



Investing in Service Years: A Strategy to Ensure the Future Success of the Nation's Opportunity Youth

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Service year programs – full-time paid service experiences that develop real-world skills through hands-on service – are a little-understood strategy to change the life trajectory of opportunity youth. *Opportunity youth*, sometimes referred to as *disconnected youth*, comprise nearly five million American youth aged 16 – 24 who are neither in school nor employed. Finding ways to help opportunity youth find pathways to employment or further education and training can help the country fill workforce gaps. Doing so through service year experiences offers the added benefit of developing purposeful, engaged citizens willing to volunteer to solve community problems long after their service year ends.

About a third of full-time service year positions today are targeted at opportunity youth through programs such as youth corps (comprehensive youth service programs that provide their participants with job training, academic programming, leadership skills, and additional support), and YouthBuild programs (which enable low-income young people to learn construction skills by helping to build affordable housing and community facilities while working toward a high school credential). Today, more than 100 youth corps and 260 YouthBuild sites, along with an unknown number of other programs, offer the chance for opportunity youth to advance themselves through service.¹

This paper outlines reasons to invest in expanding service year experiences for young people who are neither in school or working, including information on the developmental phase now known as “emerging adulthood” and its role in future success of young people, and an explanation how service year programs help reduce inequities that are exacerbated during this period of life. It calls for increasing service year positions for opportunity youth to 100,000 per year, and concludes with action agendas for four specific audiences: policymakers, employers, programs, and community leaders.

Who are opportunity youth?

Approximately 4.6 million American youth – about 11.7 percent of the 16 to 24 year old population – are disconnected, according to a recent report released by Measure of America of the Social Science

¹ In addition, a subset of existing service year programs is focused on improving outcomes for low-income youth, including a large portion of AmeriCorps VISTA. These programs, too, are too small to meet potential demand. This paper does not address the potential benefits of expanding such programs, although there are many.

Research Council in March 2018, a decline from the 2010 peak rate of 14.7 percent.² These young people are disproportionately Black, Latino, and Native American, and young men are slightly more likely to be disconnected than young women. The majority of opportunity youth are born into and raised in poverty, often in communities with low-performing schools and high rates of crime. Dropping out of school is highly correlated with disconnection, as is experience with the criminal justice system or family caregiving responsibilities, including teen parenthood. Many opportunity youth have disabilities, experience in foster care, or have lived in institutional residences.³ Few have bachelor's degrees. They are also far more likely to be living independently of either parent than other youth. And while youth in urban areas – particularly city centers – experience higher than average rates of disconnection, youth in certain rural areas and small towns have even higher rates. Opportunity youth tend to have children who suffer the same fate, creating a powerful intergenerational cycle of poverty and insufficient education and training.

“Emerging adulthood” and why it matters

The years between the ages of 18 and 24 are known as “emerging adulthood,” a phase of life when young adults develop the skills, credentials, and connections they need to live independently. While much has been written about the critical early years of life, emerging adulthood has similar implications for young people’s future success. And it is during this period that the opportunity gap between low-income youth and their more affluent peers widens dramatically.

In earlier generations, most young adults left home, completed school, entered the workforce, married, and had children by age 26. Today, most young adults remain dependent on their families for financial assistance, support, and guidance while they complete their educations and enter the workforce. Different access to supports during young adulthood is a major reason opportunity youth struggle to find pathways to college or careers. Even if they succeed in completing high school, they will likely leave ill-prepared for success in today’s workforce, according to the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s seminal report, *Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing*

Program Highlight: YouthBuild

Through YouthBuild, Opportunity Youth learn construction skills to help build affordable housing and other community buildings while returning to school, gaining skills they need for employment, and becoming leaders in their communities. Every year, at a cost of about \$22,000 per person, 260 YouthBuild programs annually engage nearly 8,000 low-income young adults who have left high school without a diploma, approximately 30% of whom have been court-involved. They achieve powerful outcomes:

- 74% of all enrollees obtain their high school equivalency credentials, high school diplomas, and/or industry-recognized credentials
- 54% of all enrollees go on to postsecondary education or jobs
- 73% of those placed retain their placement for at least six months

² Burd-Sharps, S., & Lewis, K. (2018). *More than a Million Reasons for Hope: Youth Disconnection in America Today*. Measure of America of the Social Science Research Council.

