited job opportunities, and a lack of awareness about career pathways. Amplifying these challenges, there are also changes in work opportunities for young people. Many entry-level jobs that once attracted teens are now either automated or require more experience and skills. More young people are also staying in school longer, prioritizing higher education over entering the workforce, as the demand for higher qualifications grows. Many young people are pursuing college degrees or career-focused training rather than seeking employment. These challenges lead to fewer young people joining the labor force and prevent us from making the most of this important group.

This disengagement reduces the amount of skilled labor and hampers economic growth. In recent years, Washington businesses have continued to experience a tight labor market with increased competition for a limited pool of workers. Put simply, companies need more workers, including young ones, to meet their operational demands and drive innovation. Young workers remain an underutilized talent pool.

Addressing these demographic and labor market challenges requires a multifaceted approach to enhance youth engagement in the workforce development system. By investing in skills development, creating supportive policies, and fostering collaboration among educational institutions, employers, and government agencies, we can build a dynamic, future-ready workforce. This strategic focus on youth engagement is essential for ensuring economic resilience and growth in the face of ongoing demographic shifts.

Streamlining the Path to Postsecondary Credentials

Given the rapid pace of economic changes, it is equally important to shorten the time required to achieve postsecondary credentials. Accelerated learning programs, credit for prior learning, and flexible learning schedules can help students complete their education promptly, allowing them to enter the workforce sooner and start contributing to economic growth. Engaging in the workforce during the middle teen years increases the likelihood of

⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics: Expanded State Employment Demographics, 2023.

career advancement. Research suggests that early work experience can enhance skills, build networks, and provide insights into career paths, all of which can contribute to long-term career success.

In today's competitive job market, a postsecondary credential has become a critical asset. It serves as a benchmark of an individual's expertise and readiness for professional roles. Therefore, encouraging and facilitating the attainment of post-secondary education is a strategic move towards building a skilled and work-ready workforce. Without a postsecondary credential, students risk missing out on further education and face limited job prospects, stuck in low-paying roles with few opportunities to advance. As workers age, they face additional barriers to education and training due to limited time, financial resources, and increased personal responsibilities. Older workers are more likely to have family obligations or full-time jobs, making it harder to dedicate time to further education and training. They may also prioritize job security over career development, fearing that taking away time from work for training may jeopardize their current position. Some may also be daunted by the prospect of starting over or adapting to new technology, reducing the likelihood they will pursue new skills.

With this in mind, aligning programs and postsecondary credentials with student and industry needs is vital to set young workers on a viable career path right from the start. Industry-recognized credentials (IRCs) often can provide a leg up for students entering the workforce, and partnerships between business and education can create clearer pathways to employment. While many programs currently provide IRCs along with other postsecondary credentials, streamlining policies to encourage youth participation and success in these programs is crucial.

Providing opportunities for youth to earn and learn simultaneously is crucial for their self-sufficiency. Internships, pre-apprenticeships, and apprenticeships can enhance youth employability and business productivity, but regulatory barriers often discourage employers from hiring youth. Wage and hour restrictions limit how many hours minors can work, for example. Employers are also required to meet specific safety standards when hiring younger workers, especially for certain industries. Youth workers also typically need more supervision and training, which can lead to higher costs for employers. That said, registered apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs are a valuable resource for many young people who don't thrive in traditional, formal education programs. Registered apprenticeship programs and their supporting feeder programs are seeing increased support at all levels—from federal funding infrastructure strategies to on-the-ground awareness and engagement from youth and young adults in reengagement education pathways.

Other opportunities to streamline career pathways between secondary and postsecondary education and training programs include dual credit programs. Dual credit programs available to Washington high school students include Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Cambridge International, College in the High School, Running Start, and career and technical education (CTE). To maximize the benefits of earning college credits while in high school, stakeholders need to explore how to better support and align dual credit and other credentialing opportunities for youth. That includes partnering with Skill Centers, which provide Washington high school students with hands-on, career-focused training in a variety of fields. These centers offer programs that allow students to earn both high school credit and industry certifications, enabling them to prepare for careers in sectors such as healthcare, information technology, manufacturing, automotive, construction, and more. Many of the programs also include internships, work-based learning opportunities, and partnerships with local employers, providing students with valuable networking opportunities and a clearer path to employment after graduation.

Support Programs for Students and Workers

To effectively prepare youth for the workforce, it is essential to implement support programs that address the diverse needs of students and workers. These programs might include mentorship opportunities, career counseling, internships, apprenticeships, and financial aid. Such initiatives can bridge the gap between education and employment, ensuring a smoother transition for young individuals into the labor market

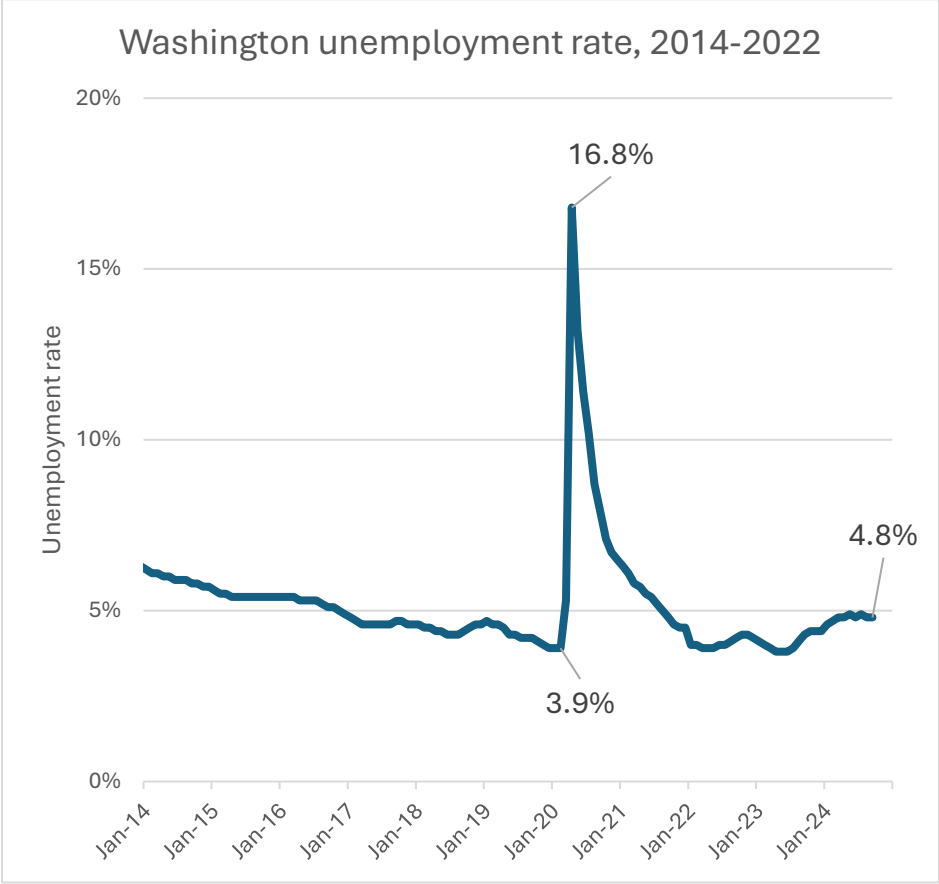
Connecting youth to programs that equip them with the knowledge and tools for successful careers is critical. This can be achieved by focusing on youth-centered approaches that recognize and build on their existing strengths. Also, key is supporting co-enrollment in programs like Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Youth and Open Doors (see below), aligning programs with their geographic needs and interests, connecting businesses with education to create career pathways, using workforce and peer navigators, and expanding career-connected learning to younger students.

