

Youth Apprenticeship: A Worker Advocate Perspective

The union apprenticeship model has long been an established successful path for workers to learn skills on-the-job, allowing for workers to quickly integrate into the field, build connections in the industry, and allowing the apprentice to earn money rather than go into debt during the training process. At a time when higher education debt is skyrocketing and youth unemployment rates remain stubbornly high, youth apprenticeship adds another tool to the toolbox of options to help build a more prosperous economy for all Americans.

Background

The high youth unemployment rate is a longstanding issue with long term consequences. A 2014 Brookings memo by Isabel Sawhill and Quentin Karpilow took a longitudinal look in *Youth Unemployment Is a Problem for Social Mobility*. Sawhill and Karpilow found that from 1948 through 2014 at the time of publishing, youth unemployment rates averaged around 2.7 times higher than the prime-age unemployment rate (25-54 years). This ratio tended to fluctuate in tandem with business cycles, particularly in economic downturns. Sawhill and Karpilow estimated the individual impact of a six-month period of unemployment at age 22 to reduce the following year's wages by 8%, and to reduce future earnings by about \$22,000 over the following decade. In looking to explain these lost earnings, the memo pointed to "lost work experience, depreciating labor market skills, and the negative signals that unemployment sends to employers."¹ Notably, this impact is not evenly distributed across all youth. The long term economic losses, deemed "scarring," were more severe for youth from what the Brookings memo referred to as "disadvantaged populations" and particularly for youth not pursuing post-secondary education. This trend of a widening opportunity gap appears to be holding.

As of July 2023, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) numbers place current youth unemployment at 8.7 percent, with little change from 2022.² By comparison, the prime-

¹ Sawhill, Isabel V. and Quentin Karpilow. *Youth Unemployment Is a Problem for Social Mobility*. The Brookings Institution. 5 March 2014. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/youth-unemployment-is-a-problem-for-social-mobility/#:~:text=High%20youth%20unemployment%20isn't,vary%20with%20the%20business%20cycle>.

² Economic New Release: Employment and Unemployment Among Youth Summary. 16 August 2023.

age unemployment rate from 2023 through February 2024 has hovered between 3.0 and 3.3 percent.³ When stratified by gender, the unemployment rates for young men was 9.2 percent and women was 8.2 percent. When stratified for race/ethnicity, the rates broke down to White at 7.0 percent, Black at 18.0 percent, and Hispanic at 10.5 percent, all substantially similar to the year prior. The young Asian unemployment rate was the only rate which was lower than the previous year, at 5.6 percent, however, this data is not disaggregated to account for the wide variations across the ethnicities captured by Asian American Pacific Islander Native Hawaiian (AAPINH).⁴

Senator María Elena Durazo introduced Senate Bill 1351, the California Youth Apprenticeship Program, in 2022. She was chair of Senate Budget Subcommittee 5 overseeing California's labor and workforce development budget items. As Subcommittee chair, she established the California Youth Apprenticeship Program and secured \$20 million in 2022-2023, \$20 million in 2023-24, and \$25 million in 2024-25 to support the program for a total of \$65 million.⁵

The program is administered by the California Department of Industrial Relations Division of Apprenticeship Standards (DAS), with the charge of awarding grants for the purpose of providing funding for existing apprenticeship and preapprenticeship programs or to develop new apprenticeship and preapprenticeship programs to serve the target population and satisfy the goals and objectives of the grant program. Critically, the bill defined “target population” as individuals from 16 to 24 years of age who are at risk of disconnection or are disconnected from the education system or employment, unhoused, in the child welfare, juvenile justice, or criminal legal systems, living in concentrated poverty, or are facing barriers to labor market participation. “Target population” is also inclusive of youth who face chronic opportunity educational achievement gaps, attend schools in communities of concentrated poverty, or attend high schools with a negative school climate. Importantly, the program will collect, analyze, and report data on race, gender, income, rurality, ability, foster youth, homeless youth, English language learner, and other key characteristics.

DAS convened the California Youth Apprenticeship Committee (CYAC) to develop recommendations to the division on the expansion of youth apprenticeships in California. The Committee was charged with establishing definitions of youth

<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/youth.nr0.htm>

³ Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey: A-10. Unemployment rates by age, sex, and marital status, seasonally adjusted. Bureau of Labor Statistics. 8 March 2024.