³ Belfield, C. R., Levin, H. M., & Rosen, R. (2012). *The Economic Value of Opportunity Youth*. Civic Enterprises.

Young Americans for the 21st Century, which suggests that the nation's national strategy for education and youth development has been too narrowly focused on an academic, classroom-based approach. To advance along the pathway to successful careers, in addition to traditional education, young people also need:

- 21st century skills: The development of both “soft skills” and “21st century skills” that employers look for in new hires.⁴
- Work experience: The opportunity to operate in a real world setting where the individual is accountable for punctuality, professionalism, and performance.
- Career knowledge: The early knowledge and exploration that leads to the choice of a career path, development of a formal or informal plan, and the motivation to do what it takes for a career in a specific field.
- Social capital: The relationships that enable individuals to navigate the job market and secure opportunities.

These assets are typically developed outside of school settings, with families playing a major role. However, in the years leading up to young adulthood, disconnected youth ages 16 and 17 are 3.2 times more likely to be living without either of their parents than connected young people that age.⁵ A majority of connected young people (60 percent) live with two parents, and only 8.3 percent live with neither parent. However, one in four disconnected young people live apart from not just one but both parents. After age 18, this parental support gap continues, as parents of adult children typically continue to provide at least some financial support throughout their late teens and twenties, spending about ⅓ of the total cost of raising a child from birth to age eighteen again between eighteen and thirty-four. Children in the top quarter of income receive 70 percent more financial support than children in the bottom quarter.⁶

Program Highlight: Green City Force

Green City Force’s mission is to break the cycle of poverty, preparing urban young adults to succeed in their chosen careers by engaging them in service, training and work experiences related to the clean energy economy. Since 2009, over 500 unemployed or underemployed young adults living below the poverty line in NYC have served in the program. Seventy-five percent had no income in the year leading up to the program, and of those who did, their average annual income was \$2,000. After service in the program, these young people have maintained an 80% placement rate in employment or college six months post-graduation.

⁴ Casner-Lotto, J. (2015). *Are They Really Ready to Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce*. The Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management.

⁵ Burd-Sharps, S., & Lewis, K. (2018). *More than a Million Reasons for Hope: Youth Disconnection in America Today*. Measure of America of the Social Science Research Council.

⁶ Settersten, Richard A., & Ray, B. (2010). What's Going on with Young People Today? The Long and Twisting Path to Adulthood. *The Future of Children* 20(1), 19-41.

In addition to receiving limited financial support, opportunity youth typically do not receive the guidance and social connections that parents of more affluent youth receive.⁷ Therefore, while other young people benefit from the mentoring and introductions that well-connected parents, family friends, professors, and coaches have to offer, disconnected young people are largely on their own to find their way. While their more advantaged peers spend time in higher education institutions that offer not only education, but also individualized advising, career centers, housing, meals, and often, mental health supports, opportunity youth by definition are left to fend for themselves. And while educated youth are connected by colleges or families to internships and jobs that lead to meaningful careers, disconnected youth find themselves unprepared for anything except unskilled work, and sometimes lack the basic workplace skills that are essential for any job.

The consequences of young people remaining disconnected from school and work are immense. Opportunity youth often face lifetimes of unemployment, incarceration, or dependence on public assistance. One estimate places the lifetime direct cost to taxpayers of one 20-year-old who does not reconnect to education or employment at \$235,680, and the social cost at \$704,020. While the human cost is impossible to measure, the broader economic consequences are clear: The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce estimated that by 2018, only 30 percent of jobs in the United States will be for workers with either a high school diploma or an incomplete high school education – down from 72 percent in 1973, 44 percent in 1992, and 41 percent in 2007.⁸ Opportunity youth who remain disconnected from school and work will be unable to take advantage of opportunities in the job market of the future, and therefore will be unlikely to be able to fulfill the dreams they may have for themselves and their families. At the same time, the country will lose the valuable human resource represented by these young people.

