

PROVIDING TRUE OPPORTUNITY FOR OPPORTUNITY YOUTH

Promising Practices and Principles for Helping Youth Facing Barriers to Employment

May 2015, Research Brief

Many “opportunity youth”—youth who are not working or in school—would benefit substantially from gaining work experience but need help overcoming barriers to employment and accessing the labor market. In response, advocates, policy makers, and program providers are driving a growing national movement toward better helping opportunity youth succeed in employment.

Those opportunity youth facing the most significant challenges, such as extreme poverty, homelessness, and justice system involvement, often need even more intensive assistance in entering and keeping employment, and are at risk of being left behind even by employment programs that are specifically designed to serve opportunity youth. There is limited evidence supporting best practices in employment services for these young people, although numerous program providers are developing and implementing innovative techniques for helping those youth facing the most barriers to enter and succeed in employment.

In order to fill this gap and equip the field to better serve these young people, this paper builds on the research literature with extensive interviews with employment program providers who have had success in helping the most vulnerable opportunity youth succeed in the workforce. Six principles for effectively serving these youth are identified. Further research, funding, and replication are necessary to test and refine these principles in order to ensure that efforts to connect opportunity youth to employment do not leave behind those youth who need assistance the most.

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National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity

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Our national initiatives include:

The National Transitional Jobs Network (NTJN)

The National Center on Employment & Homelessness (NCEH)

Black Men Overcoming Barriers & Realizing Employment (B.MORE) Initiative

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Introduction

Now is an especially opportune and critical time to identify, test, and implement strategies and promising practices for helping the most disadvantaged and vulnerable young people succeed in the workforce. Prolonged youth unemployment, combined with recent changes in national workforce development policy and federal, state, municipal, and philanthropic investment and interest has sparked momentum and support for increasing employment among youth nationwide.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) seeks to ensure that the nation's public workforce system is accountable to jobseekers facing barriers to employment, especially youth who are out of school and experiencing multiple barriers to employment. Likewise, the Performance Partnership Pilots for Disconnected Youth initiative allows increased funding flexibility to test innovations to improve education and employment outcomes for youth in several states, and the My Brother's Keeper initiative has spurred interest nationally in economic opportunity for young men of color. With this momentum it is essential to ensure that the youth facing the most significant barriers to employment are not left behind and that the strategies put in place are effective for all young jobseekers regardless of their strengths and needs.

This paper focuses on promising employment principles, practices, and innovations targeting the estimated 6.7 million young people broadly characterized as opportunity youth.¹ This group is most commonly defined as youth who have never been in or are under-attached to school and/or work after the age of 16.² This paper gives special attention to employment principles and practices for helping those opportunity youth who face the most significant barriers to employment—those who are involved in the justice system, experiencing homelessness, LGBTQ, transitioning out of child welfare/foster care services, experiencing poverty, or living in areas with high rates of violent crime.

Because there is limited experimental evidence regarding specific practices and principles that are effective in delivering employment services to the most at-risk opportunity youth, this paper supplements a literature review with interviews and focus groups with providers that have demonstrated success in helping opportunity youth with significant barriers access and succeed in employment. Taken together, these sources of information identify common strategies and recommendations for practitioners, researchers, and policy makers.

I. The Impacts of Youth Employment and Unemployment

While youth overall struggle to connect to the labor market, the situation is considerably worse for opportunity youth facing multiple barriers to employment. Youth unemployment is associated with immediate and long-term negative outcomes, while having a paid job is can be particularly beneficial to opportunity youth. This section gives an overview of the impacts of youth employment and unemployment on young individuals, their families, and society.

The employment situation for youth remains bleak. As of July 2014, the height of the summer employment season, the unemployment rate for youth ages 16 to 24 was more than twice that of the general population (14.3 percent compared to 6.2 percent).⁴ Youth have experienced a precipitous decline in employment since 2000⁵—of all youth ages 16 to 24 who were not incarcerated or in other institutions, barely more than half (51.9 percent) were employed in July 2014 compared with 65 percent in 2000.⁶ Millions of young people want and need to work, but are unable to find jobs.

While youth across the board have struggled to gain a foothold in the labor market, the employment situation is considerably worse for opportunity youth. Opportunity youth are more likely to come from vulnerable populations and include youth with low educational attainment, youth experiencing or at-risk of homelessness, youth involved in the justice or child welfare systems, pregnant or parenting youth, young men of color, and LGBTQ youth, among others.

These youth face multiple barriers to successfully finding and keeping a job such as low literacy and numeracy skills, unstable housing, a criminal record, unaffordable childcare, or discriminatory hiring practices. For example:

- In 2010, youth without a high school diploma were four times as likely to be unemployed as their counterparts with a bachelor's degree or higher (33 percent compared to 8 percent).⁷
- Nearly one in four African-American youth is looking for a job but cannot find one.⁸
- Youth from low-income households have an employment rate 10 percentage points lower than those from higher income households.⁹
- By age 26, less than half of former foster youth were employed in 2010 compared to 80 percent of their peers nationally.¹⁰

Youth unemployment is associated with immediate and long-term negative outcomes, while having a paid job is important to an individual's social-emotional development and can be particularly beneficial to opportunity youth who have an increased need for social connection and income to support their basic needs.



