Workforce Development System Efforts for System-Involved Youth: Opportunities and Challenges

Mary Elizabeth Collins
Professor
Boston University School of Social Work

Adrianna Spindle-Jackson
Ph.D. Student

Mengni Yao
Ph.D. Student

December 2020

Workforce Development Systems Efforts for System-Involved Youth:
Opportunities and Challenges

Abstract

Most studies that have examined the employment prospects of system-involved youth have done so from the perspective of the child welfare system or the juvenile justice system to determine employment-related outcomes. In the current study, by contrast, the focus is on the workforce development system and the extent to which these systems address the needs of youth in child welfare or juvenile justice. The key research question for the study is: *How do State and Local Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) address the needs of system-involved youth?* Data were collected via open-ended qualitative interviews with key workforce personnel in 10 states. The data identify mechanisms by which WDBs addressed these specific populations of youth as well as strengths and gaps in these efforts. We offer suggestions for further efforts to meet the employment and training needs of these highly vulnerable populations.

Key words: youth unemployment, aging out of care, workforce development policy, employment and training for youth

Funding: funding for this research was provided by the Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Young people who are neither in school nor working have been termed "disconnected" or more optimistically "opportunity" youth (Burds-Sharps & Lewis, 2018). Their circumstances raise concern because of the potential for a very negative life trajectory in adulthood characterized by unemployment, poverty, homelessness and other forms of instability. The negative effects of disconnection from school and work at a young age are profound and frequently long term (Lewis & Gluskin, 2018). The widespread impact of COVID-19 on the economy and employment only exacerbate these concerns both in the U.S. and globally (ILO, 2020).

Although there are multiple programs available to address youth unemployment, the results of interventions are typically modest and uneven. A recent major evaluation of YouthBuild, a large well-known program, identified some positive effects, but recognized cost effectiveness as a challenge and summarized "that the program provides a starting point for redirecting otherwise disconnected young people, albeit one that could be improved upon"(Miller, et al., 2018. p. ES-9). There are numerous other youth employment programs that demonstrate some limited successes (Spievak & Sick, 2019) but the challenges are more apparent for system-involved youth (Edelstein & Lowenstein, 2014).

In several studies that tracked former foster youth (e.g., Macomber et al., 2008), research has identified high rates of unemployment in comparison to the general population of youth as well as low-levels of income when employed. Negative effects on employment have also been found for youth involved with the justice system (e.g. Wiesner, Kim, & Capaldi, 2010). There are many reasons why these populations have challenges with employment: the circumstances (e.g., maltreatment, truancy, arrest) that originally led to their system involvement, resulting trauma that interferes with success in multiple ways, experiences of poverty and the generally

poor schools found in low income communities, the many disruptions in life and schooling that negatively impact efforts to build educational and pre-employment skills, and the lack of resources and networks to aid in accessing academic and vocational opportunities.

Most studies that have examined the employment prospects of system-involved youth have done so from the perspective of the child welfare system or the juvenile justice system. In the current study, by contrast, the focus is on the workforce development system and the extent to which these systems address the needs of youth in child welfare or juvenile justice. The key research question for the study is: *How do State and Local Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) address the needs of system-involved youth?* This focus offers potential benefits by identifying existing mechanisms, strengths and gaps which can result in suggestions for improvement.

Employment Outcomes for System-involved Youth

Several studies have tracked former foster youth into their adult years and consistently identified the challenges facing youth transitioning out of the child welfare system (Barnow et al., 2015; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Okpych & Courtney, 2014; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Steward, Kum, Barth, & Duncan, 2014). In comparison to young adults in the general population who had similar education level and economic conditions, youth aged out of foster care tend to experience higher rates of unemployment and only earn approximately half their income on average when employed (Hook & Courtney, 2011; Okpych & Courtney, 2014; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). This high unemployment rate and low-income jobs hinder the ability to gain financial independence as adults (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018).

Multiple factors influence the employment outcomes of former foster youth. During economic downturns, alumni of foster care are especially vulnerable for unstable employment

which means that they are more likely to experience homelessness than their peers in the general population (Barnow et al., 2015; Dworsky & Gitlow, 2017; Stewart et al., 2014). In addition, former foster youth who identified as African American particularly face racial disparities in employment outcomes (Dworsky & Gitlow, 2017; Hook & Courtney, 2011). In terms of gender equality findings from one study show that young women aged out of foster care worked more than men but earned less overall (Stewart et al., 2014).

There are many reasons why youth aged out of foster care have challenges with employment. Several research studies suggest that childhood experiences, life disruptions and social capital all play a role in influencing employment outcomes of these vulnerable youth as they transition to adulthood (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Dworsky & Gitlow, 2017; Hook & Courtney, 2011; Okpych & Courtney, 2014). The circumstances (e.g., maltreatment, truancy, arrest) that originally led to their system involvement could result in trauma that interferes with success in their adult life (Sansone, Leung, & Wiederman, 2012). Compared to non-system-involved counterparts, former foster youth are found to experience more mental health difficulties, grade repetitions and early parenthood (Dworsky & Gitlow, 2017; Okpych & Courtney, 2014).

