LEGAL ACTION CENTER

NO HEALTH = NO JUSTICE

BUILDING SAFE PATHWAYS TO OPPORTUNITY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

A Policy Brief on Youth Employment, Safety, and Systems Change

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This document is informational and does not constitute legal advice.

Centering Youth Voice, Safety, and Opportunity

This policy brief elevates the lived experiences, recommendations, and leadership of young people navigating workforce barriers, community safety concerns, and systems that often fail to reflect their realities. Through youth advisory discussions in Metro Atlanta and Washington, D.C. in October 2025 and March 2026, employer interviews, and community stakeholder conversations, young people identified clear strategies for creating safer, more equitable pathways to employment, advocacy, and long-term well-being.



Youth are not asking for more rhetoric — they are asking for safety, trust, opportunity, and systems that support them before crisis

Executive Summary

Young people in Metro Atlanta and Washington, D.C., are navigating environments shaped by chronic stress, fear of surveillance, limited mobility, economic instability, and deep mistrust of institutions. Despite these barriers, youth consistently identified employment, mentorship, structured activities, and safe opportunities for participation as critical pathways toward stability, belonging, and long-term success.

This policy brief synthesizes findings from youth forums, advisory council meetings, and stakeholder discussions conducted through the Legal Action Center's No Health = No Justice Initiative and community partners. Across both locations, youth emphasized that current systems often fail to provide safe, accessible, and trustworthy opportunities before crises occur. Existing workforce and intervention programs remain difficult to access, insufficiently responsive to youth realities, or structured in ways that unintentionally exclude those most impacted.

Key findings across both jurisdictions include:



- Youth experience persistent fear and emotional distress in schools, public spaces, workplaces, and online environments.
- Employment, education, and training opportunities can promote stability and success when supported by transportation support, flexible scheduling, supportive supervision, and trauma-informed approaches.
- Safety is foundational to participation; many youth avoid programs or leadership opportunities because public visibility sometimes feels risky.
- Credible messengers, particularly directly impacted adults with similar backgrounds, are among the most trusted supports for youth engagement.
- Youth seek multiple pathways to success, including trades, entrepreneurship, caregiving roles, creative industries, and behind-the-scenes employment—not solely college-based trajectories.
- Youth advocacy must be compensated, consent-driven, and structured around trust rather than performative participation.

This brief recommends a systems-level approach centered on early opportunity, safe and flexible workforce pathways, transportation supports, youth-designed participation models, credible messenger investments, and accountability mechanisms that prioritize healing, dignity, and long-term opportunity.

Introduction

Communities across Metro Atlanta and Washington, D.C. continue to face growing concerns related to youth safety, opportunity, workforce access, and community trust. Young people are navigating overlapping pressures including economic instability, exposure to violence, surveillance, educational inequities, mental health stressors, transportation barriers, and disconnection from institutions designed to support them.

At the same time, youth consistently demonstrate resilience, insight, and a strong desire for meaningful opportunity. During community conversations, young people emphasized that they

want jobs, mentorship, structure, independence, and environments where they feel emotionally and physically safe.

This policy brief draws from:

- Metro Atlanta Youth Advisory Council discussions with youth ages 15–20 and workforce stakeholders;
- Washington, D.C. Young Adult Opportunity Forums involving youth ages 16–24, employers, and community organizations;
- Employer interviews and community-based workforce perspectives;
- Discussions regarding youth advocacy, mobility, trust, and systems responsiveness.

Together, these findings reveal the urgent need for coordinated systems reform that centers youth voice, addresses structural barriers, and expands safe pathways to employment and belonging.

Core Findings: Cross-Site Themes Identified Across Metro Atlanta and Washington, D.C.

1. Youth Are Living in Persistent States of Stress and Uncertainty

Key Insight

Young people consistently described emotional exhaustion, overstimulation, fear, and uncertainty as routine parts of daily life. Across both Metro Atlanta and Washington, D.C., youth described experiencing chronic emotional strain, uncertainty about the future, and limited feelings of safety.