WIOA Youth—The WIOA Youth program is a federal initiative designed to help young people, ages 14-24, access education, training, and employment opportunities. The program focuses on supporting at-risk youth by providing services such as job training, mentorship, career counseling, academic support, and internships. Its goal is to help participants earn credentials, gain work experience, and transition successfully into the workforce or postsecondary education. The WIOA Youth program aims to improve economic outcomes and reduce barriers to success for young people, particularly those facing challenges like poverty or lack of access to resources.

Open Doors—Helps Washington state young people, ages 16-21, who have dropped out of high school or are at risk of dropping out, to re-engage with education and earn their high school diploma or equivalency. The program offers personalized support, including access to flexible learning environments, academic counseling, career planning, and life skills training. Open Doors is designed to help youth overcome barriers to education and successfully transition into postsecondary education, training, or employment, empowering them to build a better future.

Washington Youth Employment

While youth continue to struggle with relatively high unemployment rates, Washington’s overall unemployment rate remains low—between 4.5% and 5.0% since January of 2024. The unemployment rate reached a peak of 16.8% in April 2020, toward the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as of September 2024 it stands at 4.8%.



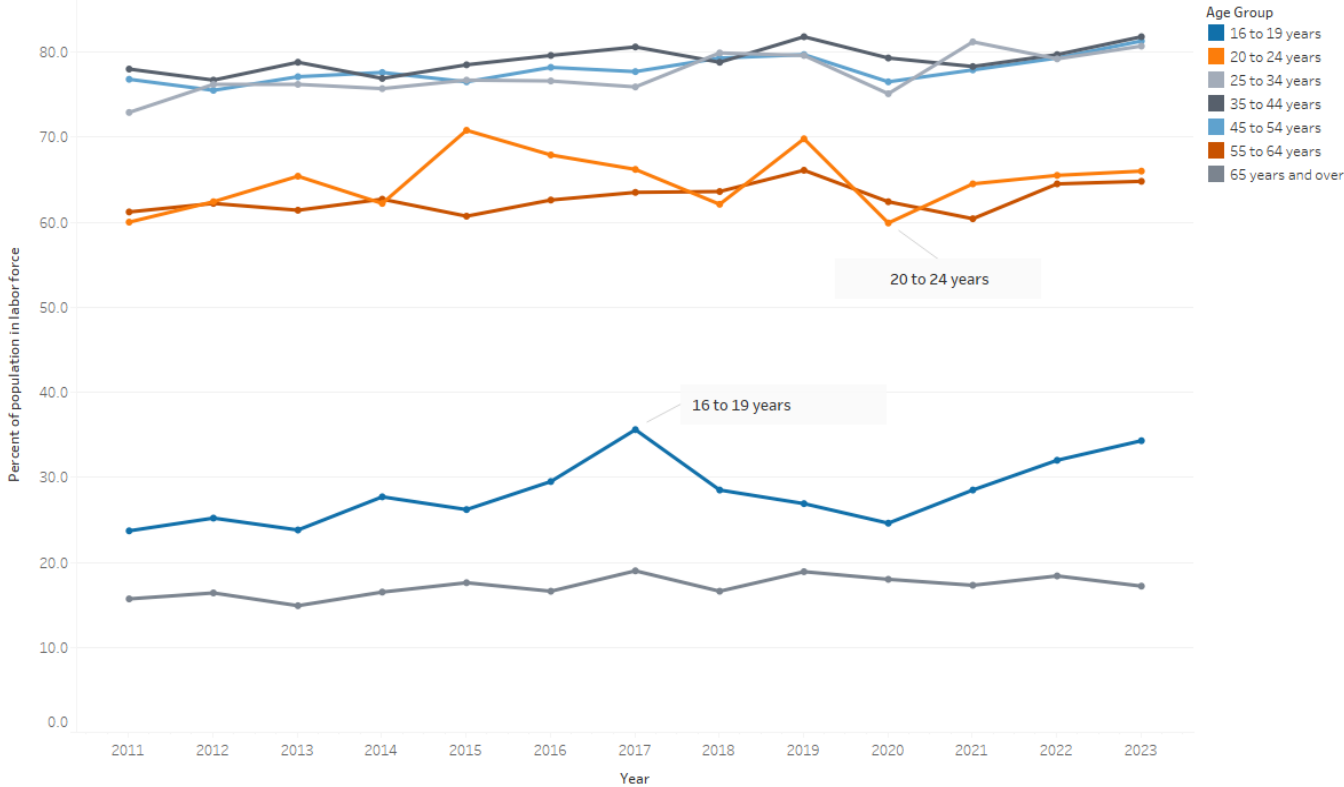
Youth between the ages of 16-24 have traditionally faced substantially higher unemployment rates compared with older working-age adults. Economic downturns tend to reinforce this existing employment imbalance. The COVID-19 pandemic presented additional challenges for young Washingtonians as they disproportionately work in industries where remote work isn’t feasible, shutting off traditional employment opportunities during the bulk of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a drastic, rapid decline in youth employment, across the nation and here in Washington.⁵ Since then, the national overall youth unemployment rates have returned to pre-pandemic levels.⁶ The youth unemployment rate in July 2024 was just about one percentage point higher than the rate in 2023 (9.8% unemployment in July 2024). In July 2024, 26% of employed youth worked in leisure and hospitality, 17% retail trade, and 13% worked in education and health services.⁷

Unemployment and Labor Force Participation

Youth unemployment and labor force participation rates differ from the general population. The following charts show Washington’s young people consistently experience higher unemployment rates than older age groups, and the labor force participation rate is lower than most older age groups (with the exception of those older than 55).

Annual average labor force participation rates in Washington, by age group, 2011-2023



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics: Expanded State Employment Demographics, 2023.