System-involved youth are also more likely to face disruptions in life and schooling which leads to fewer chance for them to build educational and professional skills for adult employment (Dworsky & Gitlow, 2017). In addition, lack of stability in childhood means that moving youth lose friends and familiar, safe environments that can improve their educational and employment outcomes in the long run (Gypen, Vanderfaeillie, De Maeyer, Belenger, & Van Holen, 2017). Finally, several studies confirmed that since foster youth often come from low-income families with limited social and human resources, they are more likely to attend

underfunded schools and live in low resourced neighborhoods (Gypen et al., 2017; Okpych & Courtney, 2014). The lack of resources and networks could reduce their access to academic and vocational opportunities that would make it possible to obtain steady, well-paying jobs (Okpych & Courtney, 2014).

Youth involved with the justice system also have negative employment outcomes (Sharlein, 2018; Taylor, 2015; van der Geest, Bijleveld, Blokland, & Nagin, 2016; Wiesner, Kim, & Capaldi, 2010). In general, incarceration has a detrimental effect on labor market participation and previous research consistently showed that it further diminishes the likelihood of the job seeker gaining employment in subsequent years, though those who had more work experience are more heavily impacted by incarceration than those who had no regular employment (van der Geest et al., 2016). This finding holds true for vulnerable youth involved in juvenile or criminal justice systems, and studies have found that compared to people without histories of delinquency, those who offended in adolescence were more likely to stay unemployed or find low-quality jobs after controlling for other demographic characteristics, human capital and system-related factors (Carter, 2019; Wiesner et al., 2010).

Youth who were criminally convicted have significantly worse employment outcomes than those who only appeared in juvenile court due to the different time that the two groups are allowed to spend in the community (Sharlein, 2018). Since criminal justice involved youth tend to have shorter time in the community, they have less opportunity to work and earn income, which affects their future life outcomes related to education and employment (Sharlein, 2018). Even after accounting for factors, such as education level and number of working weeks, one study found that youth who appeared in adult court faced significant disadvantages in the labor market and its impact on their annual income continued well into adulthood (Taylor, 2015).

Previous research has also highlighted the link between poor employment outcomes and dual-system involvement among youth (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010: Dworsky & Gitlow, 2017; Hook & Courtney, 2011). For youth who aged out of foster care and were involved in the juvenile or adult criminal justice systems, the odds of gaining employment and decent earnings were significantly reduced, comparing to those without dual-involvement (Dworsky & Gitlow, 2017; Hook & Courtney, 2011). While youth in foster care often entered the child welfare system due to abuse and neglect, many got involved with the justice system because of delinquency (Hook & Courtney, 2011). The diminished employment outcomes for system-involved youth have prompted calls for more education, training opportunities and employment-preparation services for this vulnerable population.

Workforce Development Policy

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is the primary federal workforce policy and includes a Youth Program to provide federal resources to states (and, in turn, local workforce areas) to deliver youth services to assist youth (out-of-school or in-school youth with barriers). WIOA requires that state level Workforce Development Boards (WDBs) have the participation of youth serving professionals to inform program development. WIOA's Youth Activities Formula Grant program (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017) is provided to local agencies via WDBs and includes secondary educational support components, life skills development, seasonal work opportunities, and paid internships and job shadowing opportunities.

All local workforce systems funded by WIOA serve young people—generally those ages 14–24. Some youth come from disadvantaged backgrounds and need extra supports and guidance to complete their education, gain skills, or find work (Eyster et al. 2016). Recent data

from the 3rd quarter of 2018 indicate that foster youth were 3.7 percent of the youth population, ex-offenders were 10.7 percent. Other vulnerable populations include pregnant/parenting (20.5%), youth with disabilities (15.2%) and homeless/runaway (6.1%) (Employment and Training Administration, 2018). Local workforce systems must coordinate among the various agencies and organizations offering support services and other resources to help individuals with personal challenges successfully participate in the workforce.

The WIOA encourages the implementation of career pathways (aligning efforts of education, training, and workforce programs) and sector strategies (focused on the local or regional workforce needs for a particular industry). Organizations involved in the workforce system include government and the public sector; nonprofits and collaborative entities; employers and industry; and education and training providers. Activities include employment services, education and training, supportive services, and support for employers' human resources needs, among others. Career pathways and sector strategies require strong engagement from key state and local partners and stakeholders (Cordero-Guzman 2014, cited in Eyster, et al. 2016). How local workforce systems support their workforces varies greatly according to context and priorities (Eyster et al. 2016).

