



The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act: Supporting “Successful” Transitions into Adulthood

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Abstract

Completing education, obtaining employment, and securing an independent residence, tasks tied to an ideal of self-sufficiency are viewed as important hallmarks of adulthood. Yet, not all youth and young adults (YYA) have adequate resources and many require assistance to overcome transition barriers including lack of social support, poverty, and homelessness. This study analyzed the policy design and social justice values (equity, equality, and adequacy) of three federal workforce programs, authorized by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and designed to increase economic self-sufficiency among disconnected YYA. These programs lack stable and adequate funding and currently serve a small fraction of the YYA who could benefit. A value of equity is evident in the eligibility and financing criteria, while adequacy as it relates to programming—particularly benefits and services offered to address basic needs, economic stability, and healthy development—warrants further investigation. The programs’ focus on self-sufficiency through connection to education, training, and employment ignores research suggesting that at least six other dimensions are crucial for a successful transition to adulthood. Research on program entry and exit, primary services/benefits received, and life experiences of program participants is needed to determine current levels of support and the potential of these programs to enhance other components of a healthy transition including health, community engagement, and social support among disconnected YYA. Such research may also need to be focused regionally, given the highly localized control of programs.

Keywords Young adults · Transition to adulthood · Self-sufficiency · Disconnected youth · Workforce development policy

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Background

Adulthood within the USA is defined both by legal and developmental criteria. Generally, individuals are legally considered to be adults when they reach age 18. However, this conflicts with research finding a lengthened transition between adolescence and adulthood, largely influenced by cultural, social, and economic factors (Arnett, 2000). In recent years, the ordering and timing of traditional markers of adulthood such as education, employment, and marriage have become less differentiated, resulting in increasingly individualized transition pathways (Pollock, 2008; Shanahan, 2000). However, existing age-graded expectations about completing education or training, obtaining full-time employment, and securing an independent residence remain salient hallmarks of adulthood (Settersten & Ray, 2010), and a “successful” transition to adulthood remains inherently tied to an ideal of self-sufficiency, rooted in the ideology of individualism (Segal, 2016).

According to the Administration for Children and Families, self-sufficiency is “the ability in adulthood to economically support oneself and one’s dependents without long-term dependence on public assistance” (Dion et al., 2013, p. 1). By this definition, around half of young adults ages 18 to 29 may be considered self-sufficient. For example, before the spring 2020 economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, about 47% of US young adults ages 18 to 29 lived with their parents, and as of July 2020, that figure rose to 52% (Fry et al., 2020). Within that demographic, 47% of young adults ages 16 to 24 were employed in July 2020, which is 9.5 percentage points lower than in July 2019 (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2020). Further, the disconnection rate—those neither enrolled in school nor employed—among those ages 16 to 24 rose from 12% early in 2020 to 28% in June 2020 (Fry & Barroso, 2020). Thus, even prior to COVID, a sizable proportion of young adults were not achieving self-sufficiency, as traditionally defined through connection to education, employment, or independent residence, and the situation has become direr due to the pandemic. This paper analyzes three WIOA youth-focused programs as they relate to this traditional definition of self-sufficiency and suggests that both youth and young adults (YYA) and communities would benefit from a revisioning of what is needed to ensure a “successful” transition into adulthood, beyond solely providing for one’s own basic needs.

“Disconnected Youth” Are at Risk for Failing to Achieve Economic Independence

Experts agree that an individual’s experiences during young adulthood, approximately ages 18 to 26 years, carry critical implications for future social and economic well-being (Bonnie et al., 2014). For many individuals, families provide ample support during this period. For example, prior research using nationally representative household data from Panel Study of Income Dynamics found that 34% of individuals ages 18 to 34 lived at home or received financial assistance from their families into their mid to late twenties in forms such as cash support,

childcare, or room and board (Schoeni & Ross, 2005). Further, evidence indicates that those with family support may be afforded a longer transition period while those without family support may be thrust into adult roles earlier (Osgood et al., 2005).

Lack of parental support places individuals at risk for difficulty in achieving economic independence in adulthood (Bonnie, Stroud, & Breiner, 2014). For instance, YYA aged 18 to 25 who lack support from family often face housing instability (Kull, Morton, Patel, Curry, & Carreon, 2019; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). This complicates completing education and obtaining employment because housing stability is related both to employment (National Coalition for the Homeless, n.d.) and postsecondary education enrollment and completion (U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2016; Kull et al., 2019). For instance, Rosenberg and Kim (2018) found that youth with experiences of foster care who experienced homelessness between the ages of 19 and 21 had worse educational and employment outcomes. Likewise, results from a national study showed that young adults ages 18 to 25 who experienced homelessness were over 60% less likely to be enrolled in a four-year college compared to same-age peers with stable housing (Kull et al., 2019).