The unemployment rate peaked in 2020 for all age groups (due to the pandemic). However, the peak was more oppressive for the 16– to 19-year-old age group and the 20- to 24-year-

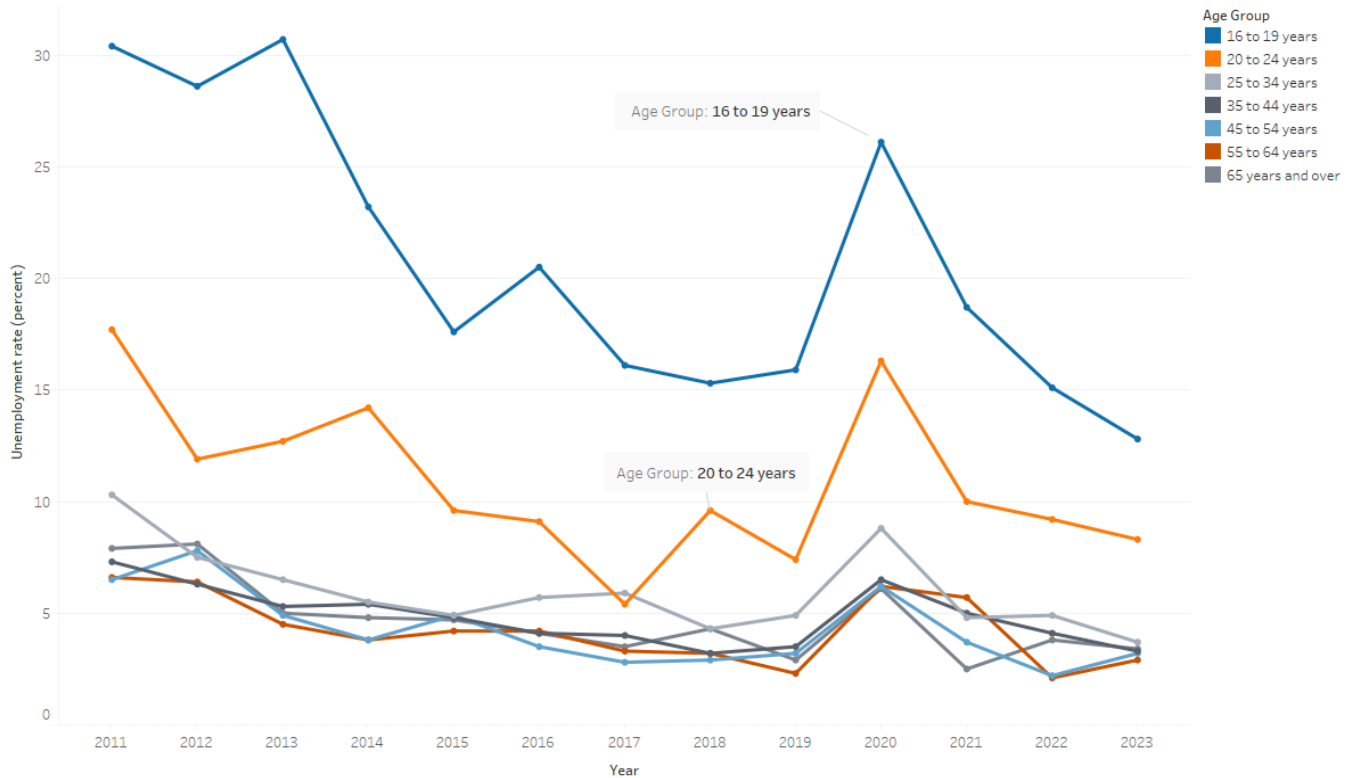
⁵ Inanc, H. (2020). Breaking Down the Numbers: What Does COVID-19 Mean for Youth Unemployment?. *Mathematica Policy Research*.

⁶ Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

⁷ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Employment and Unemployment Among Youth Summary. August 2024.

old age group. The recovery from 2020 was dramatic for these two age groups as well. For 16– to 19-year-olds unemployment dropped from a peak of 26% in 2020 to 13% in 2023. For 20- to 24-year-olds the turnaround in employment was concentrated between 2021 (16%) and 2022 (10%).

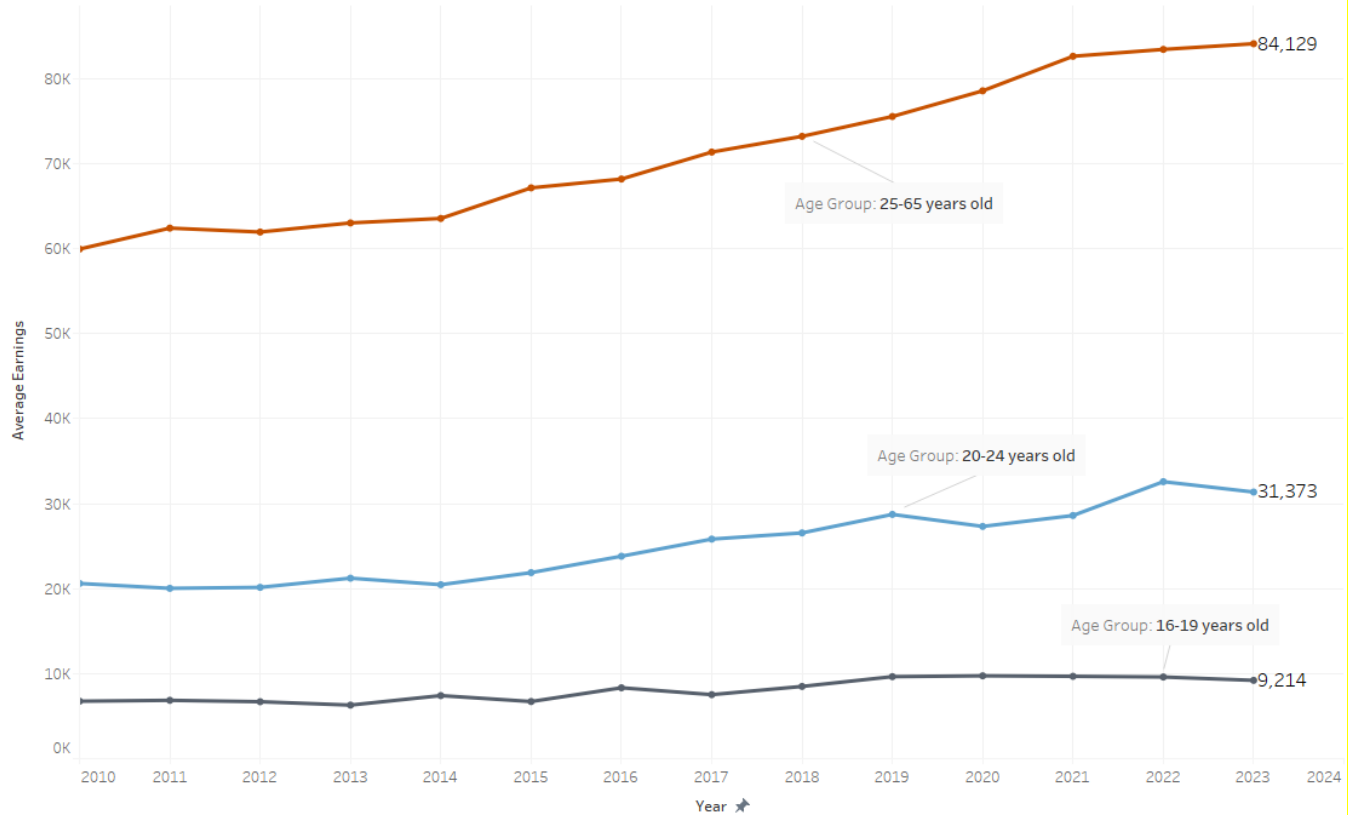
Average annual unemployment rates in Washington by age group, 2011-2023



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics: Expanded State Employment Demographics, 2023

The labor force participation rate has risen each year since 2020 for youth ages 16-19; starting at a 25% participation rate in 2020 and rising to a 34% rate in 2023. The labor force participation rate has also risen for youth ages 20-24, although at a slower pace, going from 60% in 2020 to 66% in 2023. Other age groups have shown similar increases, except for those 65 years and over who have consistently had a labor force participation rate around 17%-18%.