<https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea10.htm>

⁴ Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey: Data about Asians. Bureau of Labor Statistics. 1 September 2023. <https://www.bls.gov/cps/demographics/asians.htm>

⁵ SB 191 Excerpts. California Department of Industrial Relations Division of Apprenticeship Standards. https://www.dir.ca.gov/DAS/DAS_MeetingAgenda/2023/February/SB-191-Excerpts.pdf

apprenticeship and high school apprenticeships, guiding principles in the California Opportunity Youth Apprenticeship (COYA) Grant, and providing insights on the structure of the state's work to expand youth apprenticeship. The committee includes representatives from youth, youth serving organizations, labor, employers of youth, K–12 schools, community colleges, and the public workforce system. The first round of applications for funding for the California Opportunity Youth Apprenticeship (COYA) Grant opened in February, with projects estimated to start by July of this year.⁶ The committee has analyzed extensive surveys of youth apprenticeship models with the intention of presenting a report of findings by July.

In August of 2023, California Governor Gavin Newsom issued an Executive Order to improve access to high-paying and fulfilling careers for students and workers, reduce barriers to employment in State jobs, and launch the creation of a new Master Plan on Career Education.⁷

Findings and Recommendations

In the course of surveying models across the country and internationally, a theme which rose to the top was that youth are at a stage where exploration of interests is important. Many youth do not know what they want to do as a career, or their ideas may change as they gain experience or find out about opportunities. The most promising models for youth apprenticeship allowed youth to experience the work based learning while not pigeonholing them into a single profession or trade by ensuring that youth completed their programs not only with transferable skills but with portable and stackable credentials that can propel youth forward along branching career pathways. For example, a youth apprentice may complete a program around community health work with the intention of following a nursing pathway, but may find that rather than continuing down this path, is better suited for a role focused on behavioral health, or may be able to take this biological life sciences credential and move into lab work.⁸

⁶ California Opportunity Youth Apprenticeship Grant (COYA). California Department of Industrial Relations Division of Apprenticeship Standards. <https://www.dir.ca.gov/DAS/Grants/California-Youth-Apprenticeship-Grant.html>

⁷ Executive Order N-11-23. Executive Department State of California. <https://www.gov.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/8.31.23-Career-Education-Executive-Order.pdf> Freedom to Succeed: Governor Newsom Launches New Effort To Prepare Students and Workers for High-Paying Careers. <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2023/08/31/freedom-to-succeed/#:~:text=The%20Governor%27s%20executive%20order%20directs%20state%20leaders%20in%20education%2C%20workforce,diverse%20students%2C%20parents%2C%20education%20professionals>

⁸ Barriers and Recommendations to Facilitating Earn and Learn Training Programs in Allied Health Professions. California Department of Consumer Affairs. <https://www.dca.ca.gov/publications/ab2105.pdf>

In order for this model to work, youth apprenticeship requires extensive coordination among educators, labor, employers, and intermediaries. The 2000 hour minimum requirement typical for registered apprenticeships is challenging to complete on top of. Additionally, youth face unique barriers like consistency of transportation. current high school graduation requirements simply due to the limits on hours in the day. Successful examples of youth apprenticeship combined flexibility on the part of the employer with school credits and accommodations for workload, as well as union and intermediary supportive services and mentorship.

As with preapprenticeship, it is vital that youth apprenticeships are connected with registered apprenticeship programs. Key performance indicators in the traditional preapprenticeship and apprenticeship model like retention and matriculation from the program to employment or to apprenticeship can also be telling of the success of youth apprenticeship, however should be adjusted specifically for youth apprenticeship. For example, some models for youth apprenticeship which did not have formal connections to registered apprenticeship had outcomes where few if any who completed the program went on to a registered apprenticeship. The pattern of data suggested that these participants went on to post-secondary education. This outcome, in and of itself, is not negative, however, it does suggest that the population that was served may not have been the target population which could benefit most from youth apprenticeship. Organized labor often is ready with the infrastructure to recruit from target populations and provide the critical wraparound services that can help apprentices complete a program.

Youth apprenticeship is not a silver bullet to workforce supply and unemployment issues, but in combination with the many paths to good, thriving wage jobs, can be a critical link for youth who may have otherwise fallen through the cracks.