For disconnected YYA ages 16 to 24 who are neither enrolled in school nor employed, the health and financial risks of failing to achieve self-sufficiency are particularly great (Belfield et al., 2012). Steady employment has been associated with better health and higher income among adults ages 18 to 35 (Canivet et al., 2016; Vancea & Utzet, 2017). Similarly, higher levels of educational attainment have been positively associated with employment rates, income, and wealth, and negatively associated with physical health problems for adults (Adams, 2002; BLS, 2018; Hummer & Lariscy, 2011). Moreover, YYA who experience long-term disconnection from school and work between ages 16 and 24 have worse social and economic outcomes than peers from families with the same income in middle adulthood, such as having lower median income (~\$30,000 per year) and homeownership rates and higher unemployment rates (Lewis & Gluskin, 2018).

Additionally, studies have estimated substantial social and economic costs associated with having YYA disconnected from school and work. For example, in 2013, there were 5.5 million disconnected youth ages 16 to 24 in the USA (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2015). The authors estimated that, for those 5.5 million disconnected youth, the annual sum of direct costs for incarceration, Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income, and public assistance totaled \$26.8 billion (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2015). Similarly, research conducted by economists Belfield, Levin, and Rosen (2012) estimated the annual federal fiscal impact of 6.7 million disconnected youth ages 16 to 24 at \$32 billion—with state and local governments losing approximately \$61 billion annually through lost earnings, lost taxes, and expenses associated with crime, health, and public assistance. Though it is difficult to untangle the relationships between housing stability, employment, and education, experts agree that all three must be addressed to support young people during the transition into adulthood (Clark & Unruh, 2009; Morton et al., 2018).

Risk Factors for Disconnection

Risk factors for disconnection are located at individual, family, and community levels. Individual demographic characteristics linked to disconnection include age and race, both individually and in combination. Evidence suggests that, among YYA ages 16 to 24, rates of disconnection peak around age 19 or 20 (Ross & Prchal Svajlenka, 2016). Likewise, among YYA ages 16 to 24 in the USA, American Indian/Alaska Native, Black non-Hispanic, and Hispanic YYA have higher rates of disconnection than White non-Hispanic and Asian YYA, regardless of age or gender (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015; Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2015); however, some evidence suggests that this racial difference in disconnection is more pronounced among older YYA ages 20 to 24 (NCES, 2017).

When compared to connected YYA between ages 16 and 24, disconnected youth have higher rates of disability (Burd-Sharps & Lewis, 2017), poorer health (Hair, et al., 2009), and lower educational attainment (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015). Disconnected youth have higher rates of childhood poverty and lower incomes (Burd-Sharps & Lewis, 2017), and higher rates of involvement in delinquent activities as well as the criminal justice system (Belfield, Levin, & Rosen, 2012). Parent education level, family receipt of government assistance, family income and/or poverty status, and family structure have also been linked with connectedness (Hair et al., 2009).

Community risk factors are also related to YYA disconnection. In the USA, YYA ages 16 to 24 in rural areas are more likely to be disconnected (Burd-Sharps & Lewis, 2017), particularly in the South, Southwest, and Appalachian regions of the USA (Bray et al., 2016). Residing in neighborhoods with low levels of human development and higher rates of unemployment, poverty, and racial segregation (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2015) are associated with a greater likelihood of disconnection. Further, living in communities with lower educational attainment places YYA at greater risk for disconnection (Bray et al., 2016; Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2015).

Federal Support for “At-Risk” Youth and Young Adults

The recognition of the need to provide additional support for those “at-risk” of not achieving economic independence has prompted the creation of federal policies and programs targeting these YYA. Efforts and the terms associated with the target group have shifted over time and approaches have been fragmented and underfunded (for a detailed account, see Fernandes-Alcantara, 2018). For instance, at the beginning of the twentieth century, policy targeted children younger than 16—largely emphasizing child welfare and juvenile delinquency (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2018). Following the Great Depression, this focus shifted from child welfare and delinquency prevention to alleviating youth poverty and providing money and employment opportunities for YYA ages 16 to 25 who were trying to finish schooling or work part-time (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2017).