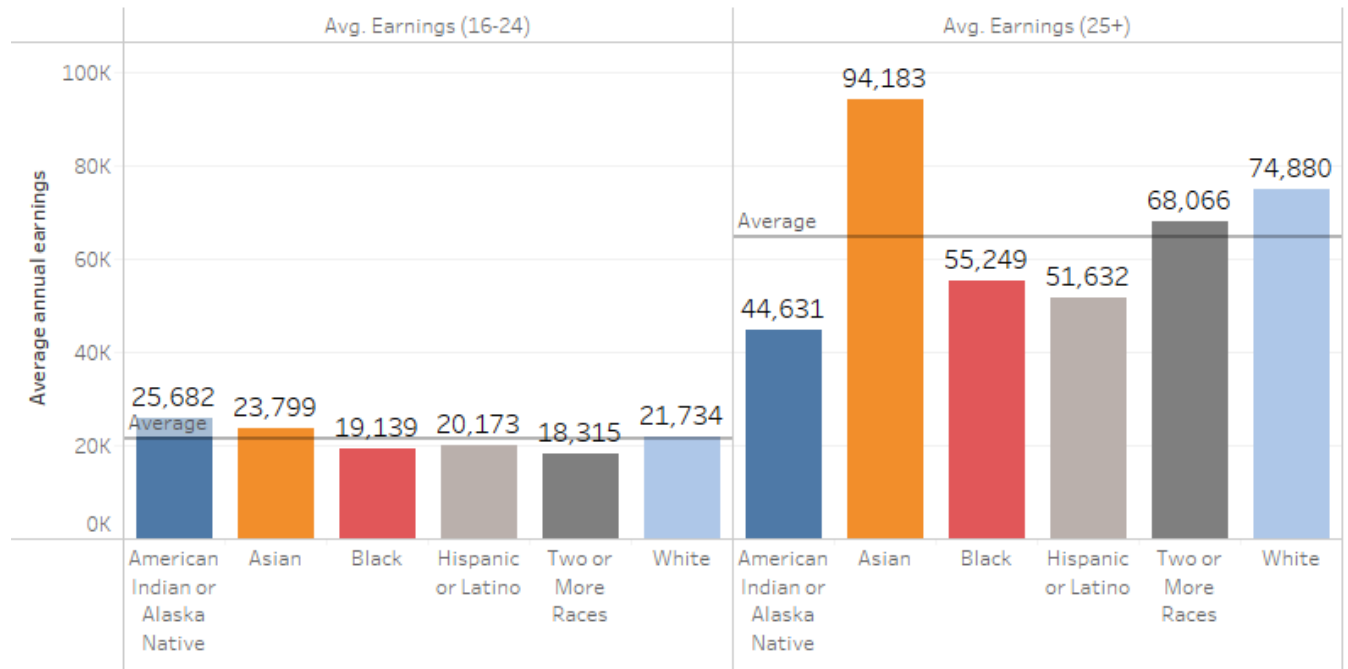
Average earnings by age group in Washington, 2010-2023
 Inflation adjusted to 2023 dollars



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1-year American Community Survey 2010-2023

Washington workers also face earnings differences between racial and ethnic groups, although these differences are less pronounced for youth. Hispanic, Black, American Indian, and Pacific Islander adults 25 and older all earn below 75% of the average amount white adults earn. However, American Indian youth ages 16-24 earn slightly more (\$25,680) than white youth (\$21,730). Black, Hispanic, and multiracial youth earn slightly less: 88% of white earnings for Black youth (\$19,140), 93% of white earnings for Hispanic youth (\$20,170), and 84% of white earnings for multiracial youth (\$18,320). Asian adults out-earn all other racial and ethnic categories, with average earnings over \$94,000; nearly \$20,000 above the next highest demographic (white adults). However, Asian youth earnings of approximately \$23,800 are much more in line with other racial and ethnic groups, earning just over the average.

Average earnings by race and ethnicity in Washington Inflation adjusted to 2023 dollars

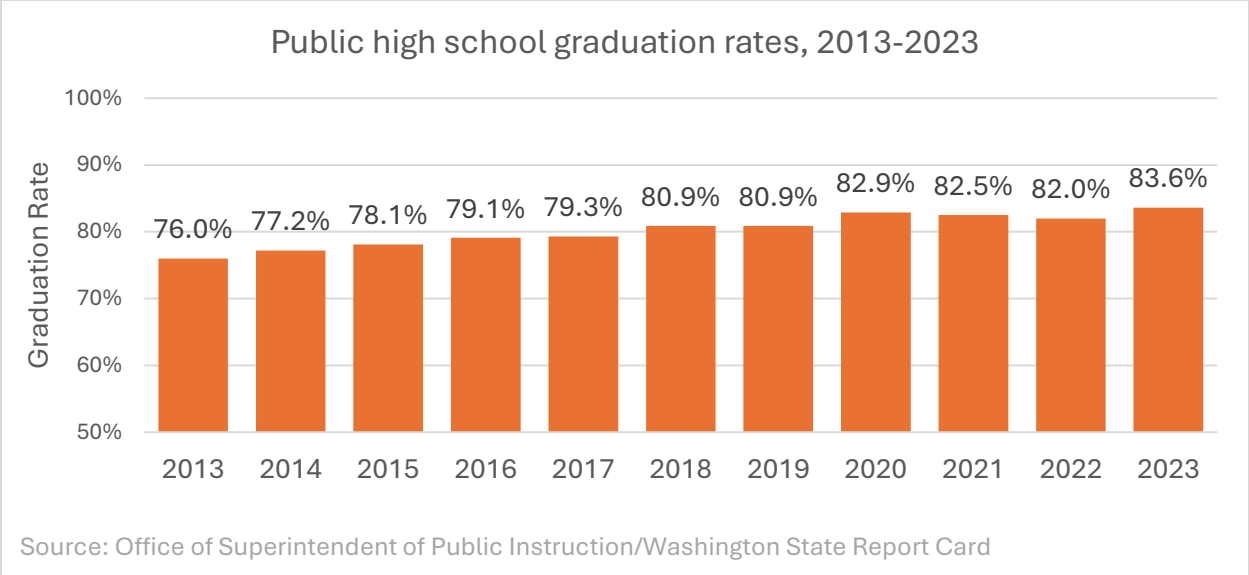


Source U.S. Census Bureau, 5-year American Community Survey, 2022

Young people from marginalized and underrepresented communities possess immense potential to drive economic growth and strengthen our communities in Washington state. However, systemic barriers, intergenerational poverty, and historical inequities have created significant obstacles to their educational and economic advancement. Investing in programs and policies that empower these young people is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic economic decision. By addressing these challenges, we can cultivate a more inclusive and prosperous future for all Washingtonians.

