RESPONDING TO YOUNG PEOPLE

An Analysis of Programs Serving Young People Not Connected to School or Work

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March 2022

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FUNDERS

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OVERVIEW

Sponsored by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Reconnecting Youth project aims to systematically understand what programs and practices are available in the United States to support young people who experience disconnection from school and work during the transition period to adulthood (typically defined as ages 16 to 24). It focuses specifically on services to help them reconnect to education, obtain employment, and advance in the labor market. This population of young people is often referred to as "disconnected youth" or "opportunity youth." This project has produced two online tools to support these goals. The first is a compendium of programs, the focus of this publication, which provides an overview of 78 programs and the practices they employ. The second is an evidence gap map that looks at the available evidence about these practices to identify what evidence exists and where there are opportunities to build evidence.

The study team from MDRC and Child Trends conducted an expansive search to identify programs that met the scope of the compendium and fielded a qualitative questionnaire to all programs from the search. The 78 programs in the compendium together were projected to serve nearly 100,000 young people in 2021. This overview provides high-level findings from the questionnaire and connects these results to findings from the evidence gap map. While not meant to be a comprehensive survey of all programs operating, the findings offer insights into what services and implementation practices are more common or less common, the use of innovative practices, and the breadth of activities programs undertake in support of young people.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Program characteristics:** Programs in the compendium reflect diverse geographies, years of experience, and annual number of participants served. The programs are mostly nonprofits operated by community-based organizations and most received public funding, indicating that they have established infrastructure to apply for and qualify for such grants.

- **Population served:** Most reported serving primarily young people. Programs were long in duration and intensity, indicating a high intended dosage of services throughout an extended engagement.

- **Outcomes targeted:** The majority of programs reported targeting both education and employment outcomes, indicating that they focus on a range of outcomes rather than specializing in one area. For education, they focus mostly on basic skills gains, high school completion, or postsecondary enrollment. For employment, they target mostly shorter-term outcomes (e.g., placement and readiness) rather than longer term outcomes (e.g., retention and earnings).

- **Education and employment services:** Most programs provided both secondary and postsecondary education services, indicating that programs may have a main service but meet young people where they are at and provide the education services they need. Most programs reported having both work readiness services to prepare young people for the labor market and job placement supports to give young people skills to gain a foothold in the labor market and access to quality jobs.

- **Program implementation practices:** A high percentage of programs provide support services, suggesting that programs provide comprehensive supports for young people to help them overcome barriers to entering education or employment. All programs reported employing at least one youth development practice in their delivery of services. Programs also often employed practices required of WIOA funding, as well as community partnerships or collaboration. Almost all programs used at least one racial equity practice, such as having a racial equity framework and representation of participant demographics in program leadership and staff.

- **Data and evaluation:** Nearly all programs reported collecting data about participation, employment outcomes, and education outcomes, but a minority had been part of a formal study or evaluation.

CONCLUSION

The questionnaire found that programs seek to serve the diverse group of young people who are disconnected from school and work by providing a wide range of services to support the diverse needs of the young people who come through their doors. Of course, a program alone cannot address the issues that lead to disconnection or mitigate all disparities in society. Systemic challenges exist beyond the reach of programs, including structural barriers and discrimination in the education system and labor market and social determinants of health. However, the wide scope of these programs indicates that they attempt to be as comprehensive as possible.

Many of the practices identified as essential to working with these young people by experts interviewed for this project were common. These include youth development approaches that focus on positive adult-youth relationships, career pathways approaches, and providing comprehensive supports. The questionnaire found that the programs largely employ these practices and approaches, indicating that program staff and experts in the field are largely in agreement about which practices best serve this population.

The Reconnecting Youth project's companion to this compendium, the evidence gap map, surveys the extent of research available about the practices used by the programs in the compendium. Comparing its findings with the compendium reveals directions for future research.

- **Some of the practices that were common in the compendium have a large body of research behind them.** These include such practices as preparation or instruction for high school equivalency, work readiness training, and supports for basic needs. Practitioners, policymakers, and researchers can use this information to learn how best to build strong programs for young people.

- **However, other common practices in the compendium have limited evidence with this population, suggesting priority areas for further research.** These include such practices as employer engagement and career pathways approaches.

- **Some innovative practices were not common in the compendium or the evidence gap map but have been found to be effective serving other populations and may benefit opportunity youth.** These practices include two-generation models, entrepreneurship training, and dual enrollment. The same can be said of expanding service providers to include more community colleges and employers, which were not common practices in the compendium.

- **More longitudinal research can help understand how to support young people who are reconnecting as they advance along education and career pathways.** Currently, most youth-serving programs target relatively short-term outcomes.

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INTRODUCTION

The Reconnecting Youth project aims to systematically understand what programs and practices are available in the United States to support young people who experience disconnection from school and work during the transition period to adulthood (typically defined as ages 16 to 24). It focuses particularly on services to help them reconnect to education, obtain employment, and advance in the labor market. This population of young people is often referred to as "disconnected youth" or "opportunity youth."

The Reconnecting Youth project, which is sponsored by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has produced two online tools to support these goals. The first is a compendium of programs, the focus of this publication, which provides an overview of 78 programs and the practices they employ. The second is an evidence gap map that looks systematically at the available evidence about these practices to identify where there are opportunities to build evidence. Together, these tools suggest areas of focus for future programming and research.

BACKGROUND

As young people transition to adulthood, connection to school and work is often dynamic, and the pathways young people take to independence and self-sufficiency can be long and non-linear. It is common for young people to make multiple attempts to earn a secondary or postsecondary credential, taking a break to focus on work or personal issues related to finances, family, parenting, or mental health challenges.[1] Some young people struggle with the transition to self-sufficient adulthood and have periods where they are not connected to school or work. In 2019, an estimated 4.1 million, or 10.7 percent, of young people aged 16 to 24 were not working or in school.[2] Racial, ethnic, and other disparities are prevalent in these numbers. Young people who are disconnected are more likely to be male; Native American, Black, and/or Hispanic; and in their early- to mid-twenties. Disconnection also disproportionately affects young people who are living with disabilities, have not completed high school, and who have parenting responsibilities.[3] A share of young people may be disconnected for long periods of time.

The prevalence and possibly the characteristics of young people who are not working or in school have shifted dramatically since this project began in 2019 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the proportion of youth disconnection fell from a high of 14.7 percent in 2010 to 10.7 percent in 2019, early research shows that the pandemic has lowered employment and school

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1.   Mendelson et al. (2018); Loprest, Spaulding, and Nightingale (2019); Feliciano and Ashtiani (2012).

2.   Lewis (2021).

3.   Lewis (2019).

enrollment for some groups.[4] Due to the long-lasting toll of the pandemic, many young people could face greater obstacles reconnecting to school or work than before the pandemic.[5]

The economic and social implications of youth disconnection are significant. Disconnection during early adulthood is associated with negative outcomes that persist for decades. One analysis found that people in their thirties who had experienced disconnection as young adults were less likely to be employed or own their own home compared with peers who did not experience disconnection.[6] The factors that lead a young person to become disconnected are myriad and can be individual, familial, and societal—and programs must contend with the fact that young people have different experiences and needs than adult populations.[7] Programs and policies to help young people reconnect exist at the federal, state, and local levels, involving many systems and institutions, including education, workforce, foster care, justice, and philanthropy.

METHODOLOGY

Scope

The Reconnecting Youth compendium is an effort to systemically gather information about programs that operate to reconnect youth. The compendium is not intended to capture all the programs and practices that support young people who experience disconnection. In consultation with ASPE, the research team from MDRC and Child Trends focused on programs that serve young people who are most likely to experience disconnection for long periods of time and need the most support to advance on educational and employment pathways. Though one definition cannot capture all the factors that may lead to persistent disconnection, the eligibility criteria for the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Out-of-School Youth (WIOA OSY) funds offer a good starting point. Young people who are eligible for WIOA OSY funds are not attending or enrolled in school and have at least one other risk factor for disconnection (see Box 1).[8] The WIOA OSY definition excludes from the scope of the compendium the many programs that focus on *preventing* young people who are in school from leaving school without a credential.

The team also established additional criteria based on the characteristics of programs. The compendium includes programs that provide services directly to young people; it does not include efforts aimed at changing systems. Further, the compendium only includes programs that target education or employment outcomes. Programs that exclusively target other outcomes, such as

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4. Borgschulte and Chen (2021).