In the 1960s and 1970s, federal legislation began to focus on workforce development and education, in addition to community service, delinquency prevention, and health and social services for YYA (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2018, 2020). This trend

continued into the 1980s with the 1983 Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), which continued to authorize programs that sought to improve employment and training for young people; the focus, however, shifted to state and local administration of these programs (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2017). The 1990s and 2000s brought legislation that focused on building up the workforce to increase economic self-sufficiency. This was targeted by offering training and development opportunities within secondary school settings to at-risk youth (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2017). The culmination of twentieth century efforts to enhance YYA workforce participation was the passing of The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, which repealed the JTPA, reauthorized Job Corps, and established the WIA Youth Activities programs.

In 2014, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) replaced the WIA of 1998 and reauthorized Youth Workforce Investment Activities (hereafter Youth Activities), Job Corps, and YouthBuild—three programs designed to connect at-risk YYA ages 16 to 24 with education or training and employment. The aim of self-sufficiency is explicitly stated within the WIOA as part of each programs' purpose and is evident within the performance measures. For instance, Job Corps' purpose states that centers will “assist eligible youth to connect to the labor force by providing them with intensive social, academic, career and technical education, and service-learning opportunities... that will result in economic self-sufficiency and opportunities for advancement” (29 U.S.C. § 3191(1)(a)(i)). The first purpose listed for YouthBuild is “to enable disadvantaged youth to obtain the education and employment skills necessary to achieve economic self-sufficiency” (29 U.S.C. §3226(a)). Finally, the purpose of Youth Activities programs is “to provide workforce investment activities, through statewide and local workforce development systems, that ...improve the quality of the workforce, reduce welfare dependency, increase economic self-sufficiency, meet the skill requirements of employers, and enhance the productivity and competitiveness of the Nation” (29 U.S.C. §3101(6)).

Of note, though the term economic self-sufficiency was used 22 times within the WIOA, no definition was provided. Each state must adopt or create an economic self-sufficiency standard that “specifies the income needs of families, by family size, the number and ages of children in the family, and substate geographical considerations” (29 U.S.C. §3174(a)(3)(A)(xii)). All three youth-focused programs have the same performance measures, which include the following: (1) placement in unsubsidized employment or enrollment in education or training at the end of the 2nd and 4th quarters following program completion, (2) gains in skills that indicate progress toward an educational certificate or employment, (3) participants' median earnings from unsubsidized employment during the 2nd quarter postprogram, and (4) degree or certificate attainment within 12 months of program completion (29 U.S.C. §3141(b)(2)(A)(ii)).

Current Study

The federal focus on supporting YYA at-risk of failing to achieve self-sufficiency during the transition into young adulthood has long focused on workforce development to create opportunity for those in need. This study analyzed elements of policy

design for the WIOA's three YYA workforce development programs and the underlying social justice values associated with the design because policy design choices reflect values about how to achieve social justice. Thus, by analyzing policy design choices and associated values, we illustrate the strengths and limitations of how federal programs support disadvantaged YYA in achieving a "successful" transition into young adulthood.

Methods

We applied Gilbert and Terrell's (2013) social welfare policy analysis framework to analyze the youth programs authorized by the WIOA. Gilbert and Terrell (2013) describe the utility of considering social welfare transfers through a benefit-allocation framework. Such a framework provides for thinking about welfare states providing for the well-being of citizens through the allocation (i.e., financing and delivery) of goods and services (benefits) that would not otherwise be available (Gilbert & Terrell, 2013). According to this framework, four dimensions of social choice were examined for each of the federal programs: (1) bases of social allocation, (2) types of social provisions allocated, (3) strategies for delivering provisions, and (4) ways to finance provisions (Gilbert & Terrell, 2013). Bases of social allocation refer to who will receive benefits or services and includes eligibility criteria. Types of social provisions allocated outline what benefits or services are offered and in what form (i.e., cash or in-kind services). Strategies for delivering services can be thought of as the mode of delivery, such as through contracts with non-profit agencies or government agencies. Financing of provisions details where funding comes from, how it is funneled, and how much is allocated (Gilbert & Terrell, 2013).