Program Highlight: Public Allies

The Public Allies signature AmeriCorps Ally Program identifies diverse young adults and prepares them for leadership through paid full-time nonprofit apprenticeships and rigorous leadership training. Over 40% of Allies enter the program with no higher education or work experience; 30% have some college but no degree; and many are remaking their lives after incarceration, foster care, gang involvement, or early parenthood. They serve with nonprofit partners to expand and improve community services, engage more leaders, and foster collaboration to make positive community change happen. Allies not only increase the capacity of the programs they serve with, they help to break down prejudices and biases about the skill sets and training individuals need in order to be successful in the workplace. Seventy-five percent of young adults who serve in the program go on to nonprofit and public service careers.

⁷ Burd-Sharps, S., & Lewis, K. (2018). *More than a Million Reasons for Hope: Youth Disconnection in America Today*. Measure of America of the Social Science Research Council.

⁸ Bridgeland, J. M., Ingram, E. S., & Atwell, M. (2016). *A Bridge to Reconnection: A Plan for Reconnecting One Million Opportunity Youth Each Year Through Federal Funding Streams*. The Forum for Youth Investment, Jobs for the Future, and YouthBuild USA.

How service years help fill the gap

Experts note that in the US, the “solutions for managing this extended transition are, to a great degree, private ones, made possible by whatever social connections or resources young people and their parents happen to have or can create.” However, they also note that service programs can provide “important networks and opportunities for young people to ‘take stock’ of themselves and of society, wrestle with social and political attitudes and values, explore their identities, build skills, contribute to their communities, and develop a larger sense of purpose beyond the pursuit of individual gain.”⁹ These experiences are especially important for disconnected young people because they “can serve as an important bridge to jobs, not only in building job-related skills and experiences, but also in fostering connections to adult mentors, social networks, and organizations.”¹⁰



Meet Xavier

Xavier Jennings lost his dad at age 6. As his mother struggled to raise five kids on her own while working low-wage jobs in inner city Denver, Xavier joined a gang and began dealing drugs at age 13. He attended six different high schools before he dropped out. At 18 he found himself unemployed, without a high school diploma, and no sense of direction, facing a potential lifetime of struggles. Then his brother recommended Mile High YouthBuild, a service year program, that not only offered him the chance to earn his GED and develop construction skills, but also money for college from AmeriCorps and the ability to make a difference in his own community.

⁹ Settersten, Richard A., & Ray, B. (2010). What's Going on with Young People Today? The Long and Twisting Path to Adulthood. *The Future of Children* 20(1), 19-41.

¹⁰ National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2002). *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*. The National Academies Press.

While volunteer experiences in youth can help prevent disconnection, well-constructed service year programs during the emerging adulthood phase of life can provide a range of things that opportunity youth need to change their circumstances.¹¹ In general, service years 1) address important societal problems, 2) require a substantial time commitment over the course of 6-12 months, and 3) are performed through organized programs that are designed to build ties among individuals from diverse backgrounds or increase life opportunities for those who serve. Because of the substantial time commitment involved, service year corps members are paid modest living allowances. They may also be rewarded with other benefits to support their living needs, such as housing, food vouchers, travel support. These programs are remarkably diverse and flexible; there is no one typical service year program design. In some cases, organizations recruit dozens of service year corps members and organize them in teams to take on projects across several locations. In others, one or two individuals serve at an organization working under staff supervision.