5. Lewis (2020).

6. Lewis and Gluskin (2018).

7. Catalano et al. (2004).

8. Division of Youth Services (2021).

BOX 1

The WIOA Out-of-School Youth Definition

An "out-of-school youth" is an individual who is not attending any school (as defined under State law), not younger than age 16 or older than age 24 at the time of enrollment, and one or more of the following:

1. a school dropout

2. a youth who is within the age of compulsory school attendance, but has not attended school for at least the most recent complete school year calendar quarter

3. a recipient of a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent who is a low-income individual and is either basic skills–deficient or an English language learner

4. an offender

5. a homeless individual, a homeless child or youth, or a runaway

6. an individual in foster care or who has aged out of the foster care system or who has attained 16 years of age and left foster care for kinship guardianship or adoption, a child eligible for assistance under sec. 477 of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 677), or in an out-of-home placement

7. an individual who is pregnant or parenting

8. an individual with a disability, or

9. a low-income individual who requires additional assistance to enter or complete an educational program or to secure or hold employment

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SOURCE: Division of Youth Services, "WIOA Youth Program Fact Sheet" (Washington, DC: US Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 2021).

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justice system or mental health outcomes, are not included. See Figure 1 for a full list of scope criteria. The criteria were applied to programs identified during an expansive search. The details of this search are described in Appendix A.

Collecting Program Information

To get a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics, services, and practices of the programs, the team fielded a qualitative questionnaire to all programs from the search. Appendix A explains the process for developing and administering the questionnaire. See Box 2 for more information about the sections of the qualitative questionnaire.

FIGURE 1

Compendium Scope Criteria

Location	Operates in the U.S. and territories	
Status	Currently operating	Stage 1 Scope Criteria
Type	Delivers services directly to individuals	
Population	Targets young people who are eligible for WIOA OSY	
Age of Program	Operating for more than 1 year	
Population	At least 25% of population targeted or served are eligibile for WIOA OSY	Stage 2 Scope Criteria
Outcomes	Targets education and employment outcomes	

NOTE: See Box 1 for Workforce Investment Opportunity Act Out-of-School Youth eligibility criteria.

BOX 2

Qualitative Questionnaire Sections

1. General program information

2. Target outcomes

3. Services and activities

4. Implementation practices

5. Evaluation information

FINDINGS FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Seventy-eight programs completed the questionnaire and are included in the compendium. Together they were projected to serve nearly 100,000 young people in 2021. Though this is a large sample, the findings presented are not a census of all operating programs that could have met the scope criteria. Still, the findings bring together information about a diverse set of programs to offer insights into what services and implementation practices are more common or less common, the use of innovative practices, and the breadth of activities programs undertake in support of young people.

General Program Characteristics

■ **Programs in the compendium reflect diverse locations, years of experience, and number of participants served. The programs are mostly operated as nonprofits by community-based organizations, and most received public funding, indicating that they have established infrastructure to apply for and qualify for such grants.**

Programs in this compendium represented all 50 states, along with Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and American Samoa. Most programs operated in just one state or territory. Several large federal programs in the compendium operated in 40+ states or territories (including Job Corps, Youth Build, and Conservation Corps), although almost half operated in just one city or metropolitan area. There was wide variation in the number of young people served by each program included in the compendium, from 3 to over 38,000, with a median count of 250 participants.

The sample of programs represented both newer and more established programs. A quarter of programs were less than five years old; another quarter of programs were more than 20 years old. Two-thirds of programs reported they were operated by a community-based organization, indicating that the programs in this compendium are largely nonprofits. Twenty-three percent reported that they were operated by a workforce development agency, and 14 percent reported that they were operated by some kind of educational entity (for example, an alternative school). While some programs reported multiple operators, most programs reported just one operating entity. Experts interviewed for this project noted that addressing the problem of youth disconnection would require more players—such as community colleges and employers—but such operators made up a small share of programs in the compendium (five and six percent, respectively).

The funding sources reported by the programs in the compendium suggest that they are relatively well-established, as opposed to being grassroots or volunteer-led organizations. As seen in Figure 2, 90 percent of programs received public funding. Accessing public funds indicates the capacity to write grants, track and report outcomes, and meet contractual requirements. The most common source of funding was state governments, although many programs also received federal or municipal funds. Almost a quarter of programs reported getting funding from all three public sources (federal, state, and municipal). More than half of the programs received

FIGURE 2

Percentage of Programs with Funding Type

Public Funding
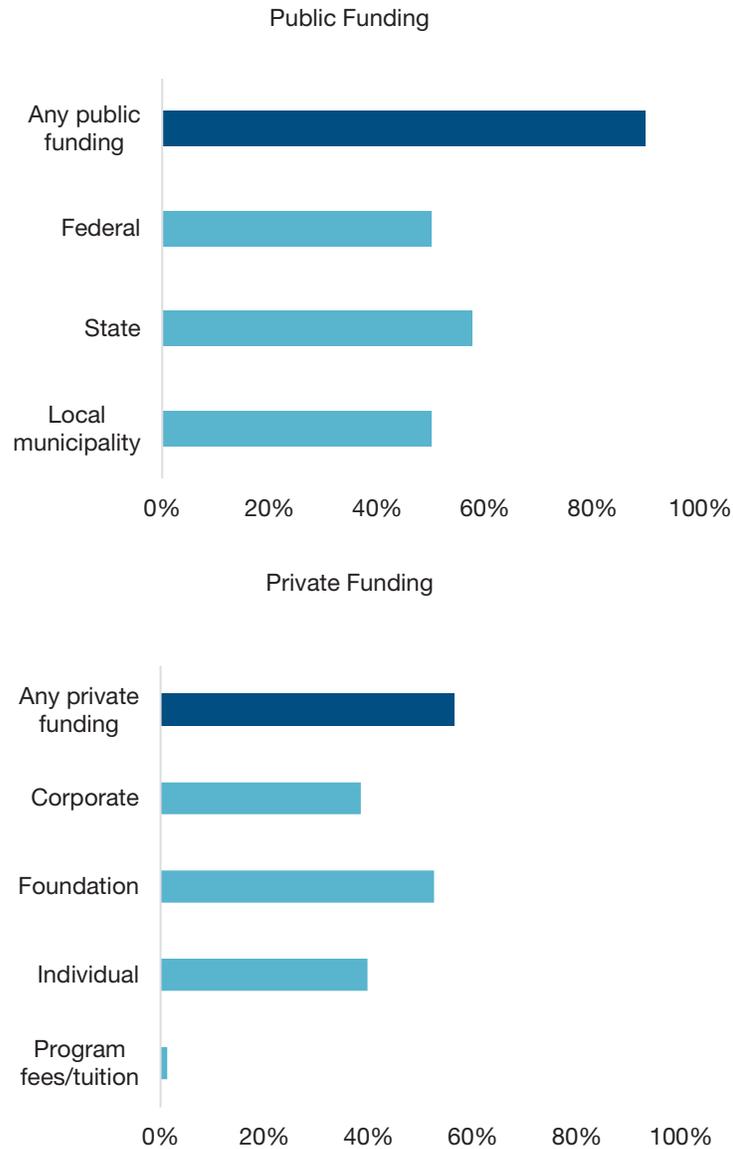
Private Funding

SOURCE: Spring 2021 Qualitative Questionnaire of Compendium Programs

private funding, the vast majority of which was from foundations. Half of programs received both public and private funding, with only four programs relying solely on private funding. Notably, only one program reported relying on program fees or tuition, and that program also received funds from other sources.

Eligibility, Recruitment, and Enrollment

■ **Most programs reported serving primarily young people. Programs were long in duration and intensity, indicating a high intended dosage of services throughout an extended engagement with young people.**

Programs reported eligibility criteria that aligned with the WIOA OSY requirements, as would be expected from the research team's scope criteria. Programs most typically reported that they served young people 16 to 24. Two-thirds of programs served only young people under 25, while about a third served both youth and adults (over the age of 25). Most programs were thus focused specifically on this population of young people. The most common eligibility requirement, reported by a minority of programs (38 percent), was that a young person is not enrolled in school, suggesting that although programs targeted youth as defined by WIOA OSY, many also served young people who were in school.

Programs reported using a range of approaches to recruit participants. Almost all programs (96 percent) recruited young people via referrals from other organizations, and 77 percent of programs recruited via street outreach.[9] Less frequent sources were reengagement networks (55 percent) and court referrals (42 percent), which might indicate they target a specific population that can be reached via those sources.[10]

Almost all programs (97 percent) reported they had a defined enrollment process, meaning the enrollment process was the same for all applicants. Ninety-six percent provided staff support for enrollment, to help young people overcome paperwork barriers to applying to a program and provide an initial personal connection to a program. Most programs (86 percent) implemented a formal assessment during enrollment, while 58 percent had minimum skills or credentials needed for enrollment. Almost half (49 percent) of programs used a cohort model when enrolling participants. Cohort models have been used to help young people engage with a program by developing peer supports and bonds.[11]

Once participants enrolled, most programs expected to engage with them for an extended period. Twenty-seven percent of programs said their duration was 6-12 months, while 35 percent said it was more than one year. Only one-fifth of programs took under 6 months to complete. These estimates of duration do not include follow-up services, which were often offered for at least one year following completion of the core program. Programs reported a wide range of hours that participants were expected to engage in services each week (1 hour a week to 40 hours a week),

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9. Street outreach is targeted outreach outside of the physical program to groups less likely to seek enrollment in a program on their own.