Across these four dimensions of social choice, we examined the extent to which each federal program reflects three core values of social justice: equality, equity, and adequacy (Gilbert & Terrell, 2013). Per this framework, equality is the extent to which a social welfare policy treats all people the same. Equity refers to fair treatment proportional to one's contributions or position in society. Adequacy is the extent to which the social welfare policy denotes a certain standard of material well-being as desirable for people's lives (Gilbert & Terrell, 2013). Based on value applicability to each policy dimension, bases of allocation were examined for equity and equality, program provisions were assessed for adequacy and equality, and service delivery and financing were assessed for all three values.

Findings

Table 1 presents program purposes, eligibility criteria, benefits and services authorized, and financing for the three programs. Below, each dimension is described along with findings related to values of equity, equality, and adequacy.

Table 1 Description of program elements for WIOA YYA-focused programs

Program	Purpose	Eligibility	Benefits/services	^b Financing
Job Corps	To promote responsible citizenship and connect youth to the labor force as a means of achieving economic self-sufficiency. This includes providing intensive education, trainings, and service-learning opportunities, primarily in residential settings, that lead to in-demand career paths, enrollment in the Armed forces, or enrollment in postsecondary education or training (29 U.S.C. § 3191)	<p>Required</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age 16–21 (80%) • 22–24 (20%) • Low Income <p>And one or more of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Out of school youth/dropout • Deficit in basic skills/at risk of not graduating • Runaway or homeless • Foster care—current or former • Pregnant or parenting • Victim of severe human trafficking <p>(29 USC § 3194)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English language instruction programs • Career and technical education/training • Career counseling and job placement services • Work experience and/or work-based learning • Childcare • Recreational activities • Physical rehabilitation and development • Drivers education • Counseling, including but not limited to financial literacy • Additional career services • Postgraduation job placement/support for up to 12 months • Childcare near at Job Corps centers • Room and board during program^a • Transition allowance for graduates • Up to 3 months of employment services postparticipation (optional) • Personal allowance (optional) 29 U.S.C. § 3197-3200) 	Enacted appropriations, FY 2020 \$1.7 billion

Table 1 (continued)

Program	Purpose	Eligibility	Benefits/services	^b Financing
YouthBuild	To enhance the workforce through increasing education, training, and employment skills as well as building leadership skills and increasing community investment. Additionally, to improve housing options and facilities for homeless and low-income families (29 U.S.C. §3226(a))	<p>Required</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Out of school youth/dropout • Age 16–24 <p>And one or more of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low income • Foster care—current or former • Has a disability • Migrant • Juvenile or adult criminal justice • Has incarcerated parent 29 U.S.C. 3226) 	<p>Benefits/services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secondary education assistance (e.g., tutoring) • Follow-up services for up to 12 months • Paid and unpaid work experience • Job search and placement assistance • Follow-up services for up to 12 months • Substance use counseling • Community service opportunities • Stipends for program participation • Adult mentoring • Need-based stipends (optional) (29 U.S.C. 3226) 	<p>Enacted appropriations, FY 2020</p> <p>\$94.5 million</p>

Table 1 (continued)

Program	Purpose	Eligibility	Benefits/services	^b Financing
Youth Activities	To enhance the quality of the workforce through improved workforce skills and education of participants in order to increase economic self-sufficiency, reduce welfare dependence, and produce a workforce that meets employers' skill demands and allows the U.S. to compete in the global economy (29 U.S.C. §3101(6))	<p>Required</p> <p>In-school youth:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ages 14–21 • Low income <p>OR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Out of school youth: • Ages 16–24 • Out of school youth/dropout <p>And one or more of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deficit in basic skills/at risk of not graduating (if in-school) • Foster care—current or former • Has a disability • Juvenile or adult criminal justice • English language learner • Pregnant or parenting • Runaway or homeless (29 U.S.C. § 3164) 	<p>Required elements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tutoring or study skills training leading to high school completion or postsecondary credential • Evidence-based dropout prevention and recovery services leading to high school completion or postsecondary credential • Alternative secondary school services • Paid and unpaid work opportunities, with both academic and occupational education components • Occupational skills training—especially those that lead to postsecondary credentials in in-demand industry sectors • Career awareness, counseling, and exploration services • Guidance and counseling, including substance use counseling or referral • Other supportive services • Financial literacy education • Entrepreneurial skills training • Adult mentoring for at least 12 months • Leadership development opportunities such as community service • Other activities to prepare youth to transition to postsecondary education and training • Follow-up services for up to 12 months after participation 29 U.S.C. § 3164) 	<p>Enacted appropriations, FY 2020</p> <p>\$913.1 million</p>