Past Employment is Connected to Future Employment and Increased Earnings

Past employment is positively associated with future employment. Youth who are employed for some period of time in a given year are more likely to be employed the following year—and this probability increases with the number of weeks worked the previous year.¹¹ For example, one study found that high school seniors who worked 20 hours per week earned 20 percent more annually in the future.¹² Conversely, spells of unemployment at a young age are associated with a loss of earnings through the age of 31.¹³



Youth Employment Can Substantially Increase Family Income

Income earned by youth can go a long way toward increasing their household's financial stability. For example, youth from low-income households participating in a transitional jobs program in Chicago earned wages that comprised, on average, 78.5 percent of their household's income. What's more, over 60 percent of those youth were the sole earners in their household at the time of participation.¹⁴



Youth Employment Can Support Transitions to Education

Employment can serve as a conduit to education and training, connecting youth with opportunities they might not have had otherwise. For example, Job Corps participants receive nearly 1,000 additional hours of education or training compared to nonparticipants, the equivalent of about one additional year of high school.¹⁵ Research also shows that in comparison to other youth who have not finished high school, YouthBuild participants who have dropped out of high school are significantly more likely to obtain their high school diploma or GED.¹⁶

A Definition of Opportunity Youth

“Some opportunity youth are ‘chronic’: they have never been in school or work after the age of 16. Others are ‘under-attached’: despite some schooling and some work experience beyond 16, these youth have not progressed through college or secured a stable attachment to the labor market. We estimate a chronic youth population of 3.4 million and an under-attached opportunity youth population of 3.3 million. Both groups are failing to build an economic foundation for adult independence.”

– The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth, pg. 1



Employment Can Decrease Justice System Involvement

In 2011, law enforcement agencies arrested nearly 1.5 million youth under the age of 18¹⁷ and nearly 69,000 juveniles were held in residential placement facilities.¹⁸ While formerly incarcerated youth will undoubtedly struggle to find employment, rigorous program evaluations show that giving youth employment opportunities can decrease their criminal justice system involvement. For example, youth who participated in a paid summer jobs program in Chicago experienced a 43 percent decline in violent crime arrests compared to their nonparticipant peers.¹⁹ This finding aligns with evidence showing that Job Corps participants experience statistically significant reductions in arrest rates compared to nonparticipants.²⁰ Employment can also help reduce recidivism among young adults who have been incarcerated—among transitional jobs participants under 29 years old, re-incarceration rates were more than 10 percent lower than a control group.²¹



Employment Can Foster Health and Positive Relationships

Employment is positively correlated with physical and emotional health across the lifespan.²² Further, service providers often emphasize that opportunity youth need positive and healthy relationships in their lives and that internships and jobs provide an avenue for youth to foster such relationships. Relationships developed through employment programs expose youth to adults who can offer support and serve as role models.



Youth Employment Can Help Avoid Costs to Society

Youth unemployment has broad and costly implications for society. In terms of lost economic potential and higher government spending, the estimated cost of opportunity youth's disconnection from school and work is upwards of \$250 billion per year—or a loss of \$4.7 trillion over the lifetime of an opportunity youth cohort.²³



Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA

BEST PRACTICES IN YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

While there is little evidence regarding what employment program practices are most effective with opportunity youth, a number of best practices have been identified for helping *youth in general* enter employment.²⁴ These practices are somewhat distinct from service delivery practices for adult jobseekers. In general, success in youth employment programming is associated with:

- A holistic approach that provides comprehensive services;
 - Competent, well-trained staff members who can build relationships with participants and connections with employers;
 - Inclusion of both basic academic and employability skills training; and
 - Programming that is relevant to young people and responsive to their input.
- Offering retention follow-up services and financial incentives such as wages or stipends are also best practices.



POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Many youth employment programs also follow a set of principles known as Positive Youth Development (PYD). Rather than focus on correcting the personal shortcomings and deficiencies that are the seeming obstacles preventing youth from success, the theory of PYD takes a different approach.

PYD stresses the need to start with each youth as an individual with unique strengths and experiences, instead of beginning with a framework focused on what is wrong and needs to be fixed. This approach encourages positive adult/youth relationships that foster opportunities for youth to develop their skills and interests. It emphasizes acknowledgement of youth as partners in decision-making processes that allow them to take ownership and develop a strong sense of self-identity.²⁵

II. Six Practices, Principles, and Innovations to Guide Employment Programming for Opportunity Youth

Opportunity youth facing the most significant barriers to employment require considerations in employment programming beyond those of other young jobseekers. This section offers promising practices and guiding principles for the design, implementation, and improvement of employment services for especially vulnerable opportunity youth.

Opportunity youth, and especially those facing the most significant barriers to employment, require considerations in employment programming beyond those of young jobseekers more generally.

The following promising practices and guiding principles for the design, implementation, and improvement of employment services for opportunity youth are drawn from extensive interviews with providers of employment services to the most vulnerable opportunity youth. The recommended principles and practices were identified by multiple interviewees who arrived at these practices organically and independently of one another based on their knowledge, experiences, expertise, and trial-and-error innovation. The parallel emergence of these principles and practices among geographically diverse providers strengthens the likelihood of their general effectiveness.

While the recommended principles and practices may require more time and intensity than typical employment services in order to effectively address the barriers faced by many opportunity youth, it is important to implement these strategies within the context of a strengths-based approach that emphasizes young people's abilities, resiliency, and potential rather than their perceived shortcomings or deficits.

*For an overview of program models that can be used to serve opportunity youth, please see **Appendix I**. For an overview of common employment service components, please see **Appendix II**.*

#1: Target and Reach the Youth Who Can Benefit the Most

“If you can come into our office and show up for services every day, you’re actually not for us! We focus our services on young people that we have to go out, locate, and bring into services—so really the high-risk youth population that aren’t willing and/or able to participate in traditional programming or work.”
– Roca Inc.