10. Reengagement networks are local efforts, often including one or more brick-and-mortar staffed locations that provide services directly or through referral, to help young people connect to schools or services to complete their high school credential.

11. Brooks (1998).

but most programs estimated 30 hours per week. Taken together, duration and service hours per week indicate a high expected dosage of services.

Targeted Outcomes

■ **The majority of programs reported targeting both education and employment outcomes, rather than specializing in one area. In education, they focused mostly on basic skills gains, high school completion, or postsecondary enrollment. For employment, they targeted mostly shorter-term outcomes (like job placement and employment readiness) rather than longer-term outcomes (like retention and earnings).**

The qualitative questionnaire asked programs to indicate the education and employment outcomes that they target.[12] Targeting an outcome does not necessarily mean that the program offers services that are aligned with that area or that they measure that outcome. Rather, it is a goal that they hope participants reach through participation in the program. Figure 3 shows the outcomes targeted by programs. As expected, given the project's inclusion criteria, all programs targeted at least one education or employment outcome. The majority of programs reported that they targeted *both* education and employment, with 94 percent of programs targeting education and 92 percent of programs targeting employment, and 88 percent of programs targeting both.

The most reported targeted education outcomes were basic skills gains, as well as high school completion (or equivalent) and postsecondary enrollment. However, far fewer programs targeted postsecondary persistence (40 percent) or postsecondary degree attainment (33 percent). Since the search focused on programs serving young people who are not in school, however, it makes sense that these programs did not focus on providing services to those who are already enrolled in school. Of the 78 programs, a minority (29 percent) targeted both high school completion and postsecondary degrees.

A large majority of programs (87 percent) targeted employment placement or attainment, while only 54 percent targeted earnings, indicating a focus on short-term employment outcomes. Of the 68 programs that targeted employment placement/attainment, almost 80 percent also targeted occupational skills/certificates and/or employability/work readiness skills, indicating that they provided specific services to help prepare young people for work.

Services

A key goal of the qualitative questionnaire was to understand the services available to young people. The team developed a comprehensive list of 31 services and practices from prior studies of programs, expert interviews, and a convening of experts and practitioners in the field of

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12. Since the scope of the compendium includes only programs that target education or employment outcomes, the qualitative questionnaire only asked about outcomes in these two areas.

FIGURE 3

Percentage of Programs with Targeted Outcomes, by Category

Secondary Education Outcomes

Postsecondary Education Outcomes

Employment Outcomes
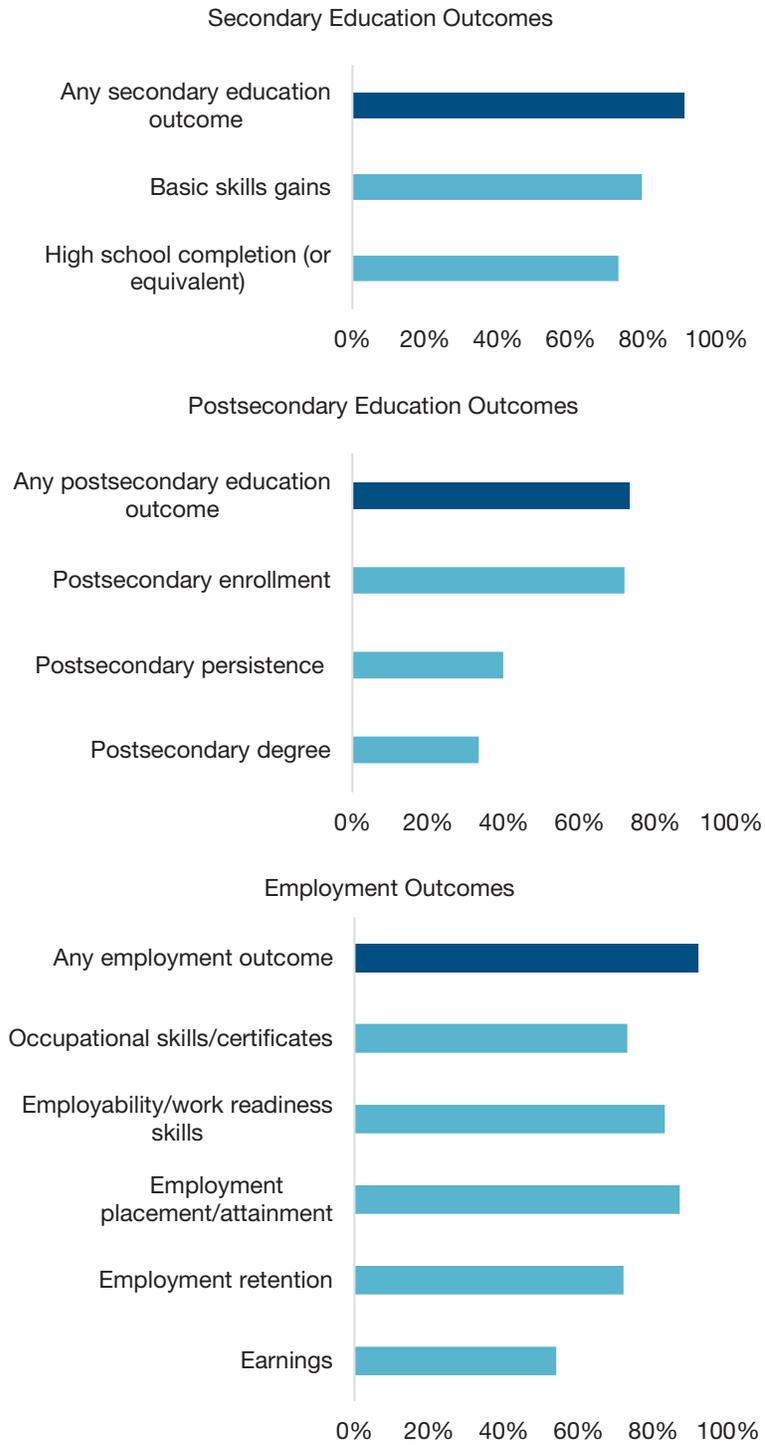
SOURCE: Spring 2021 Qualitative Questionnaire of Compendium Programs

supporting out-of-school and out-of-work youth (see Appendix B for a full listing of practices and their definitions). These services fell into four categories: secondary education services, postsecondary education services, employment services, and support services. The list included both services known to be common, as well as those that were identified as "innovative," meaning that they were not believed to be widespread but there was reason to believe they might be beneficial. Programs tend to offer a range of services to meet individual needs.[13] Since the goal was to understand which services were intended for all young people in the program and which were offered to only those who needed them, programs were asked to distinguish between services that are core practices, offered as needed, or rarely or never offered (see Box 3).[14] On average, programs identified that they provided an average of 13 of the 31 services as a core practice, meaning they intend for all participants to receive the service. Most programs had core practices in each category. A share of programs did not have a core practice in every category; this was most often true in secondary education practices (see Figure 4). In this section, findings are grouped by service category.

BOX 3

Types of Practices in the Qualitative Questionnaire

Recipients of the compendium questionnaire were given these definitions of types of practices:

**Core practice:** a service that the majority of participants in the program are expected to receive as part of the program.

As-needed basis: a service that participants in the program can receive as part of the program or in response to an emergent need, but it is not expected that all participants would receive the service. You should select this option when the service is readily available to participants who want or need it.

Rarely or never: a service not provided to participants, or only provided on rare occasions.

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13. Ross and Svajlenka (2016); Mendelson et al. (2018); Loprest, Spaulding, and Nightingale (2019).

14. Many programs partner with others to provide services. Programs were instructed to answer these questions from the perspective of a participant in their program, regardless of whether they received the service directly from the program or from a partner.