^a Annually, up to 20% of Job Corps center may be nonresidential (i.e., live off-site)

^b FY 2020 enacted appropriations retrieved from Congressional Research Services report detailing enacted appropriations. Amounts have been rounded. Source: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11640>

Bases of Social Allocation

All three programs have selective eligibility, including age and either income or school/work status, as well as at least one other risk factor (see Table 1). In the case of youth activities and YouthBuild programs, the primary selection criterion is being a YYA who is out-of-school. Job Corps focuses on individuals ages 16 to 21 who are considered to have low income, though up to 20% of participants can be between 22 and 24. For all three programs, additional selection criteria focus on experiences or characteristics that may place them at statistically higher risk of failing to achieve self-sufficiency—having a disability, being deficient in basic skills, being a migrant, having former or current involvement in foster care or juvenile justice systems, or being pregnant or parenting.

In the dimension of bases of social allocation, social justice is being pursued through increasing opportunities for certain groups of YYA. Categorical eligibility for all three programs includes known characteristics associated with risk for failure in achieving economic independence. This signals an underlying value of equity in that deservingness of aid is based on factors known to disadvantage youth—many of which may be considered outside of the YYA's control—indicating that these policies aim to level the playing field in economic opportunity. However, the 24-month participation limits imposed by Job Corps and YouthBuild also promote equality by imposing the same maximum time limit for all, regardless of need. This may hinder the ability for such programs to impact social justice for their participants, particularly those without family support, as they often face additional barriers to self-sufficiency during the transition into adulthood (Osgood et al., 2005) and may benefit from more extended support.

Types of Social Provisions to be Allocated

The type of social provisions provided by each program is primarily in-kind (i.e., non-cash) benefits such as tutoring or career exploration (see Table 1). For instance, the 14 required program elements for Youth Activities programs focus on in-kind benefits. Job Corps also offers primarily in-kind benefits such as career training and work experience, as well as recreational activities, counseling, housing for participants, and childcare, if needed. Additionally, Job Corps centers have the option to offer cash allowances during the program and postprogram cash assistance for graduates. YouthBuild has a variety of in-kind services, including paid and unpaid work opportunities, adult mentoring, and community service. Further, YouthBuild provides a cash stipend to participants while they are in training, in lieu of wages, and some YouthBuild grantees offer needs-based stipends as well.

Many of the in-kind services or benefits offered by these programs focus on improving the individual's knowledge, credentials, and skills so that they may participate in the labor force. For the Youth Activities program, there are 14 elements required of all Youth Activities programs, reflecting the value of equality in the types of benefits and services available to participants. This is not seen in YouthBuild or Job Corps, as the WIOA does not specify the required program elements

of all grantees or contractors. Some in-kind benefits offered by Job Corps reflect a value of adequacy. For example, Job Corps provides housing for YYA during program participation, as well as childcare resources for parenting YYA. Finally, while YouthBuild and Job Corps programs do have the ability to ensure adequacy—i.e., a basic standard of material living—through the use of cash stipends or allowance, this benefit is grant- or contract-specific rather than standard across programs. Having low income is either an eligibility criterion itself or associated with the circumstances by which many participants qualify for all three programs. As such, policy wording that leaves cash benefits as optional implies a lack of federal priority given to supporting young adults to adequately meet their basic needs.

Program Financing and Strategies for Delivering Services

All three programs are administered by the US Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration (DOLETA). Each may be offered by public or private entities. Financing structures vary for each of the three programs.

Youth Activities program grants are awarded to states or tribal governments by the federal government using formula grants, and financing proceeds through a three-step award process. First, states or tribes apply and are awarded funding, which is allotted by DOLETA based upon the relative numbers of unemployed individuals, the excess number of unemployed individuals, and disadvantaged youth in that state or area compared to the national or statewide totals. Second, local areas apply for and receive funding based on a similar formula. Third, organizations that wish to directly administer Youth Activities programs apply for competitive grants from the local area. These organizations become one-stop delivery centers, created under the WIOA of 2014 to deliver education, training, and employment services to youth eligible for Youth Activities in one place. This three-tiered system of service delivery allows programs to vary by local area, as the education, training, and employment needs and opportunities differ widely by region (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2020). The financing and delivery of Youth Activities programs promote a value of equity in that the funding formula is designed to guarantee that areas with greater need receive more funding. Likewise, the devolved funding and structure of program delivery may ensure that YYA have success entering and remaining in the workforce following program exit. In the same vein, devolution of control and funding may allow for local bias that could affect enrollment and approaches to service delivery, which could hurt social justice efforts.