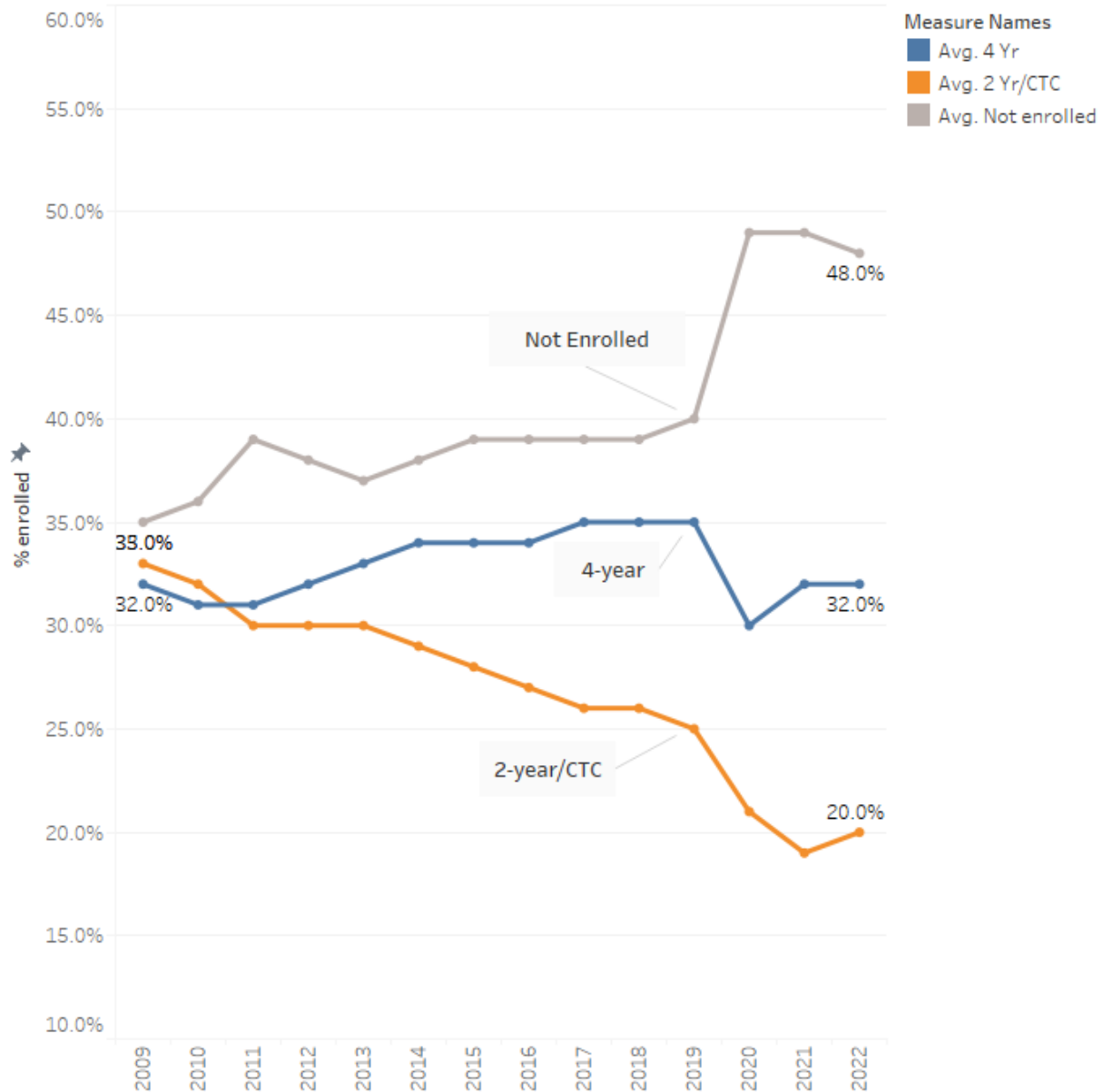
High school graduation is the biggest challenge when it comes to employment opportunities. The graduation rate of youth in Washington public schools has increased over the last decade, including a 1.6 percentage point increase between 2022 and 2023. The Washington graduation rate is 83.6% compared to the national graduation rate for public high school students, which was 87% in 2022.⁸

⁸ National Center for Education Statistics. Public High School Graduation Rates. 2022. < <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/coi/high-school-graduation-rates> >



Although having only a high school diploma often limits economic opportunities, only 52% of Washington’s high school graduates go on to enroll in postsecondary education (2022). These challenges highlight the need for better access to information, financial support, and career pathways that connect education to long-term employment opportunities.

Historic post-high school enrollment 2009-2022



Source: Washington Education Research and Data Center, High School Graduate Outcomes

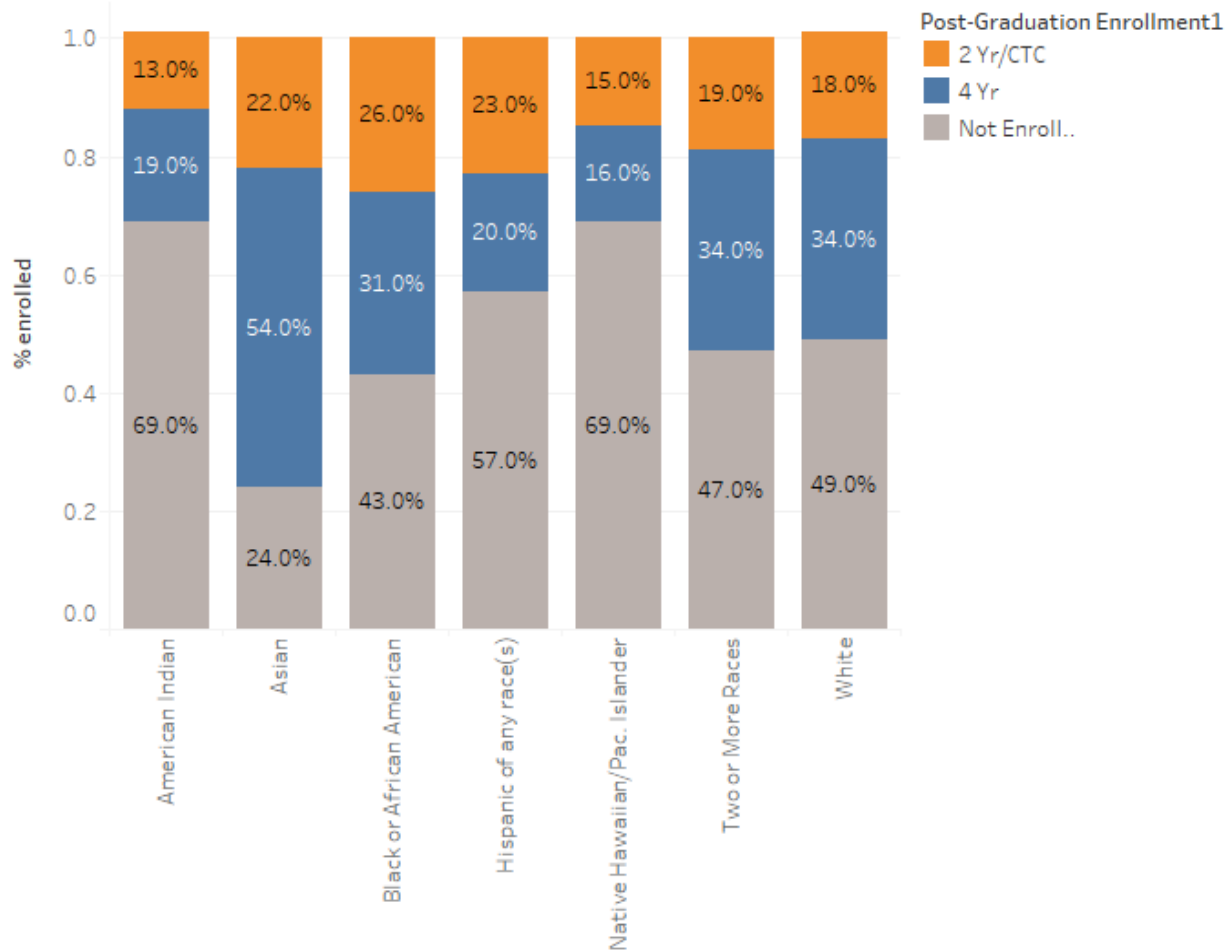
Looking at longitudinal data to examine trends in post-high school enrollment over the last decade, a growing number of students were choosing not to enroll in post-secondary education after high school graduation, even before COVID-19. In 2020 the percent of high school graduates who did not enroll in postsecondary education jumped to 49% (from 40% in 2019), as learning went fully remote and the pandemic heightened access issues. The number of high school graduates enrolling in postsecondary education and training has