Each state has a State Workforce Development Board (SWDBs) and within most states there are multiple Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDBs). Both SWDBs and LWDBs have key roles to play in the implementation of WIOA (ETA, 2017). Briefly, SWDBs include the governor, legislators, state agency heads, business and labor. State boards are business-led and designed to help the governor develop and implement the strategic plan, designate local workforce investment areas, develop funding allocation formulas and state performance measures, and prepare annual reports. LWDBs include representatives of business, local higher

education entities, eligible training providers, labor organizations, economic and community development agencies, state employment services, and vocational rehabilitation. LWDBs oversee implementation of local WIOA services, including youth services, often with assistance from local youth standing committees. Youth councils were mandated under the previous federal workforce legislation (i.e., the Workforce Investment Act) but WIOA eliminated the requirement. However, local boards may establish a youth standing committee. Among other tasks, these committees may recommend policy direction to the LWDBs for the design, development, and implementation of program that benefit all youth. This current study focused on the particular intersection of the SWDB and the LWDB as well as the intersection of the LWDB and youth committee and contracted youth programs.

Method

The method involved focusing on one LWDB in 10 states regarding their approach to system-involved youth and to understand collaborative efforts to engage system-involved youth. To reduce sources of variation and because of the inherent complexity of the systems, the sample for the study focused on smaller and medium sized states. States were selected according to three criteria: smaller or medium sized population, relatively high percentage of disconnected youth (above the median), and geographic diversity.

Sample. The initial interview target was the Executive Director of the LWDB. Additional interviews were conducted with the Chair of the Youth Committee (or other youth specialist) and the Executive Director of the SWDB. There is some variation in how the WDBs are organized so that the specific interview participant may not have these titles, but in all cases, they had leadership roles. Information to identify WDBs and their contact person is available online (careeronestop.org). Initial contact was made by email to the identified person of the

LWDB to describe the study and seek participation. At the conclusion of this interview, participants were asked to provide contact with the Chair of the Youth Committee (if it existed) or an alternate expert regarding the youth component of the WDB programming. Independently, the SWDB was also contacted for participation. In one small state there were no local boards so only a representative of the SWDB was interviewed.

Response rate was generally high. One state was problematic, and we were unable to get a response from either a LWDB (we made two attempts at two different LWDBs) or the SWDB (whose Director had recently left). We, therefore, substituted another state. In two states, the initial LWDB did not respond so we successfully identified an alternative LWDB in each state. On two occasions the LWDB did not identify a youth specialist to contact for interview after initially agreeing to but then not following up. Table 1 identifies the type of interview subject categories in each state.

Data Collection. A total of 25 interviews were conducted with 33 interview subjects (in some cases the target interview subject wanted to include others with relevant expertise). Interviews were conducted between April and August 2020 and they lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Questions included a focus on the following topics: past/current initiatives for child welfare and juvenile justice populations, structure and membership of the WDBs, interactions across the state-local-contractor levels, key partnerships, mechanisms for engaging youth in policy/programming, for example. Consistent with qualitative interviewing, probes were used to gather detailed information (e.g., "can you tell me more about that?") and to gain further clarity and understanding about the information collected. Handwritten notes were taken during the interview and then transcribed for analysis. Interviews were supplemented by document review (state and local plans) to triangulate interview data.

Analysis. Consistent with qualitative methodology, analysis began concurrent to data collection. This involved organizing the transcripts, reading them several times, and writing memos both during data collection and during the analysis process. Analytic memos were utilized to identify common and emerging themes as well as unique or unusual findings. When data collection was complete, all transcripts were reviewed to generate a listing of themes to identify topics for more in-depth analysis. Each of the first two authors independently created a list of themes that emerged from review of transcripts.

Analysis then proceeded by organizing the data by thematic content following procedures suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). This included organizing the data into charts and matrices to identify commonalities and differences. Commonalities were also further analyzed to identify sub-themes including identification of unique responses. Grouping data by common response was used to further suggest potential reasons for shared responses. Several methods were utilized to enhance the validity of findings: triangulation of method; detailed notes and memos; multiple data analysts; and preparation of an evidence trail linking data, analysis, and conclusions.

Findings

The focus of the analysis presented in this paper is identifying the extent to which state and local efforts address the circumstances of system-involved youth and descriptions of these efforts. The findings are presented in three main sections: (1) specific efforts addressing these populations, (2) engagement of state agencies of child welfare and juvenile justice in workforce efforts, and (3) engagement of youth in policy and planning. To protect confidentiality of respondents the states are not identified but are represented by letters (A, B, C, etc.). Data primarily reflect the perspective of the LWDB unless identified as “state” or “youth specialist”.

Special efforts for child welfare and juvenile justice populations

All respondents recognized and identified that youth involved in child welfare or juvenile justice systems were two of the priority populations of the WIOA youth program. In addition, respondents from nine of the states identified at least one specialized effort for one or the other population. Among the initial responses were suggestions that these efforts are "at the forefront" and that it is a big issue and that they are working proactively (C). As would be expected, most of the specific initiatives happened at the local level, due to highly localized efforts that are "different region to region" (A). Funding was identified as a factor that contributed to special initiatives. For example, a state respondent (E), identified that "years ago" one of the local boards had Department of Labor funding for a foster youth grant initiative but that it was pilot funding and was not sustained after the grant ended.