Most service year programs offer experiences that build the 21st century skills necessary for success in the workplace and, sometimes, specialized skills training relevant to future careers. Recent research by Burning Glass, comparing the resumes of individuals who have completed a service year with a matched comparison group, revealed distinct patterns that differentiate service year alumni from their peers, both in the careers they forge and in the skills they develop¹². For example, service year alumni go on to complete bachelor's degrees at higher rates than their peers, are more likely than their peers to work in education and community and social services occupations, and are more likely than their peers to advertise skills related to leadership and organization. And while service year alumni with a bachelor's degree remain more concentrated in lower-paying career areas such as education and social services, service year alumni without bachelor's degrees earn slightly more than their similarly educated peers five, seven, and ten years after service.

Rural Youth

The highest rates of youth disconnection now occur in rural areas. Rural communities with persistent poverty may be some of the hardest places to change the trajectory of these young people due to limited jobs and under resourced agencies. Appalachian Kentucky is one community that has recognized the role that national service can play in improving outcomes for disconnected youth. In 2018, eastern Kentucky became a Service Year Impact Community, aiming to double the number of national service positions in order to engage young adults and others with the community while they build skills needed in the workforce.

Policy changes that could accelerate the growth of national service in rural areas include reducing the minimum number of corps members required to apply for AmeriCorps funding, putting multi-issue programs on equal footing with those that offer a single intervention, waiving match requirements, and providing more extensive program support and technical assistance to rural areas, including tribal communities.

¹¹ Opportunity Nation. (2014). *Connecting Youth and Strengthening Communities: The Data Behind Civic Engagement and Economic Opportunity*. Opportunity Nation.

¹² Burning Glass Technologies, forthcoming.



Meet Kenvin

Growing up in Washington, DC, Kenvin Lacayo didn't think college was an option. "I didn't know if I could afford it. I didn't know if anybody was going to accept me. I was very anxious about my future." About to graduate with no future plans, Kevin heard about the new Leading Men Fellowship program, a service year opportunity offered by the nonprofit Literacy Lab as a strategy to diversify the teacher pipeline by engaging recent high school graduates in exploring a career in early childhood education.

Leading Men Fellows serve full-time for a year in pre-kindergarten classrooms in traditional public and charter schools as early literacy tutors. As a member of the inaugural class of Leading Men, Kenvin worked with three and four year olds, helping to get them "kindergarten ready." "I didn't see a man of color in the classroom until my 11th grade year," he notes. "I think young children of color deserve to see a teacher that looks like them in the classroom."

"Doing a service year has definitely opened my eyes to a career in education," says Kenvin. "It's made me extremely confident in my abilities in myself and my future." The experience made it possible for him to go to Trinity Washington University with 95% of expenses covered. "I felt like the doors were kicked down and I have so many people who believe in me and who will support me," notes Kenvin. "It opened my eyes to a wider range of possibilities for myself."

An even more important differentiator of service year programs and traditional workforce development programs, however, is the ability of service programs to help youth redefine themselves in relation to society, discover their purpose, and address their social and emotional development in a

supportive environment.¹³ These qualities make service year programs transformational for young people of all backgrounds, but especially opportunity youth.

The field of positive youth development recognizes purpose as a vital indicator of adolescent thriving, including life satisfaction, the ability to cope with challenges, generosity, optimism, humility, and maturity.¹⁴ William Damon, director of the Stanford Center on Adolescence, defines purpose as “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to self and consequential for the world beyond self.” According to Damon, two conditions increase the likelihood that a young person will thrive: (1) forward movement toward a fulfilling purpose and (2) a structure of social support consistent with that effort. His findings show that a sense of purpose is a key to health and happiness, as well as a major factor in resilience, the ability to overcome severe trauma and adversity.

Young people themselves make this point. In a recent meeting with youth leaders from service programs in Englewood and similar Chicago neighborhoods, Thelonis Stokes, a 21 year-old serving with Public Allies, was asked what youth most need. His response: “Forget opportunities or lack of opportunities -- most youth in Englewood lack purpose which stops them from moving forward in life.” Well-constructed service year programs fill this void by helping young people discover their purpose, showing them that they can make a difference, and providing support and validation.