FIGURE 4

Co-occurence of Practices, by Category

Percentage of Programs with Secondary Education
Services, with Services in Other Categories

Percentage of Programs with Postsecondary Education
Services, with Services in Other Categories
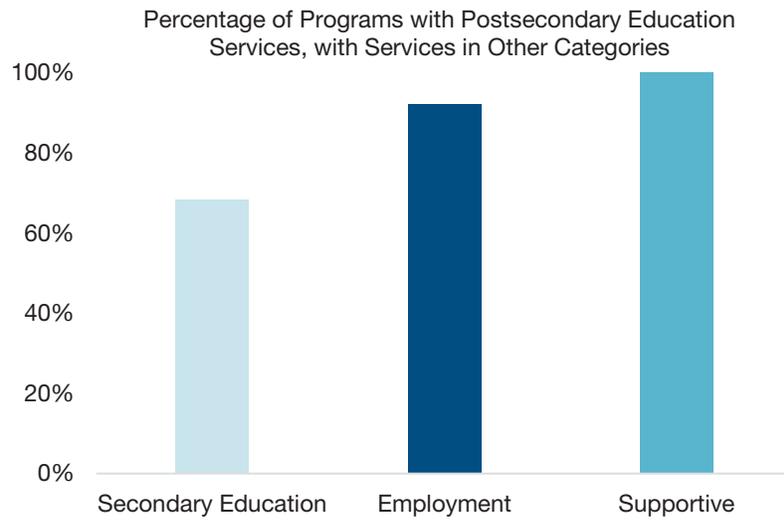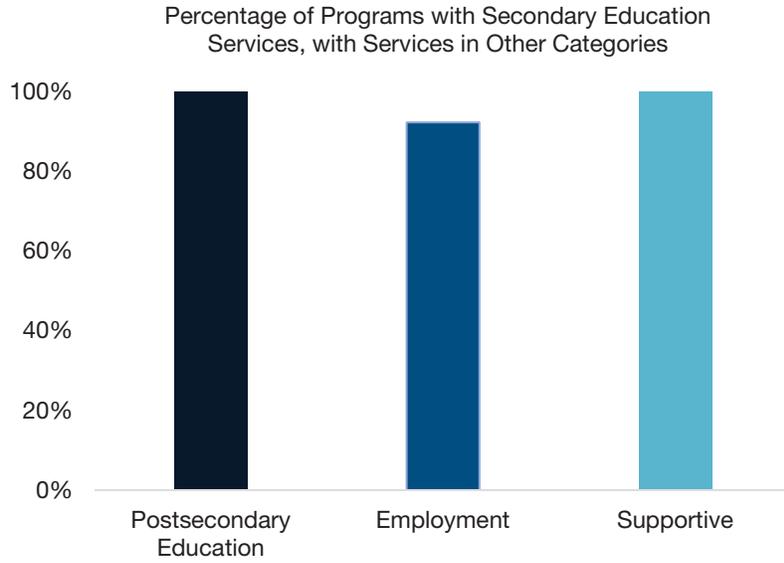
(continued)

FIGURE 4 (continued)

Percentage of Programs with Employment Services,
with Services in Other Categories
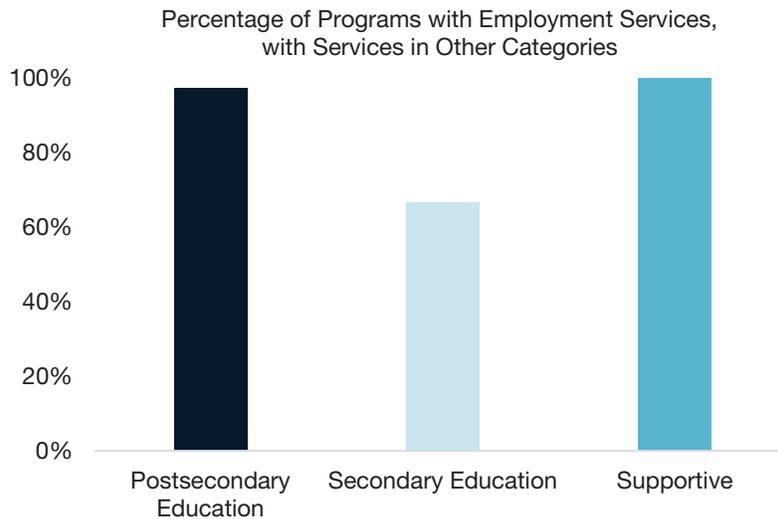
SOURCE: Spring 2021 Qualitative Questionnaire of Compendium
Programs.

NOTE: This figure shows the percent of programs that reported one or
more of the practices in each category as a core practice.

Secondary and Postsecondary Education

■ **Most programs provided both secondary and postsecondary education services, providing
some services as core practices and others as needed.**

Programs were asked about their services in both secondary and postsecondary education (see
Figure 5).[15] Two-thirds of programs offered **secondary education services** as core practices.
About 40 percent of programs reported offering **adult basic education**, **high school equivalency
(HSE) test prep**, and **reengagement with high school** as core practices.[16] Another 40 percent
offered these on an as-needed basis. **High school classes** were offered as a core practice for
about 30 percent of programs and as needed by another 40 percent of programs. Few programs
(10 percent) offered **dual enrollment** in high school and college as a core practice, though 44

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15. Secondary education services are those aimed at helping participants obtain their high school diploma or
     equivalent. Postsecondary refers to education and training services after high school completion.

16. Adult basic education was defined in the questionnaire as classes or tutoring for basic skills or Adult
     Basic Education. High school equivalency test prep was defined as classes or preparation for a high
     school equivalency (GED, HiSET, TASC, NEDP). Reengagement with high school was defined as services
     to reconnect participants who did not complete high school to a high school completion program.

FIGURE 5

Percentage of Programs with Education Services, by Type

Secondary Education Services

Postsecondary Education Services

■ Core practice   ■ As-needed basis   ■ Rarely or never
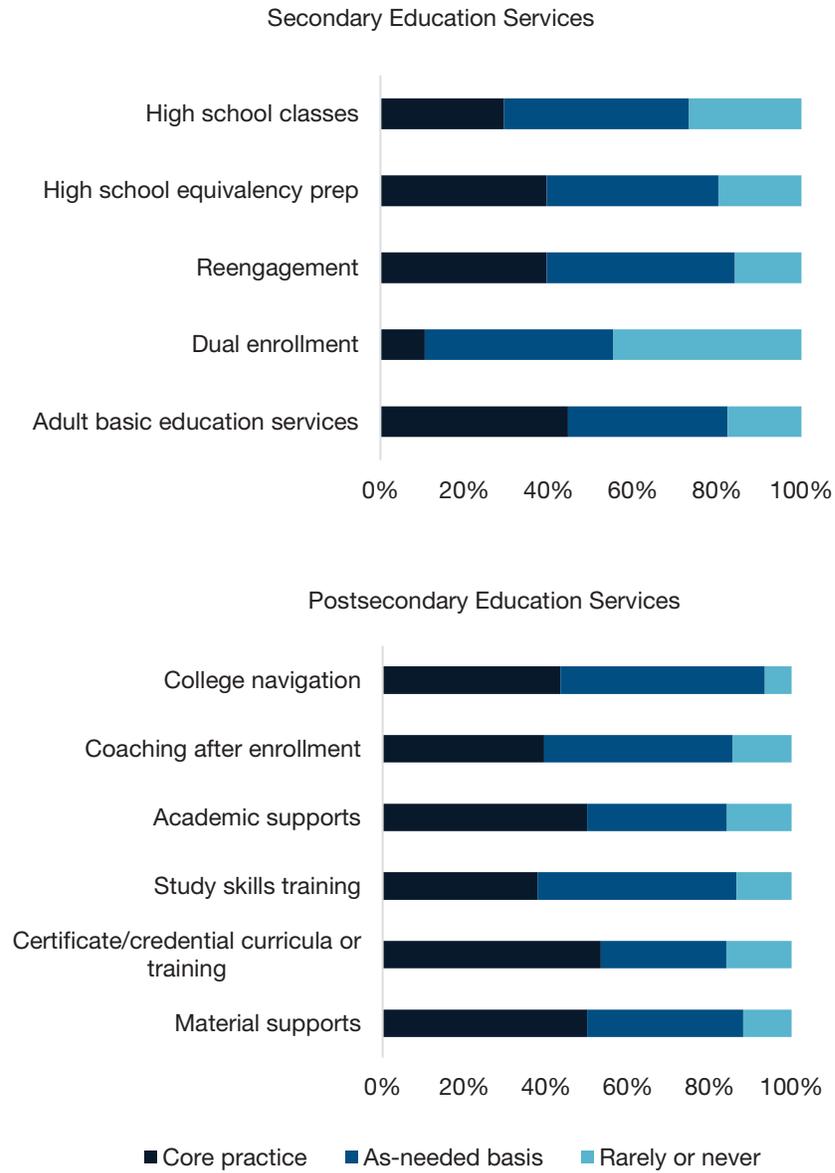
SOURCE: Spring 2021 Qualitative Questionnaire of Compendium Programs

percent offered it as needed.[17] Although dual enrollment has been found to have a positive effect on a variety of secondary and postsecondary educational outcomes, dual enrollment programs primarily operate in schools; young people who are not in school may not be eligible for many of these programs.[18] Most programs that offered high school classes as a core practice also offered preparation for a high school equivalency; this pattern holds when these practices are offered on an as-needed basis. This suggests that programs may take advantage of flexibility in high school completion options to offer multiple pathways to high school completion within the same program.