Child Welfare. Specific efforts regarding youth aging out of care were identified in four states (C, D, F, J). Partnerships with the state child welfare agency were important in these initiatives as was designated funding that facilitated specialized attention.

The respondent from *C* identified "a couple of specific initiative for the foster care system." They had recognized the poor outcomes for "aging out" youth, knew that they generally don't have good outcomes and, therefore, partnered with the city government which had received state grants for this specific group of young people. The partnership "refer[red] back and forth" offering job search, resume building, and other components of employment and training.

Similarly, the respondent from *J* reported partnering with the State department responsible for child welfare: "We started consulting with them at the local level to decide how

to better service wards or independent living kids." He went on to identify that success working with these youth was related to two things: streamlining the engagement process to get young people engaged in the services and having mutual expectations across the provider, the customer (youth), and other support services. "Once engagement happens and everyone is on the same page, then the work can be successful." The youth specialist in *J* explicitly stated that aging out youth are automatically eligible. She described the approach to emphasize that youth are engaged in the most appropriate services for them, whether that be vocational rehabilitation, therapy, or something else. Additionally, she noted that their agency had a broader scope than many providers, and, in particular that their services were trauma informed.

The youth specialist in *F* stated that her agency works closely with the youth transition workers at the state child welfare agency. They had partnered with them to provide workshops on topics such as getting a summer job. An initiative funded by Annie E. Casey was initially just for youth in foster care but has since been opened up to other vulnerable youth. Notably, this respondent commented that the workforce development program does not receive automatic referrals from the state agency which would facilitate closer engagement between the two agencies.

The state respondent in *D* stated the LWDB leaders "have done a tremendous amount of work to engage [the state child welfare agency] "to really bring those administrators into conversations with us about the aging out population." There have been "very intentional conversations" about what happens after youth graduate from foster care. Some of the focus is on creating "overlap" so that when they age out, they have something to go toward. The respondent also articulated that foster care is about meeting youth's more basic needs, not workforce

development. This is the role that the workforce system can fulfill. The aim is to be "very intentional, enter into that space", and connect with youth sooner.

Other respondents did not report special efforts in child welfare; for example, "On child welfare, probably pretty soft on that (E)." Typically these respondents reported generic responses about foster youth being one of the priority populations but offered no specific initiatives.

Juvenile Justice. Specific initiatives related to juvenile justice were identified in five states (C, E, F, G, H). Uniquely, the respondent from *G* described specific efforts in regard to youth violence. This was different from other respondents because it emphasized more of a preventive focus – that workforce could help prevent violence and consequent youth involvement in the juvenile justice system. These initiatives were based on research that found high levels of youth violence in a key city and the recommendation that employment and workforce programming would reduce youth violence. So far, a pilot has been in place to provide supportive services with the hope of expanding across the state. It was noted that a focus on supportive services is needed as foundational activities to help youth develop soft skills which are necessary for eventual success in employment.

More commonly, some respondents reported relationships with juvenile facilities (E, F, J). For example, *E*, reported that they "just started getting back connected to the justice system" and they have been talking with a couple of organizations, mainly the county juvenile justice center, and have launched a project with a county "Boys Home" with the intent that they will be able to connect every youth in the juvenile justice system with the workforce system.

Less common were three states (B, H, K) in which the LWDB respondents indicated that there were not any specific initiatives related to child welfare or juvenile justice, although a state respondent may have offered a different perspective. *B* reported that they have not been reaching out directly to either the child welfare or juvenile justice population. The respondent reported that staff do reach out to juvenile justice youth but that there are not many of them. She also noted the Job Corps is a major partner and juvenile justice youth would be addressed through them. They also do not list foster care as an "active partner" and there is not a direct linkage to the population. There is also a referral issue in regard to foster youth. About 75 percent of out-of-school youth are referred by a school counselor or via word-of-mouth by another youth but youth in foster care do not come in by these means.

But the *B* state respondent was quite knowledgeable about child welfare, was a social worker and had worked with the aging out population. "Coming out of child welfare at 18 you're coming into homelessness or you're back with family that wasn't there to help you in the first place. Tuition support is not enough. Going to college is a huge privilege. Everyone who is transitioning from care should have exposure to work experience."

K reported that they didn't "specifically tailor our programs to focus on that one specific barrier" but rather kept the broader perspective "at risk youth" and utilized a "holistic approach" to youth with barriers to employment. In *H*, the respondent from the LWDB reported that there is nothing specific regarding youth in child welfare or juvenile justice systems. Similar to the above, the respondent noted that the majority of these young people have barriers to employment and that is who they serve. The youth specialist in this state, used the term "opportunity youth" which include child welfare and juvenile justice, but other priority youth populations such as teen parents and those with disabilities. She stated that she "wish[ed] we could do more" with

child welfare. "They don't funnel enough youth" to us. It is more common that they get referrals from probation officers and the youth authority. "It would be so beneficial for child welfare young people." She reported that a few years ago the state child welfare agency offered a summer grant to have foster youth get paid summer work experience, but this program no longer exists.