Target intensive services to youth facing the greatest barriers:

Employment programming provides greater benefits for youth who are at higher risk for poor employment or educational outcomes.²⁶ Intensive employment interventions like those that subsidize wages or offer long periods of engagement appear to work especially well for higher-risk individuals compared with those who are more work-ready.²⁷ Moreover, because these more intensive models are typically more expensive to deliver, jobseekers who are likely to be successful in finding and keeping work through less-intensive employment services such as job search assistance should not be considered candidates for programs that subsidize wages or engage participants for extended periods of time. For these reasons, it makes sense for employment programs designed to serve opportunity youth to **identify and recruit program participants who face more barriers to employment**, particularly those who would be very unlikely to succeed in the labor market without assistance.

Reach out to youth who don’t seek services on their own:

Recruiting and engaging opportunity youth in employment programming is often challenging.²⁸ Programs that aim to serve the most at-risk youth can’t expect them to show up at their doorstep—those young people who need services the most may not possess the information, motivation, confidence, or resources to seek out help with employment on their own. For some opportunity youth, particularly those who are involved in the criminal justice system or experiencing homelessness, just convincing them to accept services can require a lengthy process of engagement. It is often necessary to dedicate weeks or months to outreach, gradually engaging young people with offers of services and eventually enrolling them in employment services and other structured programming. **Many providers practice assertive and persistent outreach to identify and serve the young people who need their services the most.** In some cases, programs employ street outreach teams that canvass the service area in vans to engage young people, offer help or rides, and educate them about available services. Additionally, strong referral relationships with the systems in which opportunity youth are already involved, such as criminal justice systems, foster care systems, and other social service systems can help ensure that the most at-risk young people find their way to employment programming.

“Because they have such a low trust level, they aren’t going to seek out services. A lot of kids come to us from a word-of-mouth referral from someone who trusts us. We have to approach the youth in order to get them to have some comfort level in coming here.”

– Daybreak Dayton

“We offer a long-term approach because we recognize it sometimes takes that long for young people to really get it, wrap around resources, model the behaviors we want them to display, and ultimately[move] into the world of work.”
– Our Piece of the Pie

“A year is not enough time to engage youth and turn their lives around. It’s a three to four year journey.”
– Larkin Street

#2: Design Program Engagement to Align With the Realities of Serving Youth

Engage with youth for as long as it takes:

Many of the programs interviewed for this paper had periods of participant engagement that were much longer than that of a typical adult-focused employment program. While many adult-oriented employment programs engage participants for three to nine months, programs targeting the most vulnerable opportunity youth sometimes measure the engagement period in years. An extended and flexible program engagement timeframe facilitates many of the principles and promising practices described in this paper; in fact, many of the following principles would be difficult or impossible to implement without assuming the flexibility to serve program participants over extended periods of time, in multiple episodes, and at varying levels of engagement.

Offer multiple chances to fail and try again:

Maintaining successful employment requires a complex set of skills and habits that take time to learn, practice, and internalize. Young people who have little or no prior work experience and face barriers to employment are often unlikely to master this success in the first or even second try. Many successful employment programs serving youth **anticipate and plan for failure and offer structured pathways back into programming and employment** for youth who have been terminated from jobs or removed from programming. Learning involves making mistakes, and making mistakes can disrupt and delay program flow for participants. Maintaining engagement with participants over an extended period of time lets programs plan for and accommodate failure, and allows young people to make mistakes—and even get fired—and then take the necessary steps to reenter programming and employment, even multiple times.

“Staff should expect failure from the youth. They will mess up, perhaps repeatedly. Be prepared for that. Youth can be asked to leave programming, but the door is always open for them to return.”

– Larkin Street

“We expect people to fail several times. You can get fired from [your transitional job] but you can’t get fired from Roca unless something extraordinary happens. We won’t write you off.”

– Roca, Inc.

“We never shut the door on anyone... Some of our most successful youth are those who failed the first time. We tell people they can apply again, but they’ll have to go through the entire process again.”

–Taller San Jose

#3: Address the Unique Developmental Needs of Opportunity Youth

***“When youth arrive at Larkin Street, they are all in the ‘pre-contemplation’ stage of change. It is exceptionally important to meet the youth where they are.”
– Larkin Street***

Providers of employment services for at-risk youth should recognize that youth and young adults have different developmental needs than adult jobseekers. Many providers design and deliver programming that is informed by the fact that young people’s brains, social skills, and sense of self are still developing. Youth also typically have far less work experience than adults and so have had fewer opportunities to experientially learn successful workplace behaviors and the expectations of employers. While opportunity youth bring a wide range of strengths to the process of finding and keeping work, behaviors and skills that facilitate survival on the streets or while incarcerated are typically not the same skills that need to be developed for workplace success.

When discussing effective service delivery for young jobseekers with barriers, multiple providers stressed the importance of “meeting youth where they are.” Although this phrase may be interpreted in a variety of ways, providers used it as a way of describing an approach that recognizes and accepts a young person’s current readiness and willingness to take steps toward positive change related to employment and other goals. For example, a number of providers noted that youth experiencing homelessness or involved in the justice system are in “survival mode” and are not yet ready to commit to seeking employment or other positive changes. “Meeting youth where they are” means accepting their current situation, state of mind, and most pressing needs and helping them move forward from there toward stability and self-efficacy through employment. It often requires balancing the need to maintain high expectations of young people and the need to acknowledge their current situation. Deliberate and mindful attempts to meet young people where they are with regard to employment typically require understanding their readiness to change and having tools to help them make commitments to change.

***“Our programming is informed by the Stages of Change theory and we certainly build into our program the room to fail and come back. We’re not looking to exit youth from the program. When they stumble we’re looking to find a way to address that barrier and move forward.”
– HHCS***

Apply therapeutic concepts to employment services:

Multiple providers identified a set of strategies with origins in clinical practice that they applied successfully to employment services for opportunity youth. Although these strategies have their roots in therapeutic practice, employment program providers use them as tools to build confidence, draw out strengths, and bolster commitment toward the goal of succeeding in employment, rather than as treatments addressing a problem or disorder. Clinical techniques that have been successfully repurposed by youth employment programs include change theory, motivational interviewing, and trauma-informed care.