begun to increase since the pandemic, but the number of non-enrollees is still eight percentage points higher in 2022 than it was in 2019.

Meanwhile, four-year college enrollment dropped from 35% in 2019 to 30% in 2020, followed by an increase to 32% in 2021 and 2022. Enrollments at two-year colleges decreased between 2019 and 2020 and then again between 2020 and 2021. This was followed by a small increase in 2022, bringing the percentage enrolling at 2-year colleges to 20%.

Post-high school enrollment differs by race and ethnicity. Asian students have a much higher percent enrolled in a four-year college or university. Native American and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students have the highest proportion of those who do not enroll in postsecondary education. The differences seen between race and ethnic groups are less pronounced when looking at enrollment at a community or technical college. The amount enrolling in a two-year college range from 13% for American Indian or Alaska Natives to 26% for Black high school graduates.

Post-high school enrollment by race and ethnicity 2022



Post-secondary enrollment has also changed considerably between 2019 and 2022 due to COVID-19.

American Indian graduates had been attending two-year college at a rate of 19%, which dropped to 13% in 2022; a change of six percentage points. Hispanic graduate post-secondary enrollment dropped five percentage points for both four-year and two-year enrollment, for a total change of 10 percentage points.

Black graduates' enrollment in four-year colleges increased by three percentage points but decreased five percentage points for two-year colleges.

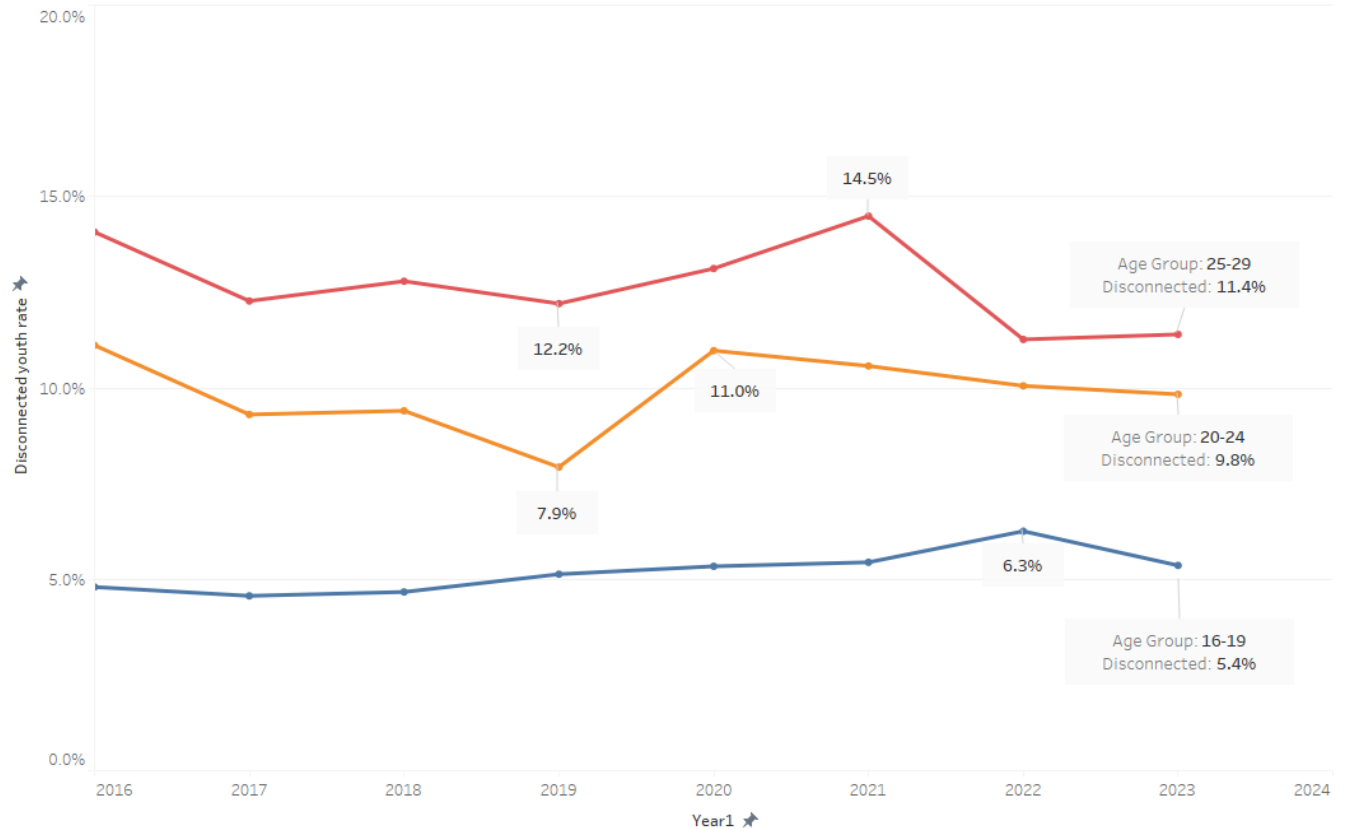
Pacific Islander, multiracial, and white graduates' enrollment dropped more drastically for two-year colleges and less for four-year colleges.

Race/Ethnicity	Enrollment	2019	2022	Percentage point change 2019-22
American Indian or Alaska Native	4 Yr	19%	19%	0%
	2 Yr/CTC	19%	13%	-6%
	Not Enrolled	63%	69%	6%
Hispanic or Latino of any race(s)	4 Yr	25%	20%	-5%
	2 Yr/CTC	28%	23%	-5%
	Not Enrolled	47%	57%	10%
Black or African American	4 Yr	28%	31%	3%
	2 Yr/CTC	31%	26%	-5%
	Not Enrolled	41%	43%	2%
Asian	4 Yr	53%	54%	1%
	2 Yr/CTC	26%	22%	-4%
	Not Enrolled	21%	24%	3%
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	4 Yr	18%	16%	-2%
	2 Yr/CTC	20%	15%	-5%
	Not Enrolled	62%	69%	7%
Two or More Races	4 Yr	35%	34%	-1%
	2 Yr/CTC	24%	19%	-5%
	Not Enrolled	41%	47%	6%
White	4 Yr	35%	34%	-1%
	2 Yr/CTC	23%	18%	-5%
	Not Enrolled	42%	49%	7%

Education Research and Data Center researchers calculated the median earnings of graduates in the first 15 years after graduation and showed that those with bachelor's degrees or higher had the highest earnings at approximately \$89,600, followed by those with an associate degree (\$61,800), and finally no degree \$39,500.