Virtually all (97 percent) programs offered **postsecondary education services** as core practices. More than half (56 percent) of programs offered **academic supports for postsecondary education** as a core practice.[19] About half of programs offered **certificate/credential curricula and/or training** and **material supports** as core practices.[20] While the proportion of programs reporting postsecondary practices as a core practice or on an as-needed basis was slightly different for each practice, these services were available in some way across programs at similar rates. Only a few programs reported rarely or never offering these practices, showing that programs offer a wide array of postsecondary education services to meet many participant needs.

Two-thirds of the programs offered both secondary and postsecondary services, enabling them to enroll and serve a diverse set of youth. It was less common for programs to narrow their focus to just secondary education or just postsecondary.

Comparing the eligibility requirements for a program with the services they reported provides additional insight into how programs structured their services. Most of the programs that required that participants do not have a high school degree or equivalent upon entering the program offered high school classes or equivalency prep as core practices, and most programs that required that a participant not be in school offered reengagement services as a core practice. However, many programs that did *not* have these as eligibility requirements still offered these services, mostly on an as-needed basis. This highlights that many programs were meeting young people where they are and working to provide them with the education services they need.

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17. Dual enrollment was defined in the questionnaire as dual enrollment in high school and college programs.

18. Dual enrollment programs were found to have positive effects on students' degree attainment (college), college access and enrollment, credit accumulation, completing high school, and general academic achievement (in high school), with a medium to large extent of evidence. What Works Clearinghouse (2017).

19. Academic supports for postsecondary education were defined in the questionnaire as academic advising, tutoring, developmental education/remedial education, and mentorship/general advising.

20. Certificate/credential curricula and/or training were defined in the questionnaire to include those that are industry recognized or not. Training and material supports were defined as financial aid advising, scholarship fund, and other financial assistance.

Job and Career Training and Job Placement

■ **Most programs reported having both work readiness services to prepare young people for the labor market and job placement supports to give young people skills to gain a foothold in the labor market and access to quality jobs.**

Programs were asked about job training and placement practices in three categories: career education and work readiness, job training, and job placement. Figure 6 shows the services offered by programs in these three areas. Most programs (92 percent) reported that at least one of the 11 practices asked about was a core practice. Most commonly, programs reported that **career exploration or counseling** (82 percent) and **work readiness** (85 percent) were core practices. Job placement activities were also common; 70 percent of programs offered **placement or referrals to jobs** and **supports to maintain employment** as core practices. Forty-two percent of programs said they **provide supports for employers** as a core practice, echoing an increasing body of research describing employer engagement in youth workforce development.[21]

The majority of programs reported that their job training programming went beyond work readiness and job placement supports to give young people skills to gain a foothold in the labor market and access to quality jobs. Sixty percent of programs reported providing training in **occupational skills or sector-based training.** Half of programs reported providing **on-the-job training, pre-apprenticeships,** or **apprenticeships.** A quarter of programs offered **entrepreneurial skills** as a core practice, though 54 percent offered it on an as-needed basis. Given the nature of the labor market, increases in self-employment and entrepreneurship have the potential to be a pathway to disrupting inequity, enhancing economic self-determination and wealth-building in low-income communities.[22] Not including entrepreneurial skills on a broader basis may be a missed opportunity for programs.

Young people who are disconnected often lack work experience, which can hinder their ability to find and retain jobs.[23] One strategy programs employ is to provide participants with paid work experience to build their skills and resumes and to provide for their financial needs. Fifty-five percent of programs reported they provided some sort of **temporary or transitional work** to participants as a core practice. This could include supported employment, transitional jobs, or internships.[24] **Internships** were offered as a core practice by 33 percent of programs, 41 percent of programs offered **transitional jobs** as a core practice, and 10 percent offered **supported employment** as a core practice.

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21. Spaulding and Martin-Caughey (2015); Taylor (2011); New Ways to Work (n.d.); Commonwealth Corporation (2013).

22. Klein and Nemoy (2019).

23. Liu (2018); McKechnie (2015).

24. Supported employment was defined in the questionnaire as paid employment with support for those with severe disabilities. Transitional jobs were defined as temporary paid work experiences for those who have difficulty attaining and retaining employment.

FIGURE 6

Percentage of Programs with Employment Services, by Type

Career Education and Work Readiness Services

Job Training Services

Job Placement Services

■ Core practice ■ As needed basis ■ Rarely or never
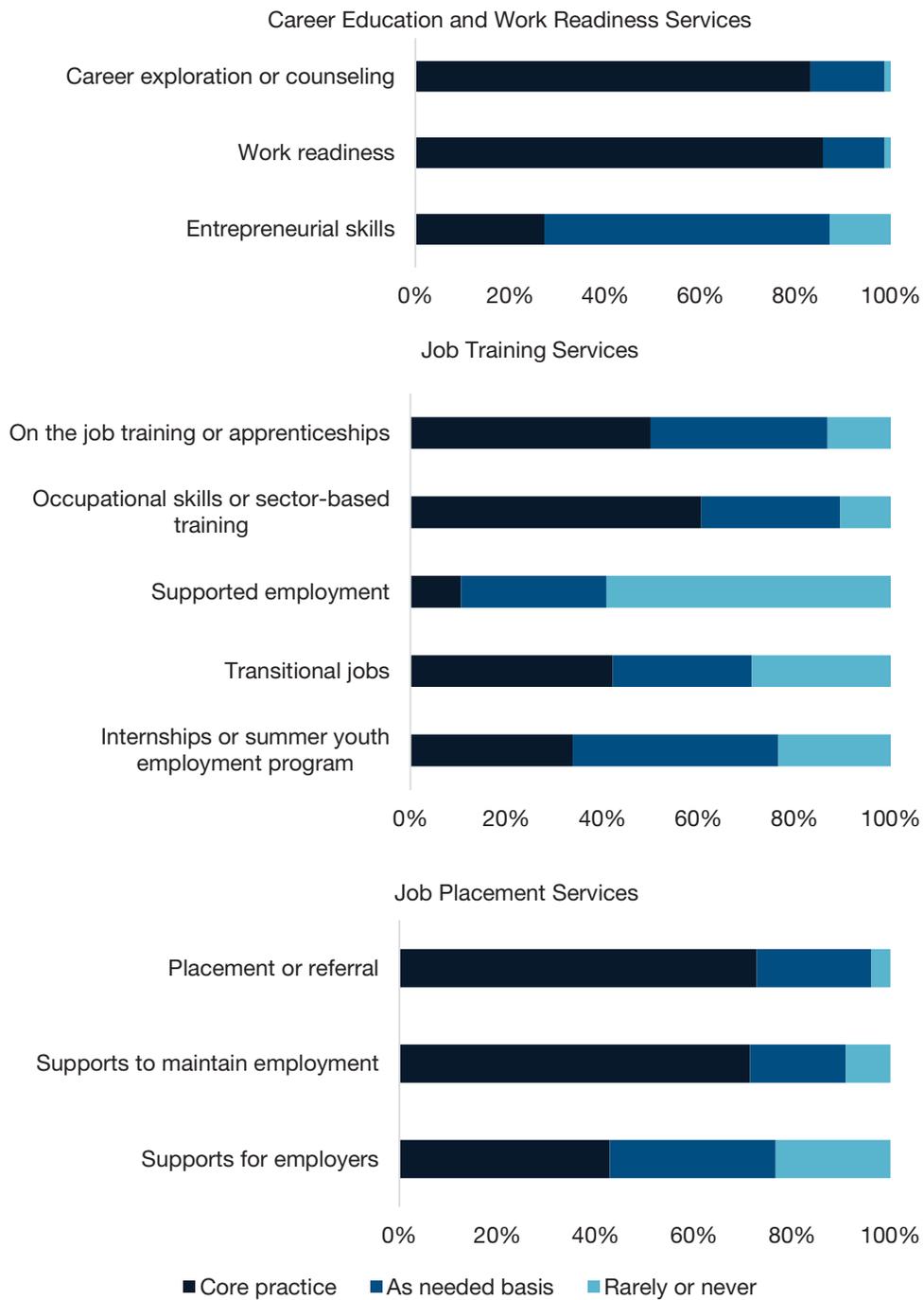
SOURCE: Spring 2021 Qualitative Questionnaire of Compendium Programs.