Change Theory

It can be useful to understand an individual’s readiness and ability to effect positive change through the Stages of Change theoretical framework. According to the Stages of Change theory, an individual seeking to change behavior passes through five basic stages: pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance.²⁹ Employment programs serving opportunity youth can use change theory to gauge a young person’s readiness to change and tailor services accordingly. For example, a young person who expresses resistance or ambivalence to the idea of pursuing employment would be considered to be in the pre-contemplation or contemplation stage, and may benefit from an intervention

“We know that most participants have experienced different types of trauma and are subject to multiple stressors and complex home lives. We want our program to be a place where those issues can be reduced. So, we are understanding of the environmental context our participants are coming from and how that can impact the behaviors they exhibit.”
– HHCS

such as motivational interviewing (described below) to identify reasons why employment may help achieve personal goals. On the other hand, a young person who demonstrates a strong desire to begin work immediately may be in the preparation or action stage and would benefit from career exploration, training, or job search assistance to begin attachment to work as soon as possible.

Motivational Interviewing

An increasing number of employment programs serving chronically unemployed individuals use motivational interviewing (MI) as a tool to help jobseekers build confidence, tap into motivation, and make a commitment to pursuing employment. MI is an evidence-based strategy that can help address an individual’s ambivalence toward making the necessary changes to entering employment. MI is defined as “a form of collaborative conversation for strengthening a person’s own motivation and commitment to change”³¹ and consists of holding guided conversations about change in an accepting, compassionate manner that elicits an individual’s own reasons for committing to change.³² Many employment programs serving opportunity youth use MI as an effective means to help participants move through the stages of change and commit to taking steps toward success in work.

Trauma-Informed Care

Youth who have been involved in the justice system, experienced poverty or homelessness, or have been victims of violence, abuse, or discrimination are likely to have been subject to trauma that may impact their ability to successfully enter or keep employment. It is important to understand how opportunity youth who have experienced trauma may respond to events or situations in workplace settings that trigger responses to trauma and to ensure that programming and work experience do not re-traumatize participants. Moreover, it is critically important to educate employer partners about how to avoid and respond to triggers in the workplace (see below for more on educating employer partners). Trauma-informed care, defined as “a strengths-based framework that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment,”³³ provides a framework for many employment programs serving youth who have experienced trauma.

Learn more about transitional jobs and social enterprise programs for opportunity youth:

Case Study: Daybreak, Dayton, OH

Case Study: Roca, Boston, Chelsea, and Springfield, MA

Case Study: Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA

#4: Offer Paid Employment Opportunities to Educate Youth on Workplace Success Basics

Many employment programs targeting opportunity youth such as transitional jobs, YouthBuild, Youth Corps programs, social enterprise, youth summer jobs programs, and on-the-job training offer employment experience that is compensated through stipends or hourly wages. There are a number of reasons why paid work experience may be especially useful in serving opportunity youth. Youth are more likely to have no prior work experience and can especially benefit from establishing a work history and a reference. Also, paid employment can help address the difficulty of engaging and retaining opportunity youth in programming—a guaranteed chance to earn money may serve as an incentive for opportunity youth to engage in programming and receive other services that they would not otherwise seek out. Wage subsidies, when combined with employment-focused support services, can be used to address employers' reluctance to hire opportunity youth.³⁴ Many employers who have participated in transitional jobs and subsidized employment initiatives report that the experience made them more likely to hire youth and adults with barriers to employment.³⁵ Finally, paid work experience, when designed to facilitate participants' development of work readiness skills and combined with proper support services, can play a role in preparing opportunity youth for future workplace success.

Youth are less likely than adult jobseekers to have any prior work experience and as a result they have not had the opportunity to experientially learn about successful workplace behaviors and employer expectations. Many of these behaviors and expectations are assumed and unspoken, and young people without prior work experience can easily find themselves fired or disciplined as a result. For this reason, in-house and social enterprise transitional employment may be an especially valuable paid employment program model as it provides a relatively safe space in which young people can observe, model, and practice workplace behaviors while still being subject to the demands of a real workplace. Social enterprises and other types of in-house job placements give providers a great deal of control over the work environment, the amount of stress and responsibility experienced by workers, and how disciplinary matters are handled.



Bright Endeavors, Chicago, IL

“It’s essential to build relationships with young people. It can take weeks to get anywhere with these relationships.”
– Larkin Street

#5: Emphasize Building Trusting Relationships with Participants in Staff Hiring and Training

For many providers, building supportive, caring adult relationships with young jobseekers is the most important factor in their programs’ success. In fact, multiple providers indicated that building relationships with the youth they serve is the primary job duty of program staff. Opportunity youth who have experienced trauma such as homelessness or justice system involvement may require extra time to develop trust in a caring adult, so some providers establish a single staff member who will nurture and maintain a caring relationship with an individual participant throughout the young person’s engagement with the program. Providers also frequently used the term “mentoring” to describe this relationship. Specifically, programs should consider the importance of trusting, supportive relationships when making hiring decisions for frontline staff positions, and offer staff development opportunities in mentoring and related techniques. It is also critical for staff members to be trained to deliver services in a **culturally competent** manner that accommodates youth who are LGBTQ or have experienced trauma.