Even when a close relationship is reported, it is not necessarily straightforward. A thoughtful response from a youth specialist (F) identified that she "spen[t] a lot of time thinking about partnership." While she reported a good partnership it also depended on the "level", meaning the difference between interaction with workers versus the systemic level. Speaking about child welfare she noted that despite having a good partnership, it was also "odd" because it is "very hard to make traction"; it's "troubling that we don't get more referrals". She described it as a challenge even though she did have a good relationship. One of the issues was that the youth transition staff (from child welfare) were all on one team (statewide) whereas each LWDB has a different service provider. Consequently, youth transition staff may have variable experience with workforce development. The respondent was also sensitive to recognizing that she was unaware of the caseload size or priorities of transition staff, hypothesizing that workforce probably was not a priority for them. On a positive note, she also mentioned a regional resource center with expertise in youth that was helpful in advancing efforts regarding youth engagement and which has collaborated with her organization as well as others.

Engagement of the state agencies in state workforce development planning

SWDBs are required to have a membership in which the majority is held by business and which is also chaired by business. But representatives of key state agencies are members as well. WIOA designates core partners (e.g., Adult Education, Vocational Rehabilitation) as members of

WDBs and interviewees spoke about the range of members. Respondents were asked specifically about the inclusion of representatives from the state departments responsible for child welfare and juvenile justice, and the level of engagement and visibility of these members on the SWDB.

There was variation in whether these members were included and how they were described. One of those that seemed to be the strongest was *J*. This SWDB purposefully arranged itself to be more connected to government; it "pulls together state agencies to provide clear-cut direction and to break down siloes." Some effects of this include braided funding, development of wraparound supports, and, ultimately putting "people, not programs" at the center of the work. The SWDB took a different approach to the WIOA plan by breaking down the various subgroups and then being strategic in targeting the subgroups. Review of the state plan verified this description. It provided a very detailed discussion of the different subgroups and in which youth received significant attention.

It was more common that the engagement of the state agencies appeared perfunctory or episodic. One SWDB respondent reported these agencies to be involved "indirectly", articulating that there can be youth-focused grants that fall under the authority of some of the state agencies (in addition to human services, such as higher education) and these become vehicles for collaborative efforts. Additionally, this respondent noted, as did some others, that the Workforce Investment Act, which was the legislation prior to WIOA, resulted in "huge boards". Consequently, this SWDB made a deliberate attempt to be more agile and to create more flexibility at local levels. As the respondent described it, his state was "hyper focused" on connecting to others rather than trying to include everyone on the board.

Some informality was also apparent in states that described themselves as small. One respondent (G) noted, "I can call the Secretary of X department, ask for something, and get it". As another example (A), which did have child welfare and juvenile justice as members of the SWDB, noted that it was a small state, and thus it was not difficult to maintain partnerships.

Respondents in *F* reported that child welfare and corrections attended meetings and contributed to strategic planning although they were non-voting members of the SWDB. The SWDB, however, has a sub-committee specific to the young adult population and child welfare and corrections were part of that group. Additionally, in their state there is a Children's Cabinet within the Governor's office and state agency commissioners sit on that. This Cabinet then interacts with the young adult sub-committee of the SWDB.

A unique response came from *B* which reported that the SWDB included a representative of child welfare, but the person was not representing the state agency. Rather this individual represented a statewide youth advocacy organization that organizes and supports young people to advocate for policy change. The respondent had encouraged this individual to join the SWDB believing his presence to be helpful in representing the voice of the youth population.

One state (D) noted that their board is only about 2/3 of their capacity. When asked specifically about child welfare and juvenile justice representation on the board, they said they did not have representatives from those agencies. They also noted they did not do anything specific for child welfare and juvenile justice youth. But they then mentioned that some of the Board members have experience with youth.

Review of state plans identified a wide range of approaches to workforce development, generally, and youth programs, more specifically. Each report contained a section on the Youth

Program. As noted above, one report (J) offered an in-depth description and analysis of their youth program. In another example (B) the state plan identified a statewide position - a Youth Engagement Coordinator. This role was also mentioned in an interview as the "keeper of the values" and who works across the state promoting workforce development in youth service agencies.

Youth perspectives

Engagement of youth at a policy or program level was not common. Most frequently respondents indicated that the workers advocate for youth (K youth specialist), that they hear feedback from youth "every day" (A), that youth surveys serve as a feedback mechanism (J youth specialist) or that they rely on the contractors' expertise in regard to youth (H).