Disconnected youth

Non-institutional civilian population that are not participating in the labor force or in school.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1-year American Community Survey, 2011-2023

Youth between the ages of 16 and 19 have had the most stable disconnection rate; the disconnection rate reached a high of 6.3% in 2022, but it dropped to 5.4% in 2023. Youth ages 20-24 have the most volatile trend over the past few years with a three-percentage point increase between 2019 and 2020, this group's disconnection rate has steadily decreased since 2020, but has still not reached its pre-pandemic low. The 25- to 29-year-old group dropped from 14.5% in 2021 to just over 11% in 2022 and 2023. Disconnected young adults are a lost asset in Washington's economy. Engaging these youth will not only benefit them, but the communities where they live and work.

YOUTH STRATEGIC PRIORITY

Youth are a top priority in the state's strategic workforce development plan TAP 2024-28. The Workforce Board and partners seek to improve opportunities for young people to transition to an economically successful adulthood as part of this four-year workforce plan. Addressing the needs of youth, especially those facing barriers including disabilities, limited work experience, or socioeconomic challenges, ensures a more inclusive and

equitable opportunity to succeed in the job market. Partnering with businesses is crucial for aligning training programs with industry needs, creating a strong connection between education and employment. Raising awareness of youth work opportunities not only empowers young individuals but also bridges the information gap between employers and potential employees and helps businesses access valuable, underutilized labor.

Guiding Principles

This youth workforce development policy represents a significant step towards addressing the longstanding disparities faced by historically underserved and marginalized populations. By focusing on equitable access to education and training, this policy aims to break down barriers that have disproportionately affected these communities in the past. The intention is to develop targeted initiatives to provide skills development, and job placement opportunities for youth from underrepresented backgrounds, ensuring that they have a fair shot at economic success.

Furthermore, this policy development encourages the active participation of partner agencies and stakeholders in the design and implementation of programs, ensuring that the needs and concerns of marginalized populations are taken into account.

Youth engagement in the workforce development system is crucial for fostering a robust and inclusive labor market. Recent economic disruptions, including the COVID-19 pandemic, have disproportionately affected young people, exacerbating existing challenges in securing employment. Addressing the needs of all youth, particularly those facing barriers such as disabilities, poverty, and homelessness, is essential for creating a more equitable access and success in the job market. The state's strategic workforce plan, TAP, focuses on multiple priority areas:

- **Impact of Economic Disruptions on Youth Employment:** Youth were hit hardest by recent economic disruptions, facing fewer job opportunities, increased job losses, and reduced hours, particularly in sectors like hospitality, retail, and entertainment.
- **Challenges in Education and Skills Development:** Disruptions in traditional education settings, such as remote learning and school closures, have affected youth skills development, mental health, and access to internships or work experience.
- **Inclusive and Equitable Job Market:** Addressing the needs of all youth, especially those facing barriers to education and employment, is critical for creating inclusive and equitable access and success in the job market.
- **Role of Technology in Workforce Development:** The growing use of technology in education and the workplace will greatly affect young learners, who will need to

develop relevant skillsets while educators and workforce professionals leverage AI to enhance their effectiveness.

- **Comprehensive Support Services for Youth:** Effective support services designed within the core tenets of positive youth development and trauma-informed care are essential for helping youth overcome barriers and succeed in their educational and career pursuits.
- **Structural Barriers to Postsecondary Education:** Many young people face structural barriers such as lack of transportation, housing insecurity, and age caps on aid programs, which hinder their ability to utilize financial aid for postsecondary education and career-focused training.
- **Strategic Priority to Improve Youth Opportunities:** Improving opportunities for young people requires increasing awareness of workforce services, supporting co-enrollment in programs, and aligning youth programs with geographic needs and interests.
- **Proven Programs for Youth Employment:** Education and training opportunities through Skill Centers, Running Start, Career Connect Washington, and Core Plus have proven successful in helping youth transition to further education and successful careers by offering a combination of work-based learning and academic support.
- **Aligning Education with Workforce Needs:** Connecting businesses with educational institutions is key to improving youth outcomes in workforce training by better aligning education programs with industry needs and providing experiential learning opportunities.
- **Support for Youth with Disabilities:** Enhancing Transition and Pre-employment Transition Services for youth with disabilities is important for helping them transition from school to the workforce.

Taking these focal points into consideration, the workforce development system centered on two key youth strategic priorities.

1. **Increasing Youth Awareness and Usage of Workforce Services and Programs:**

- Raising awareness of workforce services and programs is vital for empowering young individuals and bridging the information gap between employers and potential employees. By connecting youth to appropriate programs, we can equip them with the knowledge and tools needed to build successful careers.
- Efforts should focus on strengths-based, person-first programming, co-enrollment in youth-opportunity and re-engagement programs, and aligning

youth programs with the needs and interests of young people in specific geographic areas.

- Expanding career-connected learning and exploration to in-school youth, starting as young as elementary and middle school, will ensure that young people are aware of and can access workforce services from an early age.

2. Shortening the Time Needed to Achieve a Postsecondary Credential:

- Increasing rates of youth credentialing enhances the qualifications and employability of the future workforce, enabling youth to embark on a pathway to economic stability and boosting long-term career prospects.
- Strategies to shorten the transition period from secondary education to career include exploring dual credit programs in middle and high schools, strengthening and increasing available apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs, and supporting CTE across all occupational sectors.
- Supporting CTE building trade and industrial arts programs prepares youth for jobs created under new federal investments, ensuring they are competitive candidates for quality jobs earlier in life.

Investing in comprehensive education and vocational training programs is essential for equipping youth with the skills and knowledge needed to secure stable employment and financial independence. By focusing on increasing youth awareness and usage of workforce services and programs, and shortening the time needed to achieve a postsecondary credential, we can create more inclusive and equitable access to the job market, ultimately contributing to overall economic growth and stability.