Young people used words such as:

- Stressed
- Overstimulated
- Uneasy
- Scared
- Lost
- Tired
- Under pressure

Many youth reported that their bedrooms were the only places where they felt safe. Public gathering spaces—including recreation areas, restaurants, entertainment venues, and digital spaces—were often described as emotionally unsafe. These are places where their fear of ridicule, punishment, or rejection is heightened.

Youth emphasized that fear is not tied to isolated incidents, but functions as a constant background condition shaping daily decisions, movement, social participation, and willingness to engage with institutions. Policy Implications

- Emotional and physical safety must be treated as a public policy issue.
- Youth programming should integrate trauma-informed approaches.
- Community safety strategies must address both physical and emotional well-being.
- Systems should prioritize predictable, consistent, and relationship-based support.

2. Fear of Surveillance and Criminalization Shapes Youth Participation

Key Insight



Youth participation is directly shaped by fear of surveillance, criminalization, and exposure within schools, workplaces, online environments, and public spaces. Youth in Metro Atlanta expressed significant mistrust of policing and surveillance systems. Many shared that they perceive themselves as constantly watched across schools, commercial spaces, online platforms, and public gathering areas.

Young people described:

- Fear of being stopped without cause;
- Anxiety triggered by police presence;
- Distrust of law enforcement participation in youth spaces;
- Concern for their own safety and the safety of family members during police interactions; the Metro Atlanta youth expressed living with fear about their parents getting pulled over by police and being subjected to brutality that may lead to their deaths as they have routinely seen videos of Black drivers all across the country being assaulted and even murdered by police officers.
- Belief that arrest permanently damages future opportunities.

In Washington, D.C., youth similarly emphasized that safety and visibility concerns directly influence whether they participate in programs, employment, or leadership opportunities.

Policy Implications

- Youth engagement spaces should remain separate from punitive systems.
- Confidentiality, consent, and anonymity protections are essential.
- Programs should reduce unnecessary surveillance and administrative barriers.
- Community trust must be rebuilt through transparency and accountability.

3. Employment is a Critical Protective Factor

Key Insight



Employment, mentorship, sports, and structured activities function as stabilizing supports when designed with youth realities in mind. Across both jurisdictions, youth, employers, and community organizations consistently identified employment and structured activities as stabilizing supports.

Youth reported that jobs, sports, internships, and structured programming:

- Reduce exposure to risky situations;
- Increase accountability and routine;
- Provide purpose and independence;
- Improve confidence and motivation;
- Strengthen long-term opportunity pathways.

However, young people also emphasized that employment can become another source of stress when workplaces are inflexible, unsupported, or disconnected from youth realities.

Common Barriers to Employment

Youth and employers identified several recurring barriers:

- Unreliable transportation;
- Schedule conflicts with school and caregiving responsibilities;
- Limited prior work experience;
- Workplace norms that are unfamiliar to first-time workers;
- Stressful customer-facing interactions;
- Lack of safe transportation routes;
- Fear of visibility or public exposure.

Employers noted that many challenges reflect developmental realities and systemic barriers rather than lack of motivation.

Policy Implications

- Youth employment should be treated as a developmental support (e.g., ways to support youth learning and growth, and to provide career opportunities and exposure to different neighborhoods or geographical settings, etc.), not merely as labor sources.
- Employers need training in developmentally appropriate supervision.
- Transportation assistance is essential to workforce participation.
- Flexible scheduling and supportive onboarding practices improve retention.
- Paid opportunities outperform unpaid opportunities in participation and stability.

4. Systems Continue to Overemphasize College as the Sole Pathway

Key Insight



Youth want multiple pathways to success — including trades, entrepreneurship, creative industries, caregiving, and behind-the-scenes operational roles. Youth and stakeholders in Washington, D.C. emphasized that systems frequently position college as the default or only legitimate pathway to success.

Participants highlighted the need for broader investment in:

- Skilled trades;
- Apprenticeships;
- Entrepreneurship;
- Creative industries;
- Hospitality and tourism;
- Technology pathways;
- Caregiving and human services careers;
- Behind-the-scenes operational roles.

Many youth are actively supporting family members and require paid opportunities immediately rather than long-term educational pathways that delay income.