Several respondents confirmed that youth councils were required under the Workforce Investment Act but were made voluntary under WIOA. This appears to have had implications for the various board's efforts to have a structured mechanism. As *A* stated, "it's more informal now." One respondent who had been the youth council chair reported that it "never felt like it was what it could have been." As she reported, the same people engaged in youth work routinely showed up to meetings. The problem, as she saw it, was that they were only talking to each other; she "would have liked to have been able to bring in other groups." In particular they needed employers and there was not youth participation.

One robust response was articulated by *F* and the respondents raised these issues early in the interview before a question about youth engagement was asked. They reported substantial inclusion of youth voice in the development of the state plan. Youth serving organizations pulled together a number of youth and a wide range of youth voices, to provide feedback into the

plan. In a follow-up email, the respondents shared the notes from strategic planning meetings that verified substantial youth involvement. Part of the explanation they offered was that they were a small state and that it is: "Hard to do anything in the state without everyone knowing, wanting to be involved. When they heard about strategic planning, everyone wanted to participate."

In one example of engaging youth perspectives, a youth specialist reported expertise in her agency related to positive youth development. She reported that her program is "known for it." In her view, most organizations put positive youth development on the "back burner" whereas it "should be on the front burner" and "that's where we start." In terms of the interaction of this with the LWDB, in the past the LWDB would ask for youth success stories for the newsletter and they would invite youth to present to the Board. But lately due to "a lot of shifts in leadership" at the LWDB they have not asked the youth to present.

Several respondents, in noting they did not have a formal mechanism for engaging youth at this level, expressed recognition of the importance of this and an interest in doing so:

> C: I'd like to be better [at this]. There is no shortage of young people who want to be heard. I see a real lack in doing that. Barriers such as transportation, youths' schedule. Current crisis might improve that – getting better at that with online communication. That's one issue that we need to focus on.
>
> D: One [new initiative] just came out a couple weeks ago. [It] will involve bringing voice of youth into programming, decision-making. We have not provided youth the opportunity to be involved in design of programs.

E: We really should [have youth on the council]. We're seeing that, we need to have more of that voice. Partner organizations are largely speaking for them in most settings. Not much else to say other than there is a need to have youth present.

F youth specialist: [The LWDB] did have a young person on the youth council who was a client of the program. Then she became staff – a career advisor. If we reconvene [the LWDB] we will probably discuss this [having another youth]. It's not really included in the official program design. We are attuned to the importance of youth voice.

Discussion

Extensive research has demonstrated the limited employment of youth with histories of child welfare or juvenile justice system involvement (e.g., Barnow et al., 2015; Wiesner, Kim, & Capaldi, 2010). These youth have particular needs for creating positive pathways to stable employment and consequent economic stability. The federal workforce development system operating under WIOA provides potential opportunities for creating employment pathways. Little is known, however, regarding how these networks serve youth in child welfare and juvenile justice systems. In this article we have begun to identify how these networks do serve youth and can offer some adjustments to policy and practice.

Data presented in this paper suggest that there are a variety of approaches to these populations in state and local workforce systems. While they are a mandated priority population identified by WIOA, they receive variable levels of specific attention related to particular strengths in localities, available partners, and opportunities often related to funding. There were several indications that pilot funding led to a specific focus on one or the other population but that often the funding is not sustained and specific attention wanes.

At the local level, three conclusions for practice are offered based on these data. First, in a few sites the workforce personnel felt they did not receive enough referrals from the child welfare system. They were eager to serve this population and thought they could be helpful. The same issues did not seem to arise with juvenile justice involved youth. On the contrary, juvenile justice facilities were often targeted for outreach and programming. A respondent had recognized that the work of child welfare transition workers was much broader than workforce planning and another noted that child welfare personnel often help the youth to access resources for basic needs like housing. But workforce personnel also were well aware of the specific expertise that they could bring to older youth in care and those transition from care. Forging strengthened automatic referral mechanisms is one clear recommendation. Boundaries of services areas between the local workforce area and the child welfare service area may be a barrier. But systems-level efforts are familiar with this type of barrier and can develop practices to overcome it.

Second, some respondents suggested the need for more supportive and wraparound services. Many noted the very challenging life circumstances of these youth populations and warned that too great a focus on employment and training without the needed supports (related to basic needs, mental health, and trauma, specifically) they would be challenged to achieve successful outcomes. These needs were particularly noted by youth specialists who have a much closer relationship and extensive training with youth populations. The concept of partnerships is central to workforce development and the need to address some of these basic needs of youth can only be attained through such partnerships. Nearly all respondents conveyed highly empathic responses regarding the challenges facing youth people.

Third, is the importance of recognizing the value of specialized expertise that each partner brings. Partnerships are a cornerstone of effective workforce development systems. Workforce systems can appear cumbersome because of the large number of players each with expertise in their own domain of practice. The workforce development professionals know about this area whereas foster care and juvenile justice staff do not. Child welfare workers, typically referring to the transition workers, are not experts in workforce development, and can provided limited assistance to young people with this part of their transition planning. Consequently, child welfare and juvenile justice systems must effectively engage workforce systems to support the employment and training needs of their client populations.