YouthBuild has a more direct financing process, where both public and private organizations bid to offer YouthBuild projects. Similarly, after going through a competitive contract process, private companies or other federal agencies may operate Job Corps centers (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2020). As a result, the federal government finances YouthBuild and Job Corps through project grants or contracts awarded on a competitive basis for 3 years and 4 months, not based on a pre-determined formula.

Similar to Youth Activities programs, the strategies for service delivery and financing of YouthBuild and Job Corps reflect equity through the administration of programs by local organizations to ensure implementation that can tailor programs

to community contexts. However, due to local implementation and the vagaries of devolution and street-level bureaucrats, these programs are vulnerable to inequality and inequity in the administration and execution that may unofficially favor or exclude certain populations (Rice, 2013; White et al., 2015).

All three programs receive discretionary funding, which means that the amount of money appropriated is subject to change when Congress passes annual appropriation acts (CBO, n.d.). In FY 2020, the total federal funding appropriated for all three programs was around 2.7 billion dollars. The majority of this funding (\$1.7 billion) went to Job Corps, which served about 47,000 YYA in the performance year 2018 (Job Corps, n.d.), while about \$94.5 million went to YouthBuild programs that serve around 6000 youth annually, and the remaining \$900 million to Youth Activities programs that enroll around 161,000 youth nationwide in 2019 (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2020).

The use of discretionary funding for each program may imply a value of equity rather than equality in that Congress ideally determines how much federal funding each program will receive based on their evaluation of the extent to which these programs alleviate social problems in relation to other social welfare programs. Yet, the consideration of adequacy does not seem to be built into the financing stream for these programs. Combined, these programs serve nearly 215,000 YYA per year (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2020). However, in 2018, national estimates of disconnected youth who might benefit from these programs approximated 4.3 million, or 11.2% of the 16- to 24-year-old population—a figure that does not account for the inevitable increase in disconnection rates as a result of the global coronavirus pandemic (Lewis, 2020). With appropriated funding subject to change annually, this financing stream constrains programs from reaching many who are eligible. Likewise, it does not allow the programs to adequately support disconnected YYA participants to meet basic needs such as shelter, food, clothing, and transportation that may enable program participation.

Discussion

This analysis of the WIOA's three federal programs, which target increasing self-sufficiency among disadvantaged YYA, aimed to illustrate how social policy choices align with social justice values of equity, equality, and adequacy to support a “successful” transition into adulthood.

Equity and Equality

Policy choices related to bases of allocation for the WIOA YYA programs primarily center on the value of equity, defined as fair treatment proportional to one's contributions or position in society. However, there are aspects of equality illustrated within YouthBuild and Job Corps programs, which have time limits that apply to all YYA, as well as within the types of social provisions allotted for Youth Activities programs—with all Youth Activities programs required to offer benefits in 14 areas.

The value of equity is demonstrated by the WIOA's focus on supporting "disadvantaged" individuals to become and remain connected to the workforce. YYA entering these programs face considerable challenges to economic self-sufficiency, traditionally defined as the ability to financially support oneself and dependents without public assistance (Dion et al., 2013). For instance, in performance year (PY) 2018 over one-fifth of Job Corps participants were receiving some type of public assistance prior to program participation (Job Corps, 2020). Likewise, in examining identified barriers to employment among Youth Activities program participants served in PY 2018, 85% of YYA had low income (Employment and Training Administration [ETA], 2020). Though statistics on the income level of YouthBuild participants could not be located, having dropped out of school—a requirement to participate in YouthBuild programs—is associated with lower median income compared to people with high school diplomas or degrees (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). In a recent randomized control trial evaluating national YouthBuild programs, 80% of participants randomly assigned to the YouthBuild group had completed between 9 and 11 years of schooling at the study's baseline (Miller et al., 2018).

It appears that these three programs may be successfully targeting YYA who need support to establish economic security. These policies' focus on equity may be preferable to trying to ensure equal treatment, as receiving the same services or benefits may not benefit vulnerable YYA with unique and individual challenges and strengths. It must be noted, however, that the highly localized funding and implementation structure of these programs may jeopardize equality and equity in policy execution due to well-documented bias embedded in devolution and street-level bureaucracy (Rice, 2013; White et al., 2015). While flexibility to accommodate regional workforce development needs is important, attention to who is being enrolled and graduated as well as programming focused on positive young adult development and ensuring that basic needs can be met during program participation is needed to promote social justice.