“They need a long-term relationship with a caring adult, and we stress the caring adult part. A lot of them don’t have this.”
– CEO

In addition to supportive adult relationships, **positive peer relationships** may also play a role in helping young people succeed in employment—strategies to facilitate peer support such as job clubs and motivational group meetings have been successful with jobseekers facing barriers, and peer support has been identified by researchers as one way in which work-crew transitional jobs programs may achieve their effectiveness.³⁶

#6: Educate Employers on the Value and Techniques for Successfully Employing Opportunity Youth

Employer partners may have misconceptions about employing youth—especially youth facing barriers such as homelessness, justice system involvement, or lack of prior work experience. Moreover, employers may not be well equipped with techniques for managing opportunity youth in a way that ensures success, develops skills, avoids conflict, and prevents terminations or quits. Even motivated employer partners that understand their roles and support an employment program’s mission will likely benefit from information, guidance, and support to help ensure that young people are successful in the workplace. For these reasons, youth employment programs serving opportunity youth should implement practices to educate employers on an ongoing basis.

Employers may need guidance in addressing negative stereotypes or assumptions about employing opportunity youth, such as assumptions about young people’s engagement, work ethic, or the likelihood of crime in the workplace. In these efforts, it may be helpful to enlist employer partners who have already had success in hosting or hiring program participants to share their stories with their peers. At the same time, employers need to know what to expect from young workers who may have experienced trauma or who lack prior work experience. For example, Larkin Street in San Francisco offers training to employer partners on supervising youth who may have PTSD, including techniques for avoiding situations that may trigger a trauma response and positively addressing a trauma response when it occurs.

“We have some interest in not just preparing our participants so that they’re job ready, but also preparing jobs so that they are ready for participants.”
– Homeless Youth Resource Center

Employers can also play a positive role in helping make sure young workers develop the necessary workplace skills to remain successful in the labor market; offering training and resources to help employers facilitate developmental processes can help ensure that work experience supports opportunity youth’s development. A critical part of this process is establishing mechanisms for clear, consistent, and frequent feedback to youth about their progress in developing workplace skills and ensuring that all staff members and work supervisors communicate about program participants’ progress and learning needs.

Program providers are encouraged to consider these practices and principles when designing and delivering employment services to opportunity youth, and funders and policy makers are encouraged to support the incorporation of these practices and principles into new and ongoing youth employment initiatives.

To establish a robust evidence base in what works to help opportunity youth succeed in employment, it is also recommended that that these suggested practices and principles undergo further research and evaluation.

Conclusion

Opportunity youth have a critical need to access employment and succeed in the labor market. For these young people, experience, employment, and earnings today can have lasting effects on current and future economic wellbeing, so the impact of successful employment interventions could positively change the trajectory of their lives. As we look to prepare the next generation of workers for success in the workforce, it is vitally important to include those youth for whom circumstances have made getting, keeping, and advancing in employment more challenging. These youth need a comprehensive set of employment services that meet them where they are, mitigate barriers to employment, and engage them with employment and educational options that reflect their goals.

Developing this brief raised additional points. First, further research is needed to determine the impact of promising practices for employment interventions serving opportunity youth, such as extended program engagement and multiple chances to reenter programming, among the other promising approaches and program elements described in this paper. Additionally, increased funding and attention is needed to replicate successful program models, take them to scale, and equip the field with evidence-based and promising practices in order to serve every young person who would benefit. Finally, public systems that disproportionately encounter and serve opportunity youth such as the juvenile justice, child welfare and foster care systems, and youth homeless system should integrate or prioritize employment services and partnerships that include access to employment services for these young people.

Because of the lasting implications of current youth unemployment, the rapidly changing labor market, and the unique opportunities presented by recent policy changes, now is clearly the time to further develop, test, fund, and implement bold and promising strategies to help ensure that the most vulnerable young people can successfully access employment. By dedicating the necessary time, resources, and care, we can equip our nation's opportunity youth to meet the demands of the workplace and access a future of sustaining, satisfying employment and economic security.

Appendix I: Employment Program Models and Strategies for Youth with Barriers to Employment

Appendix I gives an overview of employment program models and strategies that help youth with barriers to employment successfully connect to work. While each of the approaches is distinct, there is a great deal of overlap in program components—notably, nearly all are “earn and learn” strategies that incorporate exposure to real work activities and experiences as a means to build skills, explore interests, and in some cases earn immediate income.

CONSERVATION AND SERVICE CORPS PROGRAMS (YOUTH CORPS)

Find a Conservation and Service Corps Program:

Conservation and Service Corps [programs](#) exist in all 50 states.

Learn more [here](#).

Conservation and Service Corps Target Populations/Eligibility:

Youth and young adults between the ages of 16 and 25 are eligible to participate in Youth Corps programs.³⁷ Although Youth Corps programs “vary considerably” in the members they target for enrollment,³⁸ these programs serve thousands of disconnected or at-risk youth each year.³⁹

Conservation and Service Corps Overview and Supporting Evidence:

Operated by community-based organizations as well as local and state government agencies, Conservation and Service Corps are a diverse set of programs that engage youth in public service projects while offering corpsmembers job training, academic programming, leadership skills, and supportive services aimed at helping them further their educations, prepare for jobs and careers, and develop as civically-engaged leaders.^{40,41} Corpsmembers generally receive a stipend or living allowance.⁴² About 26,000 young people enroll in Youth Corps annually.⁴³

An experimental study from the 1990s found that more than one year after program enrollment, corpsmembers were significantly more likely to be employed and working more hours than youth in a control group.⁴⁴ The study found that corpsmembers were also less likely to be arrested than their non-participant counterparts. A 2011 follow up study, also using an experimental design, found that Youth Corps participation had no significant impacts on key outcomes related to corpsmembers’ education, employment, and civic engagement.⁴⁵

JOB CORPS

Find a Job Corps Program:

There are over 125 [Job Corps centers](#) across the United States.

Learn more [here](#).