Policy implications from this study suggest the needed for more institutionalized integration of child welfare and juvenile justice with workforce development. There were occasional examples of this provided in the data collected but for the most part a systemic integration is lacking. Part of this would involve robust, ongoing participation of child welfare and juvenile justice agency heads on the State WDB. This did not appear to be widespread. There were some limitations in our ability to assess the strength of these agencies in the youth-focused planning of WDBs. Moreover, SWDBs themselves appear highly variable in their organizational structure, operations, board member engagement, and interactions with the LWDBs. One respondent (D) relayed that the SWDB has recently been "revitalized" and is "definitely a work in progress." Prior to this they had held meetings, followed an agenda, and reviewed policies, but there was not a lot of input by the Board. While not a primary focus of the current study, there were other indications of unevenness across both SWDBs and LWDBs that would obviously affect implementation of workforce services.

The youth specialists at the local level might be another mechanism for ensuring attention to child welfare and juvenile justice populations. On the whole, interviews conducted with the chair of the youth council or another youth-focused designee identified by the LWDB, provided consistent evidence of youth-specific expertise. These respondents tended to be highly knowledgeable about youth in their community, their needs and strengths, various service models, and youth barriers to employment. From these respondents we heard about positive youth development, youth trauma, engagement with juvenile corrections facilities, aging out of care and use of Chafee funding, for example. Engaging youth expertise seemed variable and reinforces the complexity of the workforce development system and its abilities regarding vulnerable youth. In some environments youth expertise appears well-embedded and a clear partner, in others more of an independent contracted agency, and in others more diffuse.

One implication from these findings is the need for more explicit efforts to leverage this expertise in broad and systemic ways, in addition to service provision. Data demonstrated this did occur in some local settings; LWDB or SWDB respondents identified critical ways in which this expertise was used in workforce planning, for example, by having the contracted youth provider serve as chair of the youth council. This seems one pragmatic and integrative way to tap this expertise for broader integration of youth expertise with workforce planning. It might also indicate the need to revise and reform the contracting processes used to select and engage youth-serving agencies. We have little specific information about this but recognizing the complexity of the implementation process in workforce development (Cohen, Timmons, & Fesko, 2005), some thought regarding contracting seems appropriate to reflect on how these agencies might be best utilized.

Finally, youth themselves might be the entity to provide specialized expertise. Yet, formalized youth engagement in policy and planning was rare (Authors, 2020). Several respondents stated the value of developing mechanisms to include youth perspectives but there was little indication that commitment to the inclusion of youth voice was currently common. This is a bit unusual. Multiple youth serving systems have recognized the critical important of engaging youth (e.g., Collins, Augsberger, Sirois, 2020; Augsberger, Gecker, & Collins, 2018). They do not always do it well, but most are well past the point of recognizing the importance of doing so, even if not fully implemented. The majority of respondents in this study did not identify examples of engaging youth perspectives in program and planning. Exceptions to this include some of the youth provider agencies who sometimes demonstrated this expertise. There was also one SWDB who was surprisingly adept in regard to positive youth development. This was explained by their collaboration with a well-known regional training center with expertise on youth issues. Because most respondents saw the value of youth engagement a clear next step is to facilitate access to best practices regarding positive youth development that can support WDBs in further engaging youth.

Conclusion

In order to make progress in supporting the adolescents and young adults with experience in child welfare or juvenile justice, more systemic strategies are needed. Opportunities for youth through the workforce development systems are available in all communities. Although highly complex systems, several have youth-specific expertise and potential access to a wide range of employment, training, and educational opportunities. As one respondent noted, the educational slide caused by COVID will cause the poverty gap to get wider for vulnerable youth and youth in child welfare and juvenile justice systems will facing increasing gaps in accessing training for

advanced skills and credentials. Bolstering attention to the youth-focus of these systems is critical to avoid the long term impacts of disconnection at this life stage.

Augsberger, A., Gecker, W., & Collins, M.E. (2018). "We make a direct impact on people's lives:" Youth empowerment in the context of a participatory budgeting project. *Journal of Community Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22131

Authors. (2020). Integrating positive youth development into planning for youth workforce development.

Barnow, B. S., Buck, A., O'Brien, K., Pecora, P., Ellis, M. L., & Steiner, E. (2015). Effective services for improving education and employment outcomes for children and alumni of foster care service: Correlates and educational and employment outcomes. *Child and Family Social Work*, *20*, 159–170. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12063

Burds-Sharps, S., & Lewis, K. (2018). *More than a million reasons for hope: Youth disconnection in America today*. Social Science Research Council. https://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/moa/dy18.full.report.pdf.