Adequacy

The value of adequacy—indicating a certain standard of material well-being as desirable for people's lives—is another component of social justice. Through this lens, the effectiveness of these programs is less clear. The ETA reported national outcomes for all three programs over the four quarters ending December 31, 2019.¹ Job Corps participants had median wages of \$4731 in the second quarter following program exit (ETA, n.d.). If this median earning was constant across all four quarters, annual median earnings would total \$18,924. Likewise, 2019 quarterly performance measures for the WIOA Youth Activities program showed that, nationally, median earnings among former WIOA Youth Activities program participants were \$3516 for the second quarter following program exit (ETA, n.d.), or a median annual income of \$14,064. Outcomes for YouthBuild were similar, with national indicators

¹ Due to the impact that COVID-19 had on programs, including brief closures, though data was available for earnings reported for two quarters at the end of June 2020, the data for four quarters ending December 31, 2019, was used for this paper.

showing that YouthBuild participants had median earnings of \$3,392 in the second quarter following program exit (ETA, n.d.), or annual median earnings of \$13,568. The adequacy of these programs then, at least as it pertains to putting YYA on track for economic self-sufficiency, must be viewed considering these numbers. Accordingly, national statistics on median earnings outcomes provided for YYA who graduated from these three WIOA youth-serving programs suggests that a majority would be considered low-wage workers, defined by the Brookings Institution as people who are employed and earn two-thirds or less of the annual median wage for men working full-time year-round (Ross & Bateman, 2019).

Low wages connect directly with housing cost burden. In all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, it is not possible for a person working 40 h a week at the current federal minimum wage to rent one-bedroom housing at the average Fair Market Rent without costs exceeding 30% of their monthly income (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2017). Moreover, there are only 10 states in the USA where a person working 40 h a week at the current federal minimum wage can afford to rent two-bedroom housing earning less than \$15 per hour; and, even in those 10 states, the minimum wage would need to be over \$13.50 per hour (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2017). Thus, for low-wage workers in the USA, housing costs are likely a burden regardless of where they live.

Nationally representative household survey data have found that one in 10 young adults experienced some form of homelessness within a 12-month period (Morton et al., 2018). Yet, in 2016, only 5% of households living in subsidized housing had household heads aged 24 or younger (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.). The exact number of YYA experiencing homeless who participate in these three youth-focused workforce development programs is unclear. However, statistics about WIOA Youth Activities program participants from PY 2018 indicate that almost 4% of participants were homeless or at-risk of homelessness (ETA, 2020) and around 5% of Job Corps participants in PY2018 were youth experiencing homelessness, youth in foster care, or youth who have run away (Job Corps, 2020). Yet, only two of these programs offer a living stipend and only one program provides housing. This finding deserves further discussion, as having a standard of material well-being desirable for one's life is necessary for YYA to enroll in and graduate from these programs and to maintain employment once in the workforce. Thus, when considering adequacy as a component of social justice, it is problematic that current federal workforce development services overlook a need to determine and ensure adequacy for meeting basic needs such as food and shelter.

Policy Implications

A “successful” transition into adulthood includes more than economic self-sufficiency. Collaborative research conducted by the Search Institute and the Social Development Research Group identified eight core dimensions of successful development in young adulthood: (1) physical health, (2) psychological and emotional well-being, (3) life skills, (4) ethical behavior, (5) healthy family and social relationships, (6) educational attainment, (7) constructive educational and occupational

engagement, and (8) civic engagement (Scales et al., 2016). Each of the three WIOA programs reviewed here may address some of these areas; however, from a social justice perspective, designing programs that support and evaluate these linked dimensions is a critical piece of supporting disadvantaged YYA. The focus on economic self-sufficiency in the WIOA YYA policies misses the opportunity to holistically address broader outcomes that promote healthy transitions in adulthood.