Job Corps Target Populations/Eligibility:

In general, youth are eligible to participate if they are between the ages of 16 and 24; legally able to work in the United States; meet low-income criteria; and need additional technical training, education, counseling, or assistance to complete schoolwork or to find and keep employment.⁴⁶ Participants are also expected to not exhibit serious behavioral problems, have adequate childcare if necessary, abstain from illegal drug use, and not be under court or institutional supervision.⁴⁷

Job Corps Overview and Supporting Evidence:

Job Corps is primarily a residential program, with participants living at Job Corps centers while they receive academic education and hands-on training in more than 100 career areas along with meals, health care, a living allowance, and other supportive services.^{48,49} Instruction is individualized and self-paced, and participants may remain enrolled for up to two years.⁵⁰ Job Corps graduates receive supportive

services for up to 21 months after leaving the program including help with finding a job, housing, child care, and transportation.⁵¹

A large-scale, experimental study of Job Corps found that the program improved participants' educational attainment and literacy and reduced their involvement with crime. Job Corps also generated earning gains across a broad group of participants during the first two years following program participation. For students who were 20 to 24 years old at the time they joined Job Corps, these earning gains persisted up to 10 years after they entered the study.⁵²

NATIONAL GUARD YOUTH CHALLENGE PROGRAM (NGYCP)

Find a ChalleNGe Program:

The ChalleNGe program has [35 locations](#) across 27 states, Puerto Rico, and Washington, D.C.

Learn more [here](#).

NGYCP Target Populations/Eligibility:

Youth are eligible to participate if they are between the ages of 16 and 18, have left high school without earning a diploma, and are either unemployed or underemployed. Youth must also be drug free, not involved in the justice system, and a U.S. citizen or legal resident.⁵³

NGYCP Overview and Supporting Evidence:

NGYCP is a 17-month long program, beginning with a five-month residential phase followed by a year-long phase in a youth's home community. Youth are matched with mentors from their home community at the beginning of the 17 months, and these mentors play a central role in helping guide participants throughout the program and successfully achieve their goals. During the five-month residential phase, the program focuses on eight core components that include academic excellence, job skills, and life skills, among others. Youth have the opportunity for career exploration, vocational training, and job interview preparation. When youth return to their communities for the twelve-month, post-residential phase, they work with their mentor either to re-enroll in high school, pursue higher education, get a job, join the military, or do volunteer work for a minimum 30 hours per week.⁵⁴

An experimental study found very positive results for youth who participated in NGYCP.⁵⁵ Most notably, NGYCP youth were more likely to have either earned a high school diploma or obtained a GED and have earned college credits compared to non-program participants. NGYCP youth were also more likely to be employed and had increased earning potential. A cost-benefit analysis of NGYCP found the program had a return on investment of 166 percent.⁵⁶

PRE- APPRENTICESHIP

Find a Pre-Apprenticeship Program:

The Pathways to Success Tool shows [pre-apprenticeship programs](#) that have registered with the U.S. Department of Labor.

Learn more [here](#).

Pre-Apprenticeship Target Populations/Eligibility:

Individuals without the necessary prerequisites or skills to enter a Registered Apprenticeship program.⁵⁷

Pre-Apprenticeship Overview and Supporting Evidence:

Pre-apprenticeship is an employment program model or set of strategies designed to prepare individuals to enter and succeed in a Registered Apprenticeship.⁵⁸ Registered Apprenticeship programs are administered through federal and state agencies and combine paid, on-the-job training and instruction to prepare workers for a career in a skilled occupation.^{59,60} Employers can identify the qualifications and education credentials needed to apply to their Registered Apprenticeship program,⁶¹ and these qualifications are likely to exclude many youth with barriers to employment.

To bridge the gap for lower-skilled workers, the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) identifies "quality" pre-apprenticeship programs as those that offer supportive services along with pre-vocational and educational services to prepare participants to meet the entry requirements for Registered Apprenticeships.⁶² A quality

pre-apprenticeship program will also help participants apply to Registered Apprenticeships or, when possible, have formalized agreements with apprenticeship sponsors so that individuals who have successfully completed the pre-apprenticeship program can enter directly into a Registered Apprenticeship.⁶³

The DOL does not register or certify pre-apprenticeship programs,⁶⁴ and the strategy has not undergone rigorous or large-scale evaluation. The DOL recognizes YouthBuild and Job Corps as quality pre-apprenticeship programs,⁶⁵ and evidence for those programs is discussed in this appendix.

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Find a social enterprise:

The [Social Enterprise Directory](#) catalogs U.S.-based social enterprises. The Social Enterprise Alliance, which champions the social enterprise strategy, has chapters in [over 14 states](#). [REDF](#) provides capital, technical assistance, and resources to social enterprises and runs the [Social Enterprise for Jobs \(SE4Jobs\) Working Group](#), which is made up of over 300 social enterprise stakeholders.

Learn more [here](#).

Social Enterprise Target Populations/Eligibility:

While every social enterprise-based program will have its own eligibility criteria, the strategy targets individuals, including youth, with barriers to employment.

Social Enterprise Overview and Supporting Evidence:

Social enterprises are businesses that serve the common good by advancing a social mission that can include helping youth with barriers to employment earn income, gain skills, and prepare to enter the workforce.⁶⁶ Social enterprises generate revenue through the sale of goods and services that can, in turn, be applied toward wages and supportive services for the social enterprise's workers.⁶⁷ Most social enterprises offer a time-limited employment experience to prepare workers for jobs elsewhere, and many social enterprises are venues for transitional jobs programs.