Carter, A. (2019). The consequences of adolescent delinquent behavior for adult employment outcomes. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *48*, 17–29. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-018-0934-2.

Cohen, A., Timmins, J.C., & Fesko, S.L. (2005). The Workforce Investment Act: How Policy Conflict and Policy Ambiguity Affect Implementation. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 15*, 221-230.

Collins, M.E., Augsberger, A., & Sirois, L. (2020). Civic engagement approaches for system-involved youth: A comparative analysis. *Journal of Youth Studies*.

Dworsky, A, & Courtney, M. (2010). Assessing the impact of extending care beyond age 18 on homelessness: Emerging findings from the Midwest Study, (March), 1–10. Retrieved

from https://nytdcommunity.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/Assessing the Impact of Extending Care Beyond 18.pdf.

Dworsky, Amy, & Gitlow, E. (2017). Employment outcomes of young parents who age out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *72*, 133–140. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.09.032

Edelstein, S., & Lowenstein, C. (2014). *Supporting youth transitioning out of foster care, Issue brief 3: Employment programs*. OPRE Report # 2014-70. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services.

Employment and Training Administration (ETA). (Spring 2017). *WIOA Youth Program Reference Tool*. Washington, D.C.: ETA/DOL.

Employment and Training Administration (ETA). (2018). *PY 2017 Quarter 3 Report for WIOA and Wagner-Peyser*. Washington, DC: Office of Policy Development and Research/Employment and Training Administration.

Eyster, L., Durham, C., Van Noy, M., & Damron, N. (2016). *Understanding local workforce systems*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Gypen, L., Vanderfaeillie, J., De Maeyer, S., Belenger, L., & Van Holen, F. (2017). Outcomes of children who grew up in foster care: Systematic-review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *76*, 74–83. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.02.035

Hook, J. L., & Courtney, M. E. (2011). Employment outcomes of former foster youth as young adults: The importance of human, personal, and social capital. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *33*(10), 1855–1865. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.05.004

Lewis, K., & Gluskin, R. (2018). *Two futures: The economic case for keeping youth on track.* New York: Measure of America.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Miller, C., Cummings, D., Millenky, M., Wiegand, A., & Long, D. (2018). *Laying a foundation: Four-year results from the National YouthBuild Evaluation*. New York: MDRC.

Nisbet, E., McKay, H.A., & Haviland, S. (2017). The emergence of local practices in a devolved workforce investment system: Barriers and possibility for enhancing degree completion. *Economic Development Quarterly, 31*, 183-195.

Macomber, J. E., Cuccaro-Alamin, S., Duncan, D., Kuehn, D., McDaniel, M., Vericker, T., Pergamit, M., Needell, B., Kum, H., Stewart, J., Lee, C., Barth, R. P. (2008). *Coming of age: Employment outcomes for youth who age out of foster care through their middle twenties*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

O'Toole, L. J., Jr. (2000). Research on policy implementation: Assessment and prospects. *Journal of Public Administration and Theory, 10*, 263-288.

Okpych, N. J., & Courtney, M. E. (2014). Does education pay for youth formerly in foster care? Comparison of employment outcomes with a national sample. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *43*, 18–28. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.04.013

Rosenberg, R., & Kim, Y. (2018). Aging out of foster care: Homelessness, post-secondary education, and employment. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, *12*, 99–115. https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2017.1347551

Sansone, R. A., Leung, J. S., & Wiederman, M. W. (2012). Five forms of childhood trauma: Relationships with employment in adulthood. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, *36*, 676–679. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2012.07.007

Sharlein, J. (2018). Beyond recidivism: Investigating comparative educational and employment outcomes for adolescents in the juvenile and criminal justice systems. *Crime and Delinquency*, *64*, 26–52. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128716678193

Spievak, N., & Sick, N. (2019). *The youth workforce: A detailed picture*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

Stewart, C. J., Kum, H. C., Barth, R. P., & Duncan, D. F. (2014). Former foster youth: Employment outcomes up to age 30. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *36*, 220–229. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.11.024

Taylor, M. (2015). Juvenile transfers to adult court: An examination of the long-term outcomes of transferred and non-transferred juveniles. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, *66*, 29–47. https://doi.org/10.1111/jfcj.12050

van der Geest, V. R., Bijleveld, C. C. J. H., Blokland, A. A. J., & Nagin, D. S. (2016). The effects of incarceration on longitudinal trajectories of employment: A follow-up in high-risk youth from ages 23 to 32. *Crime and Delinquency*, *62*, 107–140. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128713519196

Wiesner, M., Kim, H. K., & Capaldi, D. M. (2010). History of juvenile arrests and vocational career outcomes for at-risk young men. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 47*, 91–117.

	LWDB	Youth Specialist	State WDB
A	X	X	X
B	X		X
C	X	X	X
D	X		X
E	X	X	X
F	X	X	X
G	X		Same as LWDB
H	X	X	X
J	X	X	X
K	X	X	X