Policy Implications

- Workforce systems should support multiple definitions of success.
- Trade and apprenticeship pathways should receive equal investment.
- Career exposure should begin early.
- Paid internships and stipends should be expanded.

5. Credible Messengers Are Essential to Engagement

Key Insight

Young people trust adults with lived experience who understand their realities and can provide authentic guidance and support. Youth consistently identified credible messengers—trusted adults with lived experience—as among the most effective supports.



Credible messengers help:

- Build trust;
- Reduce stigma;
- Improve program participation and increase likelihood of success in youth employment;
- Support conflict resolution;
- Provide culturally responsive mentorship;
- Translate systems in ways youth understand.

Participants also expressed concern that some traditional leadership structures unintentionally limit youth participation by failing to create space for younger voices and input.

Policy Implications

- Directly impacted individuals should be hired and compensated as mentors, evaluators, and program designers.
- Lived experience should be recognized as expertise.
- Youth leadership structures should prioritize trust and flexibility.

6. Traditional Youth Advisory Models Often Exclude the Youth Most Impacted

Key Insight



Traditional advisory structures often unintentionally exclude or fail to safely include youth who are most impacted and in need of support. Both Metro Atlanta and Washington, D.C. discussions revealed concerns that traditional advisory councils and public engagement structures may unintentionally exclude youth who feel unsafe, overstressed, or distrustful of institutions.

Youth expressed concerns about:

- Visibility;
- Public speaking expectations;
- Participation alongside unfamiliar peers;
- Fear of retaliation or exposure;
- Being asked to repeatedly share traumatic experiences.

Participants emphasized that advocacy should not require public exposure to be meaningful.

Youth-Centered Engagement Principles

Effective youth engagement should include:

- Optional anonymity;
- Small trusted cohorts;
- Multiple levels of participation;
- Flexible involvement;
- Compensation for time and expertise;
- Clear consent processes;
- Consistent adult accountability.

Policy Implications

- Youth participation models should be redesigned around safety and trust.
- Advocacy should prioritize relationship-building over visibility.
- Youth should control how their personal stories and experiences are shared

Workforce Opportunity Landscape

We conducted a landscape review of employment and workforce development opportunities available to young people in Atlanta, Georgia, and Washington, D.C. The review examined U.S. Department of Labor and related workforce data, supplemented by community conversations and stakeholder interviews with youth-serving organizations, employers, educators, and workforce practitioners. The findings identify existing opportunities, barriers to participation, and promising strategies for expanding equitable access to employment, training, and career pathways for young people.

Metro Atlanta Employment Opportunities

Youth employment opportunities in Metro Atlanta are concentrated in:



- Retail;
- Food service;
- Recreation and parks;
- Hospitality;
- Logistics;
- Aviation;
- Youth-serving programs;
- Apprenticeships and workforce development initiatives.

Key workforce programs include:

Atlanta Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP)

- Paid summer jobs and internships;
- Career exposure and workforce readiness;
- Placements in public and private sectors.

WorkSource Atlanta – Youth R.I.S.E.

- Paid work experiences;
- GED and credential support;
- Transportation and coaching assistance.

Hartsfield-Jackson ATL Workforce Programs

- Aviation and logistics exposure;
- Apprenticeships and internships;
- Administrative and facilities pathways.

Washington, D.C., Employment Opportunities

Washington, D.C. youth employment opportunities span:

- Government and public sector roles;
- Healthcare and human services;
- Construction and trades;
- Hospitality and tourism;
- Retail and customer service;
- Technology and media;
- Nonprofit and community organizations;
- Recreation and arts.



Key workforce pathways include:

Mayor Marion S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program (MBSYEP)

- Paid summer placements;
- Public and private sector exposure;
- First-time work experience.

DOES Office of Youth Programs

- Year-round workforce placements;
- Career pathways;
- Vocational and trade opportunities.

Community-Based Workforce Providers

- Mentorship;
- Peer navigation;
- Credible messenger programming;
- Workforce coaching.