Support Services

■ **A high percentage of programs provide support services either as a core practice or on an as-needed basis, suggesting that programs focus on helping young people overcome barriers to entering education or employment.**

Young people who are disconnected often face barriers to entering education or employment, so it is critical for them to have additional supports to help them remain engaged in services. Figure 7 shows how programs responded to a question about how central specific support services were to the programs. One of the most important supports is **connection to a caring adult,** a core practice employed by all but one program.[25] Providing or connecting young people with **mental health services** was a core practice of 40 percent of the programs, with an additional 54 percent of programs offering this service on an as-needed basis.

Programs tended to offer many support services on an as-needed basis. Experts interviewed for this project noted that these supports were essential. Research shows that programs often offer comprehensive supports for young people within a suite of program services and via referrals.[26] Given the individual, community, and systemic factors that cause disconnection, supportive services are a response among programs to address the structural and individual barriers many youth face in reconnecting to school and work.[27] Offering supports is not synonymous with receiving them, and studies have shown that young people may face challenges related to accessing these services.[28]

Across all support services, most programs said that these services were available on an as-needed basis. Some support services were more common as core practices than others. **Transportation supports** was a core practice for 60 percent of programs. This may be because transportation is the most direct service needed to participate in the programs, school, or work; youth cannot participate if they cannot get there. Lack of transportation can severely limit a young person's opportunities.[29] **Follow-up services** were also provided by most programs (69 percent). Follow-up services can help support a young person after they have completed a program, providing a continued connection to a caring adult who can help navigate barriers they may encounter to help them persist towards their goals. Follow-up services may include continued access to services or staff after the completion of the program. Additionally, some funding streams, including WIOA, require programs follow up with participants to collect information on their outcomes.[30]

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25. Hair et al. (2009); Foster et al. (2017).

26. Treskon (2016).

27. Loprest, Spaulding, and Nightingale (2019).

28. Wiegand et al. (2015); Treskon, Millenky, and Freedman (2017).

29. Lewis (2019).

30. Employment and Training Administration (n.d.).

FIGURE 7

Percent of Programs with Support Services, by Type
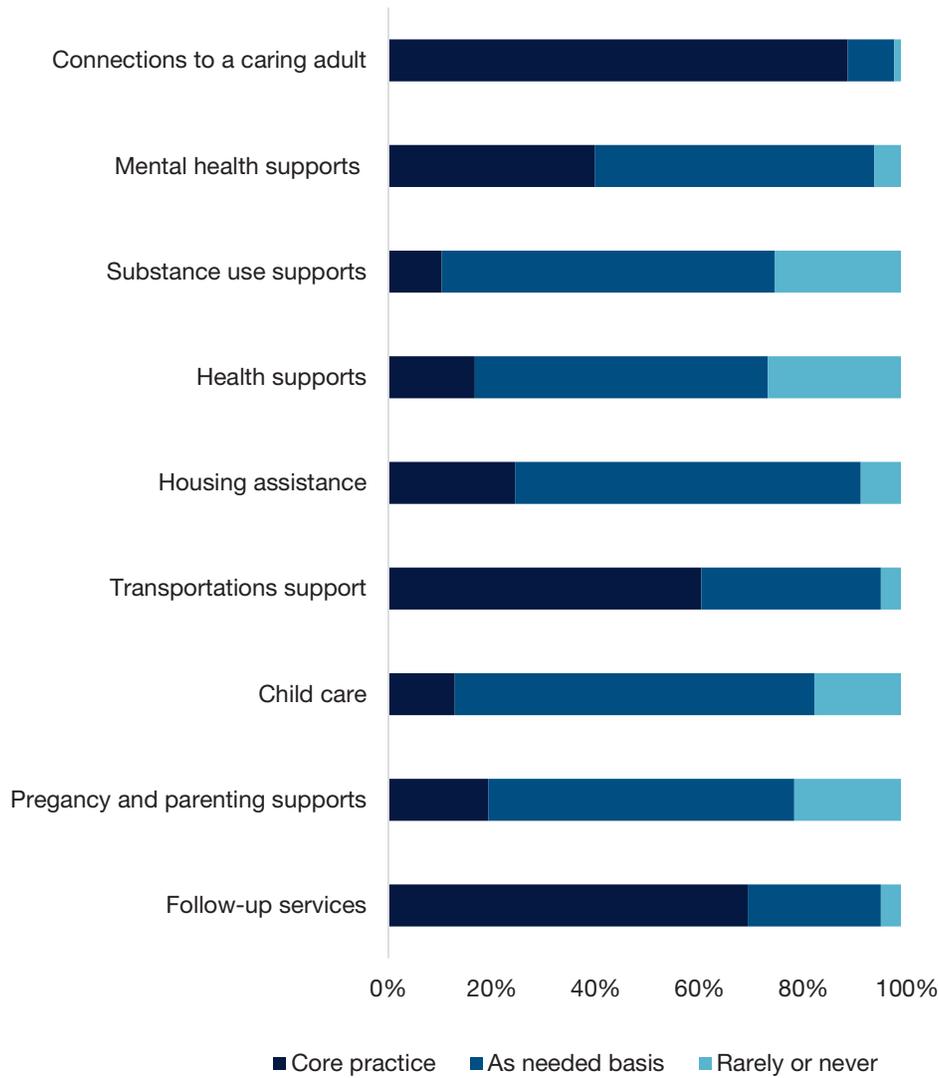
SOURCE: Spring 2021 Qualitative Questionnaire of Compendium Programs

These findings suggest that programs that responded to the questionnaire are operating in service-rich environments where they can provide, either directly or through partners, many types of supports to young people. Still, around a quarter of programs said they rarely or never provided some of the support services to participants, most commonly **substance use** (24 percent), **health supports** (26 percent), and **pregnancy and parenting supports** (21 percent). Looking forward, there is an opportunity to learn about how these programs deliver comprehensive supports, the extent to which the services are used by young people, and why some programs do not have comprehensive supports and how they might build them.

Program Implementation Practices

While the previous section describes what services are available to participants, implementation practices refer to the overall approach or strategies programs use in the delivery of services. The qualitative questionnaire asked whether a particular practice was or was not a primary practice of the program model. Figure 8 shows the programs' responses about their implementation practices.

Percent of Programs with Implementation Practices, by Type

Youth Development Approaches

Racial Equity Practices

■ Primary practice of the program model ■ Not a primary practice of the program model
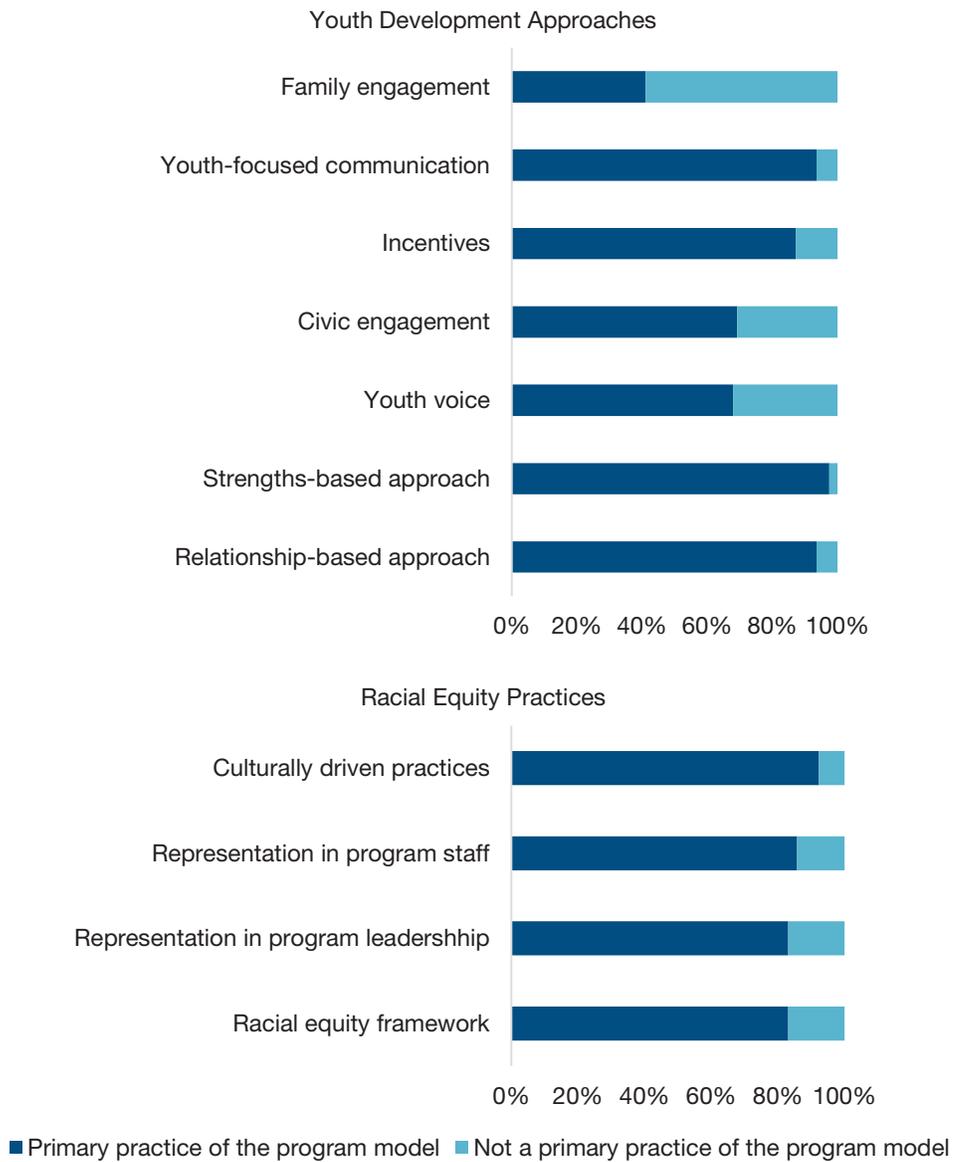
(continued)