A new, multi-part evaluation shows that the social enterprise strategy can help individuals with barriers to employment find jobs and move toward economic self-sufficiency. The evaluation found that in the year after their social enterprise jobs began, social enterprise workers experienced increases in employment and earnings, a decrease in the share of their income coming from government transfers, and were more likely to be living in stable housing. The study also found that \$1 spent by the social enterprises yielded a \$1.34 to \$2.23 return on investment for society as a whole.⁶⁸

TRANSITIONAL JOBS

Find a transitional jobs program:

Hundreds of transitional jobs programs operate in the United States. The [National Transitional Jobs Network](#) (NTJN) at Heartland Alliance's National Initiatives on Poverty & Economic Opportunity can help locate an existing program.

Learn more [here](#).

Transitional Jobs Target Populations/Eligibility:

While every transitional jobs (TJ) program will have its own eligibility criteria, the strategy targets individuals, including youth, with barriers to employment.

Transitional Jobs Overview and Supporting Evidence:

TJ combines job skills training, time-limited wage-paid work in a real job setting, and supportive services such as assistance with transportation or ongoing job coaching to help youth develop and practice soft skills, mitigate barriers to employment, and transition into jobs in the competitive labor market. TJ may take place in a private business, a public sector setting, or in a social enterprise.

The TJ strategy has been successful in helping people with barriers to employment earn immediate income to meet their basic needs,⁶⁹ gain work experience, and develop the pro-social behavior⁷⁰ and soft skills⁷¹ needed to succeed in workplace. New experimental research shows that violent crime arrests decreased by 43 percent among at-risk youth who were offered subsidized summer jobs compared to youth in a control group.⁷² Experimental research also shows that participation in a TJ program can reduce recidivism, especially among people returning from incarceration who are younger and at a greater risk of recidivating.⁷³ The return on investment of TJ programs greatly outweighs the costs.⁷⁴

YEAR UP

Find a Year Up Program:

Year Up is based in Boston and has [15 locations](#) spanning the country from New York to Seattle.

Learn more [here](#).

Year Up Target Population/Eligibility:

Youth are eligible to participate if they are between the ages of 18 and 24; a member of a low- to moderate-income family; a high school graduate or GED recipient; a U.S. citizen; available Monday through Friday; and are highly motivated to learn technical and professional skills.⁷⁵

Year Up Overview and Supporting Evidence:

Year Up is a one year program. In the first six months, youth participate in intensive skill training that prepares them to work in a corporate environment. Classes develop both hard and soft skills such as business writing, computer skills, and professional communication. Participants then have a six-month internship with a corporate partner to gain work experience, grow their network, and further develop professional skills. Participants earn college credits and a weekly stipend, and Year Up alumni have ongoing access to services to help them find jobs, network, and build their careers.⁷⁶

An experimental study found that in the year following the program, Year Up participants' earnings were 30 percent greater, on average, than the control group's earnings. This was because Year Up participants had higher paying jobs than those in the control group.⁷⁷ A follow up study found that participants' earnings gains were sustained. Over the three years after the program, Year Up participants' earnings were 32 percent greater than the control group's earnings, again primarily because of participants' higher average wages.⁷⁸

YOUTHBUILD

Find a YouthBuild Program:

There are over 250 [YouthBuild programs](#) across 46 states.

Learn more [here](#).

YouthBuild Overview and Supporting Evidence:

In general, youth are eligible to participate if they are between the ages of 16 and 24; a member of a low-income family, in or aging out of foster care, a youth offender, a youth with a disability, a child of incarcerated parents, or a migrant youth; and have dropped out of school or have dropped out and reenrolled.⁷⁹ Although YouthBuild programs target vulnerable youth, their rigorous recruitment processes may screen out youth with the highest barriers.⁸⁰

YouthBuild Overview and Supporting Evidence:

A frequent partner with Conservation and Service Corps programs, YouthBuild offers participants employment, education, leadership development, and vocational training in building construction or rehabilitation. Most YouthBuild participants enroll full-time for about 10 months. Participants spend at least half their time receiving educational services such as basic skills instruction or high school diploma or GED classes. Participants spend much of their remaining time in hands-on job training, often learning construction by rehabilitating or building homes for low-income or homeless individuals. Participants are paid a stipend, wage, or living allowance for this work. YouthBuild offers additional supportive services including counseling, job placement, and follow-up services.⁸¹

YouthBuild is currently undergoing an experimental evaluation that will analyze its impact on participants' educational attainment, employment and earnings, and criminal justice involvement, among other outcomes.⁸² Preliminary evidence shows that YouthBuild seems to have produced high rates of completion and placement into jobs.⁸³ A large-scale survey of YouthBuild graduates found that 75 percent were either employed or engaged in postsecondary studies following program completion.⁸⁴

Appendix II: Employment Program Components

Appendix II gives an overview of employment program components. In addition to the promising practices described in this paper, any comprehensive employment program serving youth and young adults should include these elements.

Recruitment and engagement of participants:

This includes identifying the characteristics of the targeted jobseekers, creating marketing materials and developing processes to reach them, determining their eligibility and fit for the program, enrolling them in the program, and orienting them to the program.

Assessment for interests, strengths, experience, skills, barriers, and learning needs:

A variety of assessment tools are available to determine a jobseeker's skills, prior experience, career preferences, and barriers, in order to better meet their needs and match them with appropriate services and employment opportunities.

Basic academic skills coursework:

Many jobseekers need to build academic skills to meet the demands of their preferred occupation or qualify for entry in occupational skills training programs. Coursework ranges from basic literacy and numeracy to GED preparation.

Work readiness or “soft skill” training:

Young jobseekers often need help learning the basics of successful workplace behavior, such as punctuality, personal presentation, and getting along with coworkers and supervisors. Effectively serving people facing barriers to employment involves offering training in these soft skills that employers find valuable.