Policy Recommendations

Recommended Systems-Level Actions

1. Expand Safe, Paid, and Flexible Youth Employment Opportunities

Policymakers should:

- Increase funding for paid youth employment and internships;
- Expand transportation supports;
- Create flexible scheduling models;
- Develop low-visibility and behind-the-scenes job pathways;
- Increase investment in trades and apprenticeships;
- Support year-round employment opportunities.
- Ensure opportunities for younger youth
- Outreach to directly impacted youth

2. Redesign Youth Participation and Advisory Structures

Youth engagement systems should:

- Allow optional anonymity;
- Use small, trusted cohorts;
- Reduce performative participation expectations;
- Compensate youth for leadership and advocacy work;
- Separate youth opportunity spaces from punitive systems;
- Provide emotional support and preparation.

3. Invest in Credible Messenger & Peer Support Models

Public agencies and philanthropy should:

- Train directly impacted adults as mentors and evaluators;
- Support peer-led engagement strategies;
- Integrate lived experience expertise into workforce and policy design;

- Build sustainable funding streams for credible messenger initiatives.

4. Diversify Pathways Beyond College-Only Models

Systems should:

- Expand apprenticeships and trade pipelines;
- Support entrepreneurship pathways;
- Increase exposure to nontraditional careers;
- Create industry partnerships with employers;
- Recognize caregiving responsibilities and economic realities.

5. Build Transportation and Mobility Supports

Transportation barriers significantly limit workforce access.

Recommendations include:

- Transit stipends;
- Employer transportation partnerships;
- Safe transportation routes;
- Expanded youth mobility initiatives;
- Cross-neighborhood exposure opportunities.

6. Improve Accountability & Community Feedback Loops

Youth repeatedly emphasized frustration when systems collect input without visible action.

Agencies and organizations should:

- Report back regularly on outcomes;
- Share progress transparently;
- Involve youth in evaluation and implementation;
- Develop measurable accountability structures.

Implementation Priorities

Immediate Priorities (0–12 Months)

- Engage young people in planning, implementing, and evaluating employment programs.
- Create ongoing feedback mechanisms to ensure opportunities align with youth needs, interests, and aspirations. Evaluate the effectiveness of wage subsidies, employer incentives, and public-private partnerships in expanding opportunities for young people.
- Identify sustainable funding mechanisms that prioritize underserved communities.
- Research employer practices that successfully balance youth employment with education, caregiving, and other responsibilities.

Mid-Term Priorities (1–3 Years)

- Strengthen partnerships among workforce agencies, schools, community-based organizations, employers, and youth-serving systems.
- Expand paid youth employment slots;
- Establish transportation supports;
- Launch compensated youth advisory cohorts;
- Increase credible messenger hiring;
- Conduct trauma-informed employer training.
- Expand apprenticeship and trade pathways;
- Institutionalize youth-centered participation models;
- Build public-private workforce partnerships;
- Scale community-based mentorship systems.

Long-Term Priorities (3–5 Years)

- Redesign workforce systems around equity and flexibility;
- Establish sustainable funding for youth opportunity infrastructure;
- Integrate youth voices and input into policy and budget processes;
- Measure outcomes related to trust, safety, mobility, and long-term opportunities.

Conclusion

Young people already know what they need to thrive. The challenge is whether systems are willing to listen, invest, and respond with accountability.



Youth across Metro Atlanta and Washington, D.C. are asking for systems that recognize their realities, protect their dignity, and create meaningful pathways to opportunity before crisis occurs.

They are not asking merely for programs. They are asking for:

- Safety;
- Stability;
- Trust;
- Visibility without exposure;
- Opportunity without punishment;
- Guidance without judgment;
- Employment pathways that honor their lived realities.

This policy brief demonstrates that young people already understand the barriers affecting their lives and have articulated clear recommendations for systems of change. The challenge now is whether institutions, policymakers, employers, and communities are willing to respond with sustained investment, accountability, and action. The future of youth opportunity depends not on isolated initiatives, but on building systems that are flexible, trusted, trauma-informed, and genuinely shaped by young people themselves.

Acknowledgments

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The perspectives reflected throughout this brief represent the lived experiences, concerns, and recommendations of young people, employers, workforce organizations, and community stakeholders committed to advancing equitable youth opportunity systems.

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