FIGURE 8 (continued)

Other Implementation Practices

Partners in the local community

Collective impact

Data sharing agreements

Structured employer engagement framework

Career pathways and career and technical education

Concurrent education and employment

Trauma-informed care

Wraparound model

Restorative justice

Two-generation approach

Family engagement

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

■ Primary practice of the program model ■ Not a primary practice of the program model

SOURCE: Spring 2021 Qualitative Questionnaire of Compendium Programs

NOTE: "Other Implementation Practices" includes a range of practices related to the way that programs might approach their work with young people.

- **All programs reported employing at least one youth development practice in their delivery of services, such as a strengths-based approach or youth-focused communications. Programs also often employed practices required by WIOA funding, as well as community partnerships or collaboration. Almost all programs used at least one racial equity practice, such as having a racial equity framework and diverse representation in program leadership and staff.**

All programs reported using at least one of the seven youth development practices, and each used an average of five as a primary practice.[31] Common practices, used by at least 80 percent of programs, included a **strengths-based approach, relationship-based approach, youth-focused communication,** and **incentives.**[32] Least common was **family engagement,** which 41 percent of programs reported as a primary practice. Looking at other implementation approaches, research finds that youth who are not working or in school, including youth involved in child welfare and justice systems, are also disproportionately likely to have experienced trauma and/or be at risk for experiencing trauma.[33] Eighty-five percent of programs indicated that they were implementing a **trauma-informed approach**. **Two-generation approaches** were uncommon, with 23 percent of programs reporting them as a primary practice.[34] Thirty-eight percent of programs reported **restorative justice,** a community-based approach to responding to instances of rule-breaking, as a primary practice.[35]

The questionnaire asked programs if they used specific approaches to providing education and employment training. Most programs (65 percent) said they offer **education concurrently and contextually with training** for specific occupations. Most programs also provided participants with **local labor market information** (82 percent). Most programs (73 percent) said **career pathways or career and technical education** were central to their model. Note that these may be common because they are included in the 14 requirements under WIOA funding.[36] These types of training practices were identified by experts interviewed for this project as innovative, noting the importance of providing young people with cohesive pathways that tie together education and viable careers.

Although the compendium is focused on programs providing direct services to young people, these programs may also be part of local efforts to effect change through system-level reforms. The questionnaire asked about how programs engaged and partnered within their community.

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31. Dion (2013).

32. Strengths-based approach was defined in the questionnaire as strength-based approaches to assessment and goal-setting. Examples of relationship-based approaches were dedicated adult relationships or peer learning. The definiton of youth-focused communication included texting, use of apps, or other forms of technology. Incentives were defined as incentives for participation, including financial, attendance monitoring, and intervention.

33. Casanueva, Dolan, and Smith (2014).

34. Two-generation approaches were defined in the questionnaire as providing services to a parenting participant and their child.

35. Development Services Group (2021).

36. Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014, Pub. L. No. 113–128, 128 Stat. 1425. Website: https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-113publ128/pdf/PLAW-113publ128.pdf.

Most programs (94 percent) reported **local community partners** as part of their programming; it is likely that these community partners help provide the support services described above. Most programs (72 percent) identified that they were part of a **collective impact approach** around opportunity youth.[37] Sixty-four percent said they had **data-sharing agreements or processes** with education and workforce system partners.

Almost all programs (96 percent) reported having at least one **racial equity** practice, which include having a racial equity framework, representation of participant demographics in program leadership, representation of participant demographics in program staff, and culturally driven practices. All these practices were widely implemented; each practice was a primary practice for more than 80 percent of programs.

Staff Training

- **Most programs reported training all or some staff in their program model, youth development practices, and racial equity practices.**

Almost all programs (86 percent) trained all staff on their program model. Seventy-two percent of programs trained all staff on youth development approaches. Notably, 73 percent of programs trained all staff and 24 percent of programs trained some staff in racial equity. A smaller share of programs (58 percent) trained all staff in trauma-informed care approaches. In sum, most programs intended to train in areas that have been identified as important for working with young people.[38]

Program Data and Evaluation

- **Nearly all programs reported collecting data about participation, employment outcomes, and education outcomes, while far fewer have been part of a formal study or evaluation.**

Nearly all programs reported collecting data about participants: 96 percent about participation, 88 percent about employment outcomes, and 91 percent about education outcomes. Given that many were funded by public sources, programs were likely required to collect some information about participants and outcomes for grant reporting requirements. Twenty-nine percent of programs have been a part of an evaluation that met the requirements for inclusion in the evidence gap map. While most programs collected data, indicating a capacity for assessing participant outcomes, a much smaller share of programs have been part of formal evaluation efforts. Of course, not all programs can participate in formal evaluations (often due to resource constraints), and programs may employ practices that are proven effective through evaluations of other programs.

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37. Collective impact approach was defined in the questionnaire as community collaboration around opportunity youth.

38. Dion (2013); Redd, Moore, and Andrews (2020); Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs (2015).

CONCLUSION

The compendium finds that programs seek to serve the diverse group of young people who are disconnected from school and work by providing many services as part of their core practices, but also offering many more services on an as-needed basis. Of course, a program alone cannot address the issues that lead to disconnection or mitigate all disparities in society. Systemic challenges exist beyond the reach of programs, including structural barriers and discrimination in the education system and labor market and social determinants of health. However, the wide scope of these programs suggests that they attempt to be as comprehensive as possible.

Many of the practices identified as essential by experts interviewed for this project were common among the programs. These include youth development approaches that focus on positive adult-youth relationships, career pathways approaches, and comprehensive supports. The compendium suggests that program staff and experts in the field are largely in agreement about which practices best serve this population.

The Reconnecting Youth project's companion to this compendium, the evidence gap map, examines the extent of research available about the practices used by the programs in the compendium. Comparing its findings with the compendium reveals directions for future research.[39]

- Some of the practices, such as preparation or instruction for high school equivalency, work readiness training, and supports for basic needs, that were common in the compendium have a large body of research behind them already; practitioners, policymakers, and researchers can use this information to learn how best to build strong programs for young people.

- However, other common practices in the compendium, such as employer engagement and career pathways approaches, have limited evidence with this population, suggesting priority areas for further research.

- Some innovative practices were not common in the compendium or the evidence gap map but have been found to be effective serving other populations and may benefit opportunity youth. These practices include two-generation models, entrepreneurship training, and dual enrollment. The same can be said of expanding service providers to include more community colleges and employers, which were not common practices in the compendium.

- Most youth-serving programs target relatively short-term outcomes. More longitudinal research can help understand how to support young people who are reconnecting as they advance along education and career pathways.

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39. *Reconnecting Young People to School and Work: A Map of Evidence and Opportunities* provides a more detailed discussion comparing the compendium and the evidence gap map.

A

Program Search and
Qualitative Questionnaire

PROGRAM SEARCH

The team identified programs for the compendium through a systemic process to identify potential programs for inclusion and verify they met the scope criteria. The team used many sources to identify programs through an intentional effort to identify programs that reflected diverse geographies, funding sources, and networks. Key sources included scans of research and policy organizations' websites for relevant projects and citations; federal agency websites for their grant programs and research; foundation websites for lists of their grant recipients; and websites of well-known programs for other relevant programs with which they partner. The team also issued a call for recommendations on social media and through professional networks, e-newsletters, and *Federal Register* notice. In the initial stage of the search, the team identified 204 programs that met stage 1 scope criteria: programs that currently operated in the United States, provided direct services, and described WIOA OSY-eligible young people as a target population. This information was gathered from programs' websites or other materials about them, such as annual reports, news articles, or research reports.