Youth Programs and Services

As mentioned earlier, Youth is one of several priority areas contained within the state's strategic workforce plan for 2024-28, TAP. To advance the four-year plan, each priority area is supported by a stakeholder group that collaborates on strategies to achieve goals outlined in the TAP plan. The stakeholders writing group that contributed to the development of the TAP plan's youth strategic priority explored existing programs and services focused on supporting Washington's youth. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but instead to serve as a starting point for future implementation efforts to further explore examples of effective programs and best practices that provide value to young workers as well as employers. These include:

1. **Skill Centers:** Provide Washington high school students with hands-on, career-focused training in a variety of fields. These centers offer programs that allow students to earn both high school credit and industry certifications, enabling them to prepare for careers in sectors such as healthcare, information technology, manufacturing, automotive, construction, and more. Many of the programs also include internships, work-based learning opportunities, and partnerships with local employers, providing students with valuable networking opportunities and a clearer path to employment after graduation.
2. **Running Start:** Enables high school students, primarily juniors and seniors, to take college-level courses at participating community and technical colleges while earning both high school and college credits.
3. **Career Connect Washington (CCW):** Offers work-based learning, internships, apprenticeships and other career exploration programs for young people to explore, learn, and/or earn money or college credits while learning. CCW partners with schools, employers, and community organizations to provide real-world learning experiences and career guidance. The goal is to help students build practical skills, make informed decisions about their careers, and ultimately succeed in the workforce.
4. **Core Plus:** Core Plus offers specialized courses that teach students technical skills in areas like machining, welding, robotics, and other manufacturing processes. The program combines classroom learning with hands-on training and often includes opportunities for internships or work-based learning. The goal is to prepare students for careers in industries that require skilled workers, helping them earn certifications and credentials that can lead directly to employment or further education in these fields.
5. **Elective Credit for Paid Work Experience:** High school students can earn up to two elective high school credits for paid work experiences and/or employment.
6. **High School and Beyond Plan:** Guides students' high school experiences and prepares them for transition from K-12 to a successful career in the workforce. Students begin developing the plan in middle school and update it annually with the support of educators and guidance counselors.
7. **WIOA Youth Program:** Prioritizes service delivery to youth and young adults aged 14-24 who identify as low-income, with emphasis on youth who have disconnected from formal education pathways and who experience additional barriers.

8. **Open Doors Program:** Education reengagement programs that support youth in completing secondary credentials and transitioning to employment or postsecondary education.
9. **Apprenticeship and Pre-Apprenticeship Programs:** Valuable resources for young people who do not thrive in traditional, formal education programs. These programs provide pathways to middle-class jobs through apprenticeship.

TAP Implementation

Stakeholders involved in the TAP workforce development plan youth strategic priority are working across agencies to reimagine youth pathways to meaningful employment starting in the first year of the workplan. These efforts focus on the established youth priorities of increasing youth awareness of workforce services and programs, and broadening access to and shortening the time required to achieve credentials. Each strategic priority outlined in the workforce development plan spans a four-year duration, emphasizing long-term vision. However, this initial year roadmap establishes specific focus areas, action plans, and stakeholder commitments. This proactive approach indicates readiness among the state's workforce system and partners to promptly implement the TAP plan, rather than deferring action until the next planning cycle.

Numerous impactful changes should occur if a youth strategic priority focusing on reducing credential attainment time and enhancing wrap-around support services is fully realized as envisioned in the TAP plan:

- streamlined credentialing process,
- accelerated skill development,
- expanded and more equitable access to support services,
- increased economic mobility,
- stronger workforce pipeline,
- improved social outcomes, and
- stronger long-term economic growth.

The youth strategic priority work group (work group) is collaborating across agencies to innovate youth employment pathways, commencing in the initial year of the workplan. Mirroring the wide scope and breadth of programs and services affecting youth, the work group draws its members from across the workforce development system, including representatives from local Workforce Development Boards, the Department of Corrections, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, Department of Social and Health Services, Employment Security Department, Office of Superintendent of Instruction, Washington Student Achievement Council, Labor and Industries, and Career Connect Washington. Representatives from the Department of Services for the Blind, Workforce Southwest

Washington Workforce Development Board and the Workforce Board also serve as coleads for the group.

The work group operates according to strategic plans laid out in the youth priority of the TAP plan, and initial efforts focus on service delivery for youth across various contexts, including educational status (in or out of school), employment status (working or unemployed), living situations (foster homes, homelessness, etc.), justice involved status, and others. Programs of interest noted in the youth strategic priority and warrant further exploration range from dual credit and work-based learning programs to wrap-around services and other student supports. These aspects serve as initial considerations, with the group tasked to determine priority areas for action.

The group is also liaising with Workforce Board members to keep the Board apprised of TAP implementation. It is also looking to leverage recent related legislation and settle upon metrics to help measure outcomes to these efforts. Upon the conclusion of the inaugural year of the workforce plan, the work group is anticipated to accomplish the following tasks: identify promising practices, establish success indicators, set goals for the remaining three years of the plan, and identify areas warranting further inquiry.

Collaborative Efforts

There are many critical aspects of the system across a gamut of state agencies and stakeholders that connect to the youth strategic priorities. These stakeholder groups include state agencies, educational institutions, local workforce development boards, employers and industry partners, community-based organizations, youth advocacy groups and nonprofit organizations, and local governments. These stakeholders will collaborate through partnerships and coalitions to coordinate resources, share best practices, and address the complex challenges facing young people in the workforce. By working together, they will create more effective and sustainable solutions to support the success of youth in Washington State.

These collaborative efforts, within the workforce system, will focus on several critical aspects that play essential roles in supporting the development and success of young people including, but not limited to:

- education and training programs,

Year 1 Youth Work Group Goals

1. Establishment of work group participants, roles, and resource allocation.
2. Exploration of alignment with existing programs and practices.
3. Exploration of promising practices for specific target areas.
4. Set indicators of success, that indicate what we want to achieve over the four-year workforce period.

- career guidance, mentoring, and counseling services,
- employment services and job placement,
- wrap-around support services,
- work-based learning opportunities,
- advocacy and awareness,
- youth development programs,
- policy development,
- partnerships and collaboration, and
- data collection and evaluation.

Starting in August 2024, the work group has been meeting monthly to implement these plans. Coleads and Workforce Board staff also continue to liaise with other stakeholders to align efforts with existing youth-centered programs and initiatives. As of the end of 2024, the group had collected information related to existing youth-centered programs and services and best practices for analysis and discussion.

The group will continue to explore these opportunities, as well as associated metrics and data sources to help measure outcomes. For the purpose of this work group, this data will be used operationally to gauge measurable outcomes. Part of the work group's charge regarding metrics will be to bring different stakeholders to the table to agree upon common definitions for metrics. This data will be used to gauge progress, identify gaps, trends and priority areas of focus. Each of the youth priority areas of focus for the youth strategic priority require data analysis to monitor and evaluate outcomes.

[Get More Information](#)

The need for well-trained and educated youth engaged in education and the workforce cannot be overstated. Through strong education and workforce development systems, supportive programs for students and workers, the promotion of postsecondary credentials, and streamlined educational pathways, policymakers and workforce development professionals can ensure that the next generation is prepared to meet the challenges and opportunities of the future. This forward-thinking approach will not only address current labor market needs but also pave the way for sustained economic prosperity.

Washington has made large-scale, ambitious, and concerted investments into career exploration and preparation over the past decade, with an eye to creating more economic opportunity for young people as they seek to enter the workforce. It is clear from the data that there is more work to be done, and workforce development stakeholders continue to address these shortcomings in a wide variety of efforts. In spite of the inherent challenges

for young workers in this economy, there are “green shoots” of opportunity, particularly in healthcare and in IT skill-based careers that should be cultivated and brought to scale for young people, in clearly articulated, stackable credential pipelines.

We invite readers to visit the companion website for this report and explore the interactive dashboards on youth employment, as the data picture during the current economic period is fast-changing. The companion website is available at:

<https://bit.ly/wayouthemployment>.

The Workforce Board staff will continue to update this online resource with timely data as it becomes available.