Further, the inadequacy of program provisions for participants may be limiting policy effectiveness and contributing to policies' failure to achieve stated goals. All three policies are aimed at intervening in logical and pragmatic sources of youths' failure to achieve self-sufficiency—lack of education, training, and workforce engagement skills. In doing so, however, these policies overlook holistic and environmental perspectives that account for the role of security and safety in achieving self-sufficiency. For vulnerable groups of YYA to achieve economic self-sufficiency, they must be supported in other dimensions important to health and well-being (Bonnie et al., 2014). The focus on enhancing self-sufficiency among YYA by prioritizing education, training, and employment completion overlooks basic needs, such as stable shelter, and social support that are foundational to success in education, training, and employment. Thus, though equity may be sought through the bases of social allocation, funding, and delivery strategies, the outcomes may not reflect a more equal playing field for former participants. A uniform approach focused on adequacy might include providing stipends for YYA participants (based upon the local cost of living) that offset basic living needs during program participation. This, in turn, may improve their ability to focus on education, training, and employment without worrying about daily needs. Alternatively, if policymakers prefer to offer services rather than cash benefits, housing could be offered uniformly across all three programs to ensure participants had access to safe and secure shelter.

Problems in the adequacy of program provisions suggest that these policies are not adequately funded at the federal level. In addition to not appropriating enough funding to cover the living expenses of participants, program financing is appropriated annually and varies significantly in allocation size. By not providing a focus on services or benefits that incorporates other core dimensions of successful young adult development, nor adequate resources to ensure that participants could focus solely on employment preparation, training, and education without the need to worry about survival needs such as shelter, our analysis deems these programs inadequate.

Finally, the highly localized implementation of these policies creates program vulnerabilities that may counter eligibility standards and service provisions aimed at equity, equality, and adequacy (Bonnie et al., 2014). As local organizations and businesses execute these programs, clear federal oversight and accountability on such metrics will help promote social justice for program participants.

Research Implications

The goals of these programs currently center on economic self-sufficiency. Yet, earnings outcomes from the 2nd quarter following program exit suggest that, at least short term, many former participants may not be on a path to achieving economic

self-sufficiency. Thus far, findings from longitudinal evaluations of Job Corps and YouthBuild have been mixed. Prior evaluations of Job Corps graduates indicated that earnings were not significantly higher than those of similarly disadvantaged peers who did not graduate from Job Corps (GAO, 2016; Schochet et al., 2008)—highlighting the failure of these programs to change the career and earnings trajectories of the youth they target. A recent national evaluation of YouthBuild found that, compared to those in the control group, YouthBuild participants earned an average of \$33 more each week at the time of the 48-month survey, and this difference was statistically significant, indicating it was not simply due to chance (Miller et al., 2018). There is a need to evaluate the extent to which these YYA programs fulfill the goal of economic self-sufficiency. And, given the highly localized program delivery, such studies may be most beneficial if they are designed to examine such outcomes at a regional level.

Additionally, due to the highly localized structure of these programs, further research that investigates equity, equality, and adequacy pertaining to how policies are implemented is also warranted. Analysis of administrative data that compares regional differences in characteristics associated with enrollment, program delivery, and outcomes may assist with evaluating equity and accountability. Further, qualitative or ethnographic research approaches could be used to examine potential sources of any identified inequities in access and service provision. Additionally, it may be helpful to create uniform training and evaluation of evidence-based positive development approaches to support healthy development among YYA participants, regardless of localized context.

Finally, research should examine secondary program outcomes such as health, community engagement, and social support and their relationship with self-sufficiency. Qualitative interviews with YYA who are eligible but not enrolled as well as former and current participants can be used to expand understanding of these programs. Studies should explore the strengths, experiences, and unmet needs of program participants, paying special attention to structural barriers such as discrimination experiences, housing security, and transportation as well as solicit YYA suggestions for improving supports. This future research may help to extend the goals of these programs to reflect what it means to have a successful transition into adulthood, beyond economic self-sufficiency.

Conclusion

The WIOA youth-focused programs have the potential to reach a broad population of YYA and support and empower YYA who face considerable challenges to healthy development. However, this analysis suggests that programs lack stable and adequate funding and are currently serving a small fraction of the number of YYA who could benefit from these supports. The focus on equity may be helpful to ensure that resources are targeted to those with the most need; however, due to the social and economic vulnerabilities of eligible YYA, there is a need to evaluate the adequacy of programming, particularly benefits and services offered to address basic needs that support program participation and graduation. Moreover,

addressing the issue of self-sufficiency among disconnected youth by focusing solely on connection to education, training, and employment institutions ignores the need for adequate housing, health care, childcare, livable wages, and meaningful social and community connections. More research is needed to determine how these programs currently support disconnected YYA and adjustments that should be made to support healthy and successful development.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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