In addition to helping young people find their purpose, service year programs offer emerging adults of all backgrounds initial work-like experience that enables them to build both professional networks and 21st century skills such as attendance, punctuality, teamwork and conflict resolution that are needed in the workplace. During their service year experience, members may also learn about careers they may not have been exposed to previously and may in fact choose specific programs so that they can “try out” occupations (e.g., conservation, education or health). Youth corps also provide wraparound and emotional supports that enable youth to advance their education, address life challenges, and develop the motivation and navigational tools they need to succeed.

Transformational service year programs for opportunity youth combine a set of essential elements, including:

- Allowing corps members the chance to be change agents by highlighting their personal strengths, leveraging their power and voice, and contributing effective solutions, rather than directing rote activities without providing context or allowing youth to lead.
- Education opportunities, including the chance to attain a high school diploma or the equivalent, earn college credits, or certifications and credentials with value in the workplace.

¹³ Friedman, E., Freeman, B., Phillips, B., Rosenthal, L., Robinson, D., Miller, H., & Porowski, A. (2016). *AmeriCorps Alumni Outcomes: Final Survey Technical Report*. Corporation for National and Community Service.

¹⁴ Malin, H., Reilly, T. S., Quinn, B., and Moran, S. (2014). Adolescent purpose development: Exploring empathy, discovering roles, shifting priorities, and creating pathways. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 24(1), 186-199.

- Support for social and emotional development, including access to mentors.
- Wraparound supports, such as mental health services, housing assistance, and social services, available on an individual basis, either directly through the program or through partner organizations.
- The opportunity to set personal goals, identify the education, training, and experience necessary to achieve them, and use this knowledge to make decisions about education and activities.
- Clear pathways to jobs or education, including the opportunity to build professional relationships with individuals who can help them advance along their pathway of choice; and
- Opportunities for corps members to develop 21st century skills that increase employment potential including self-efficacy, respect for diversity, self-confidence, collaboration, avoidance of risk behaviors, resilience, social responsibility, communication, and leadership.¹⁵

A service year action agenda for opportunity youth

Experts look to service years as an important strategy to change the equation for opportunity youth. The Institute of Medicine and National Research Council examined research to inform policy relating to adults aged 18 - 26, in "Investing in the Health and Well-Being of Young Adults." Among its recommendations, the panel found that:

National service, including military service, can contribute to optimal development during the transition to adulthood by providing new and alternative opportunities to contribute to society in meaningful ways, to form one's identity, and to explore the larger world. For some, national service is a logical next step after college; for those who do not go on to college, it can be a path to social incorporation and to skill and network building. If national service is to serve this function for marginalized young adults, however, it must provide at least some of the scaffolds (mentoring, counseling, education and training, guided practice in leadership and teamwork) that are built into curricular and co-curricular college life.¹⁶

¹⁵ Weiler, et al., *An Evaluation of K-12 Service-Learning in California*.

¹⁶ Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. (2015). *Investing in the Health and Well-Being of Young Adults*. The National Academies Press.

A vibrant but small field of organizations now offers about 66,000 service year opportunities annually. They include full-time AmeriCorps programs such as Public Allies and the residential National Civilian Community Corps; full-time faith-based service programs, such as the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, that do not engage corps members in spreading religious beliefs; and targeted programs, such as YouthBuild and many youth service and conservation corps that embed service in a comprehensive program involving education and workforce development.

Youth corps provide about 25,000 full- and part-time opportunities in about 100 programs nationwide for young adults, including young people who have already left school, but failed to connect to post-secondary education or employment. YouthBuild is one federal funding stream that has supported comprehensive programs that include construction skills and service, along with GED or high school coursework, leadership training, and wraparound supports. Numerous studies of YouthBuild have consistently found that graduates experience increased employment and higher wages, as well as other positive outcomes such as increased civic participation, improved social trust, an orientation toward community.¹⁷ However, with only about 10,000 members, YouthBuild is largely oversubscribed. While other programs also engage opportunity youth as corps members, no reliable data source provides an account of their numbers.