Since it was not known how many programs would be identified, the team used a two-stage process to apply scope, which left open the option of narrowing or expanding scope after an initial set of programs was identified using the stage 1 scope criteria. Once the initial list of programs was identified, the team further evaluated the 204 programs against the stage 2 scope criteria to determine if they 1) served a "significant share" of WIOA OSY-eligible young people (defined as about 25 percent of participants serviced), 2) had been operating for at least one year, and 3) targeted education and employment outcomes. While the stage 1 scope criteria were relatively easy to apply based on publicly available information, the team encountered difficulty applying the stage 2 scope criteria. In applying the stage 2 scope criteria, the team was able to fully verify scope with publicly available information for 78 programs; however, the team was unable to verify some of the scope elements for many of the other programs due to limited available information.

Though the team had initially planned to gather information for the compendium from publicly available sources, the search process revealed important differences in the type and detail of information available about programs. Using only publicly available information to develop the compendium would have resulted in a compendium that only included programs that had the resources for a robust web presence, which would have resulted in a compendium that did not reflect the diversity of programs operating. In June 2020, the team held a convening with federal staff representing the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs and non-federal staff subject matter experts, to advise on various aspects of the project. The experts recommended that the team gather information from programs directly to support better representation of programs. The team subsequently developed and fielded a qualitative questionnaire (described below) to gather information from programs. In all, 114 programs were invited to complete the questionnaire. This included 78 programs that met all scope in the initial search, 30 programs that had scope elements that that team was unable to verify from publicly available information, and six additional programs that had been submitted to the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation through a request for information in the *Federal Register*.

The program search sought to be representative in its approach and identify programs that may not be well-known, either because they operate only locally, serve a small number of participants, or have not been subject to evaluation or otherwise have not received publicity. However, the search process still required that programs have some online presence to vet the stage 1 scope criteria. Thus, programs that do not have an online presence are not included in the compendium. The compendium has 78 programs, and it is not possible to know what share of eligible programs operating in the United States were captured because the number of programs that meet the scope criteria is not known.

QUALITATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE

As discussed in the report, to create the questionnaire, the team developed a comprehensive list of common and innovative services and practices from prior studies of programs, expert interviews, and the convening referenced above. The initial list was developed based on the team's existing knowledge of these practices, as well as interviews with subject matter experts. The list was further refined after receiving feedback from both federal and non-federal experts in the field during the June 2020 convening. The finalized list of services and practices became the basis of the questionnaire. The questionnaire asked programs whether they offer or implement each of these services or practices. It also asked for program characteristics, which allow for better understanding of the types of programs; experts also advised which characteristics to include.

To ensure that the questionnaire and its terms made sense to programs, a sample of six programs representing a variety of types of programs were administered the questionnaire as a pilot. The team adjusted the instrument afterwards based on feedback from the pilot programs, particularly the practice categories, in order to best align the instrument with the definitions and structure of programs in the field.

The questionnaire was administered online and distributed via email. The questionnaire was sent via email to contacts for the program listed on the website; wherever possible, the team sent the same questionnaire to a second contact at the program to increase the visibility of the questionnaire within the program. Programs received individual follow-up via email and calls after the initial email invitation if they did not respond to the questionnaire. It was designed to take programs approximately one hour to complete, which they could do collaboratively with other staff at their organization and over multiple sittings. Seventy-eight programs out of 114 who met scope criteria from the search completed the questionnaire and are included in the compendium. Of the 36 programs that did not complete the questionnaire, five were no longer in operation and 11 were completely non-responsive, meaning they did not respond to emails or calls or open the survey link.

APPENDIX

B

Practices as Defined by the Qualitative Questionnaire

PRACTICE IN COMPENDIUM	LANGUAGE FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE
Secondary Education	
High school classes	Classes towards a high school diploma
High school equivalency test prep	Classes or preparation for a high school equivalency (GED, HiSET, TASC, NEDP)
Reengagement	Services to reconnect participants who did not complete high school to a high school completion program
Dual enrollment	Dual enrollment in high school and college programs
Adult Basic Education	Classes or tutoring for basic skills or Adult Basic Education
Postsecondary Education	
College navigation	Pre-enrollment supports for transition to postsecondary (such as help selecting and applying to colleges)
Coaching after enrollment	Postsecondary education/support coaching after enrollment
Academic supports	Academic support (academic advising, tutoring, developmental education/remedial education, mentorship/general advising)
Certificate/credential or training	Certificate/credential curricula and/or training (industry recognized or not)
Study skills	Study skills training
Material supports	Material supports (financial aid advising, scholarship fund, other financial assistance)
Employment Practices	
Career exploration or counseling	Career awareness/exploration or career counseling
Work readiness	Work readiness training, soft skills training, job shadowing
Entrepreneurial skills	Entrepreneurial skills training
On-the-job training or apprenticeships	On-the-job training, pre-apprenticeships, and/or apprenticeships
Occupational skills or sector-based training	Occupational skills and/or sector-based training
Supported employment	Supported employment (paid employment with support for those with severe disabilities)
Transitional jobs	Transitional jobs (temporary paid work experiences for those who have difficulty attaining and retaining employment)
Internships	Internships and/or summer youth employment
Job placement or referrals	Job placement (information, referrals)
Supports to maintain employment	Supports to maintain employment (counseling to navigate barriers to persisting in jobs, coaching on resolving workplace challenges)

PRACTICE IN COMPENDIUM	LANGUAGE FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE
Supports for employers	Supports for employers (training, check-ins with supervisors)

Supportive Services

Caring adult connections	Connections to a caring adult (e.g., case management, adult mentors)
Mental health supports	Mental health supports (e.g., counseling, therapy, mental health treatment)
Substance abuse supports	Substance abuse treatment and prevention
Health supports	Health supports (e.g., reproductive health education, primary care, dental care)
Pregnancy and parenting supports	Pregnancy and parenting supports (e.g., prenatal care supports, parenting education, nutritional counseling/benefits)
Child care	Child care (e.g., child care referrals/supports, on-site child care)
Housing assistance	Housing assistance
Transportation	Transportation assistance (e.g., bus tickets, gas cards)
Follow-up services	Post-program supports/follow-up services (e.g., continued access to services or staff after program completion)

Implementation Practices

Education and training offered concurrently	Education is offered concurrently within and in the same context as workforce preparation and training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster
Labor market information on in-demand jobs	Participants are provided with labor market and employment information about in-demand industry sectors or occupations available in the local area
Career pathways or career and technical education	Career pathways model or career and technical education
Trauma-informed care approach	Trauma-informed care approach
Two-generation approach	Two-generation approaches, providing services to a parenting participant and their child
Wrap-around model	Wrap-around model, with services offered for the home, school, work, and community to help meet needs.
Restorative justice	Restorative justice
Structured employer engagement framework	Structured employer engagement framework
Data sharing agreements	Data sharing agreements or processes with education and workforce system partners
Collective impact approach	Participates in a collective impact approach or community collaboration around opportunity youth

PRACTICE IN COMPENDIUM	LANGUAGE FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE
Partners in the local community	Partners within the community, including businesses, organizations, agencies, and individuals to support youth
Youth voice	Youth voice and leadership opportunities (e.g., youth governance, youth councils, youth committees)
Civic engagement	Opportunities for civic engagement, community service, and/or advocacy
Relationship-based approach	Relationship-based approach (e.g., dedicated adult relationships, peer learning)
Incentives	Incentives for participation, including financial, attendance monitoring, and intervention
Youth-focused communication	Youth-focused communication (e.g., texting, use of apps or other forms of technology)
Strengths-based approach	Strengths-based approaches to assessment and goal-setting
Family engagement	Family engagement

Recruitment Practices

Street outreach	Street outreach, relentless outreach, and/or targeted outreach to groups with less access to opportunity
Referrals from other organizations	Voluntary referrals from social service, education, workforce development, and/or other agencies
Reengagement network	Part of a reengagement network
Court referrals	Referrals from the justice system

Enrollment Practices

Defined process	Defined enrollment process that is the same for all applicants
Staff support	Staff support for completing enrollment paperwork and steps, such as support for accessing documents needed for enrollment
Formal assessment	Formal assessment (needs, strengths, risks, or skills-based)
Minimum skills or credentials	Minimum basic skills test scores or educational credentials
Cohort model	Cohort model (participants entering the program at the same time and moving through the program together)

Racial Equity Practices

Culturally driven practices	Program uses culturally driven practices
Representation in program staff	Program ensures representation of participant demographics in program staff
Representation in program leadership	Program ensures representation of participants demographics in program leadership
Racial equity framework	Program/organization uses a racial equity framework

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