“Hard skill” or occupational training:

Training in specific occupational skills is often necessary to access and advance in positions beyond entry-level work. Training works best when it is designed with employer input and targeted at occupations and industries with anticipated demand for workers.

Career exploration:

Jobseekers may not be fully aware of how their skills, interests and preferences align with the full spectrum of career options. Career exploration assessments and exercises open up career possibilities and help facilitate good matches between workers and employers.

Job search assistance and training:

Assistance with locating job postings, developing effective résumés, completing electronic applications, and following up with employers helps ensure jobseekers' success in their current job search, and builds skills for future job searches.

Work experience:

Opportunities to gain work experience through subsidized employment, on-the-job training, internship, or apprenticeship helps jobseekers gain occupational skills, establish a work history, gain exposure to potential employers, and refine career goals.

Interview preparation:

Helping jobseekers anticipate likely interview questions, develop and refine answers, and practice interview skills in mock interviews can help build confidence and boost performance in job interviews.

Employment-focused supportive services:

Services aimed at helping workers succeed in employment, such as providing interview clothing, childcare, and transportation, can help jobseekers more reliably and consistently meet employer expectations.

Connections to social services when needed:

Services such as anger management assistance, substance abuse counseling, parenting courses, financial management services, or housing assistance may be necessary on a case-by-case basis to mitigate barriers to employment and help ensure a jobseeker's long term success in work.

Job development and placement services:

Job development plays a critical role in helping jobseekers identify and access appropriate opportunities and matching a jobseeker's interests and skills with an employer's needs.

Job retention follow-up:

Retention services can help ensure that issues that arise in the workplace are addressed before they become cause for termination or resignation. Effective follow-up depends on the frequency and duration of contacts, and employ practices that help keep program graduates in contact, so that emerging workplace issues can be addressed with ongoing support and coaching. Maintaining contact often includes the use of monetary incentives

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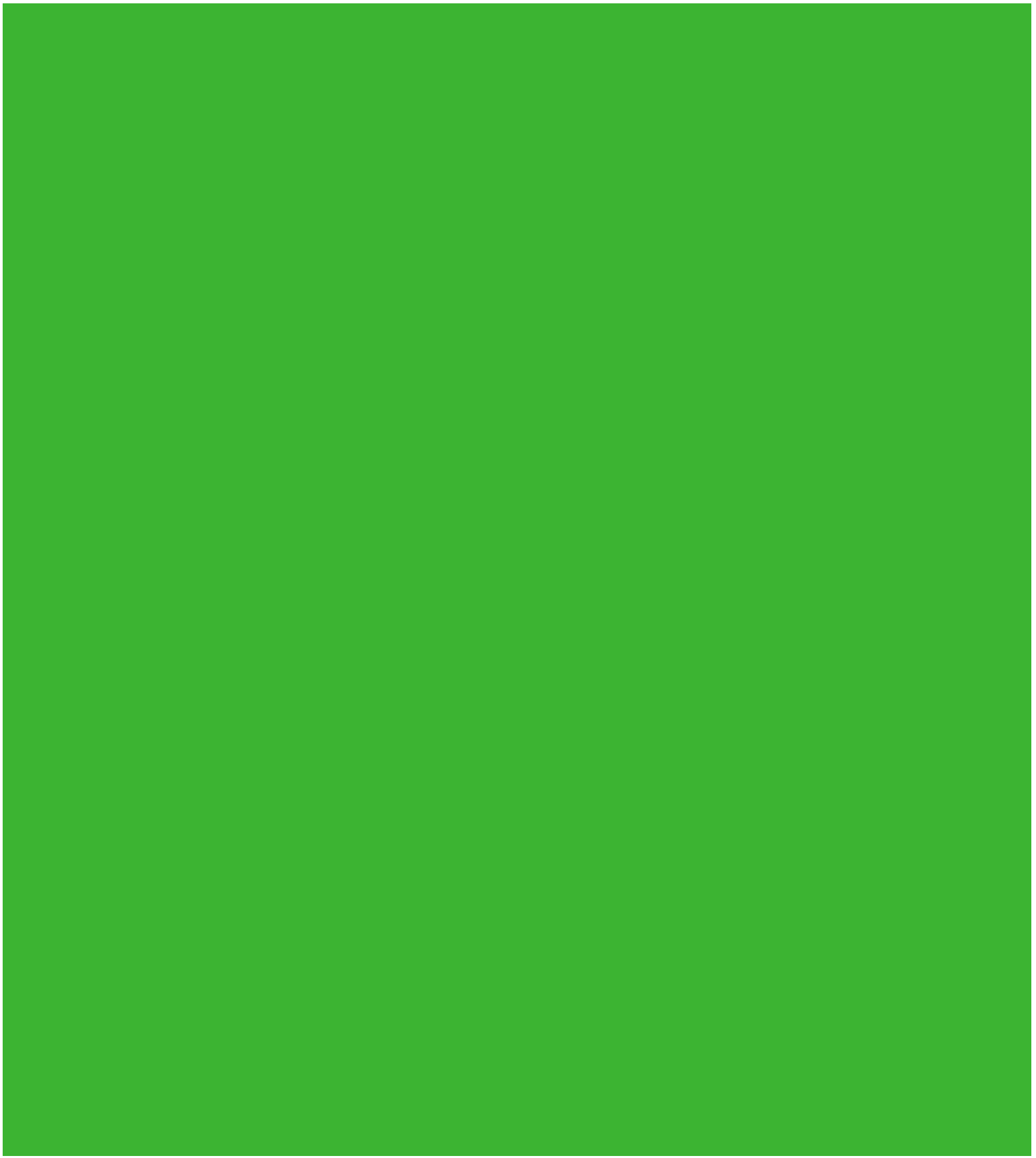
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