Program Highlight: AmeriCorps NCCC

AmeriCorps NCCC is a full-time, residential, team-based program for diverse young adults, age 18-24. Members develop leadership skills and strengthen communities by completing service projects around the country. During the 10-month service term, members receive lodging, transportation, uniform and meals. In addition to developing workplace and civic skills, research shows that corps members develop important interpersonal skills, including communication, listening to others' opinions, collaborating with team members to achieve shared goals, getting along with coworkers, resolving conflicts through discussion, and treating customers with courtesy and respect.

¹⁷ Tomberg, K. A. (2013). *Youth development through service: A quality assessment of the YouthBuild AmeriCorps Program*. Research and Evaluation Center, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and City University of New York.



Meet Amanda

After graduating from West Virginia University, Amanda had trouble finding stable employment. She lost her part-time job at a restaurant and her financial struggles left her sleeping on friends' couches without a home to call her own.

Things turned around when she found an opportunity to serve with AmeriCorps VISTA. She went on to do two service years at an adult literacy nonprofit in West Virginia where she coordinated hundreds of volunteers in workshops and events.

Now, she leads her own AmeriCorps VISTA program called Collaborative @ WVU – a program at West Virginia University that focuses on community development, the opioid crisis, food insecurity, disaster preparedness, and combating poverty across the state.

Amanda's story shows us how service years can help young people find meaningful, stable employment and become change agents in their own communities.

Getting to 100,000 opportunity youth in national service annually

Increasing the number of quality national service positions filled by opportunity youth to 100,000 annually, and targeting resources to communities with high percentages of disconnected young people, could have a transformational impact on corps members, communities, and the country. By expanding service year opportunities, more opportunity youth will have experiences giving back to their local community, building skills and networks, and joining the workforce. However, to address the shortage of service year positions available to opportunity youth, a cross-sector effort is required. This section spells out what policymakers, programs, employers, and communities can do to maximize the potential for service years programs to transform the lives of disconnected young people.

What federal and state policymakers can do

Under current law, two federal programs provide direct funding for service year programs open to opportunity youth: AmeriCorps and YouthBuild. These programs have seen little growth over the last decade. Expansion of these funding sources would enable more young adults to do a service year; federal dollars through these programs leverage other public and private sources and therefore have an exponential impact.

At the federal level, a variety of other strategies could open more positions to opportunity youth, including:

- Increasing the living allowance or providing housing and other benefits to make it possible for low-income youth to participate
- Increasing scholarship funding available to young adults who complete a term of service to increase the likelihood that they will be able to pursue further education or training related to their goals
- Encouraging integration of funding streams, including those supported by the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, to provide for a wider range of supports
- Testing emergency funds and other strategies to increase retention of corps members who experience personal crises during their terms of service

Mentoring

Research confirms that quality mentoring relationships have powerful positive effects on young people's academic and employment outcomes. Mentoring is particularly beneficial to disadvantaged teens, greatly increasing the chance that they will attend college, and positively influencing social relationships, behavior, and performance.

Unfortunately, only one in three young people has a mentor. Programs certified on ServiceYear.org require that every corps member be matched with a mentor to encourage programs to make mentoring an important part of the service year experience.

- Encouraging employer partnerships and issuing of credentials with value in the workplace
- Adjusting AmeriCorps requirements, or creating a special category of funding, to align with the best practices of youth corps, including expanded time spent on training and the ability to offer graduated living allowances based on time in program
- Weighting corps member outcomes equal to community outcomes in competitive selection of programs

State policy could mirror these strategies. In addition, every state has a state service commission that can provide coordination, grantmaking, training and technical assistance and other functions if properly supported.

Both federal and state government could open additional funding streams for service year programs aligned with other agency goals. For example, the 21st Century Conservation Corps now under consideration in Congress, enables federal agencies managing public lands to contract with youth corps for this work, thereby expanding the resources and service projects available to these programs. Agencies at all levels of government could use service year programs to advance their missions.

What organizations can do

An inventory of service year positions appropriate for opportunity youth has never been conducted (approximations are based on youth corps, YouthBuild, and other program data). However, anecdotal experience suggests that many organizations that operate service year programs need help recruiting and supporting opportunity youth to serve and removing barriers that keep these young people from serving (such as excessive criminal record background screening and college degree requirements).

At the same time, organizations that currently serve opportunity youth, such as job training providers or community-based organizations offering support services, could integrate service into their programs for these young people. The Service Year toolkit, “Service Years as a Strategy for Engaging Opportunity Youth,” provides information regarding what opportunity youth need to succeed in service year programs, and the “Service Year New Program Guide” offers information on starting service year programs. Both can be found at resources.serviceyear.org.

What employers can do

While many employers see the value in young people who have completed a service year, most employers are unaware of the benefits of the experience. At the same time, few programs have strong employer partnerships that would enable graduating corps members to move easily into the workforce. Research by Burning Glass Technologies documents that service year alumni bring organization, planning, teamwork, and other important skills to the workplace.

Employers of National Service, an initiative of Service Year Alliance, the Corporation for National and Community Service, the Peace Corps, and the National Peace Corps Association, identifies employers



who provide preferred hiring or other opportunities for service year alums. In addition to joining Employers of National Service, employers can:

- Seek out service year programs in their communities to explore potential fit of graduates with open positions.
- Provide mentors to opportunity youth during their year of service.
- Offer job coaching, resume advice, and other supports to corps members.
- Participate in job fairs and other opportunities to engage with service year corps members and alums.
- Organize groups of local employers committed to hiring youth who have done a service year.
- Provide funding for service year positions aligned with their workforce needs.

What communities can do

The Opportunity Index assesses the level of economic mobility that exists in a community. Local leaders looking to increase opportunity through service years can conduct an assessment of programs currently engaging disconnected youth and develop a plan to expand these programs or create new ones. In addition to seeking AmeriCorps, YouthBuild, or state funding, communities may explore existing funding streams that could support service year programs. Cities have used a wide range of local funding sources, including utilities, public education, waste management, community development block grants, and community health centers, to support service year programs aligned with the mission of these revenue streams.

In addition, communities can explore ways to support corps members during and after their service year. For example, providing housing, transportation passes, or grocery vouchers could make it easier for low-income corps members to serve, while offering tuition breaks or free courses could improve education outcomes.

Reentry

Experience with the criminal justice system is strongly associated with disconnection. Service year strategies may well have outsized impact for court-involved youth and young adults, including those reentering communities after incarceration. Research demonstrates strong ties between community service and lower recidivism rates. Additional studies suggest that service contributes to the ability of these individuals to form new prosocial self-identities and to be viewed more positively by society, facilitating their reintegration into communities.¹⁸

For example, the pilot program for Civic Justice Corps (CJC), which reconnected formerly incarcerated and court-involved youth and young adults with the community through service, included a recidivism rate of just 10% and 72% retention in jobs or college.¹⁹ The recidivism rate for YouthBuild graduates who were formerly convicted of felonies is about 11%, compared to a national rate of 21% to 33% within one year.²⁰

¹⁸ Bazemore, G., & Karp, D. (2004). *A Civic Justice Corps: Community Service as a Means of Reintegration*. Florida Atlantic University.

¹⁹ Data provided by The Corps Network.

²⁰ YouthBuild USA. (2016). *Life after Lock-Up: A Special Report on Successful Recidivism Reduction*. YouthBuild USA.

Conclusion

Service years offer a powerful, but underutilized solution to improving career outcomes for opportunity youth and addressing worker shortages in job markets facing low unemployment or a lack of qualified employees. A service year can provide a starting point for local young people to build a set of work-ready skills that employers need. With a concerted effort on the part of policymakers, programs, employers and communities, we can increase the annual number of opportunity youth doing a service year fourfold, saving the nation billions of dollars and enabling hundreds of thousands of young people the chance to redefine themselves and follow their dreams.