



the Broken Marketplace



America's School-to-Work Crisis

A first-of-its-kind national study shows a generation stalled by the system meant to support and guide them

The Schultz Family Foundation &
HarrisX, A Stagwell Company

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Introduction

The Biggest Workforce Crisis No One is Talking About

Many young Americans seek professional success but face fractured pathways from high school to the job market. The people meant to support and guide them — parents, teachers, counselors, and employers — often have misaligned expectations and provide outdated guidance.

That is the reality revealed in *The Broken Marketplace: America's School-to-Work Crisis*, a national research effort commissioned by the Schultz Family Foundation and conducted by research consultancy HarrisX to understand why so many young adults feel stalled at the starting line and what it will take to help them move forward.

The research sheds new light on how the system designed to support young adults on the journey from school to work is fundamentally out of sync with the rapidly shifting modern economy. And it is poised to get worse as advances in artificial intelligence further impact the labor market.

Parents offer advice shaped by their own past, even as the world their children face has changed dramatically. Navigators — educators, guidance counselors, community leaders, and career and workforce specialists — often lack the time or tools to help students plan for what comes next. Employers want experience, but few provide it. Each group assumes someone else is filling the gap. In reality, many young people are left to figure it out alone.

The result is a **Broken Marketplace** where more than four in 10 young people say both the education system and the employment resources available to them are broken and do not provide effective guidance.

Many are also anxious about the future, with nearly half feeling unprepared — or unsure of their readiness — for the jobs ahead, especially as AI reshapes the market.

This misaligned system is stalling the futures of tens of millions of young Americans.

The findings illuminate how a broad swath of Generation Z ages 16-24 remains far from tapping its full potential. Many young people are not being adequately served by the institutions they encounter at every stage of their journey into adulthood, from high schools that do not expose students to a range of careers and non-college training pathways to achieve good jobs, to employers who are unwilling to invest in building hard and soft skills among new hires.

A consequence of this misalignment, coupled with lingering mental-health impacts from the COVID pandemic and the pervasive influence of social media, is that many young Americans are stalling or foregoing traditional American steps into adulthood: enrolling in post-secondary education, selecting a career, moving out of their family home, and working full time.

This research was shaped by listening directly to young people across the country—their stories, their struggles, and their hopes for the future. What we heard was clear: young adults seek personal and professional success, but the systems meant to support them often are failing them.

The stakes are real. This is about more than career trajectories. It is about whether young people can afford to move out, find stability, and build a life on their own terms. It is about confidence, purpose, and belonging. And it is about the strength of the U.S. economy, which cannot afford to leave millions of young people stalled at the starting line.

And the consequences of the Broken Marketplace are already visible. The national unemployment rate for 20- to 24-year-olds stands at 8.2%, the highest in almost a decade outside of the pandemic.¹ Even among college graduates aged 22 to 27, the unemployment rate now surpasses the national average and has reached its highest point since 2013, excluding the pandemic years.² For those without a degree, the picture is even more troubling: unemployment among 18- to 19-year-olds with no college experience is 19.9%.³

Improving the way young adults navigate to skills and work is not just important to set people up for success at the start of their careers. As AI and other technological advances further disrupt the labor market, more Americans of all ages will need better resources to grow skills and transition into new occupations.

The findings of this study are both a diagnosis and a call to action:

Parents can guide their children more effectively by using up-to-date tools and understanding the realities of today's career landscape.

Navigators can be supported to help guide students, not just graduate, but also connect what happens in school with what is next.

Employers can build real pathways by investing in training, creating accessible entry points, and clearly signaling what skills and experiences matter.

Addressing this crisis requires a fundamental realignment across every part of the Broken Marketplace. This research serves as a call to action for everyone to build a better marketplace, particularly for the economy ahead. A system where every young person has a real chance to chart a path toward opportunity and success.

The *Broken Marketplace* offers essential insights for those ready to build something better.

¹ [Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis](#)

² [Federal Reserve Bank of New York](#)

³ [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics via Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis](#)

About the Study

This landmark national study, commissioned by the Schultz Family Foundation and conducted by research consultancy HarrisX, offers a unique, multi-stakeholder view into the fractured systems shaping how young people transition from school to work in the United States.

Drawing on insights from more than 5,700 qualitative and quantitative interviews with young adults (ages 16-24), parents, educators, and employers, the *Broken Marketplace: America's School-to-Work Crisis* reveals deep misalignments in guidance, expectations, and access to opportunity. Together, these disconnects are stalling the futures of tens of millions of young Americans.

Methodology: 5,686 quantitative survey respondents and 85 in-depth qualitative interviews

YOUNG ADULTS:

Who are they? 16-24-year-olds in America, with a focus on low- and middle-income households



2,820 survey respondents
42 qualitative interviews

PARENTS:

Who are they? Parents of 16-24-year-olds in America



992 survey respondents
12 qualitative interviews

NAVIGATORS:

Who are they? Educators, guidance counselors, community leaders and career/workforce specialists who work with young adults ages 16-24



1,267 survey respondents
16 qualitative interviews

EMPLOYERS:

Who are they? HR and hiring managers who make decisions in recruiting and hiring for industries in need of talent



607 survey respondents
15 qualitative interviews

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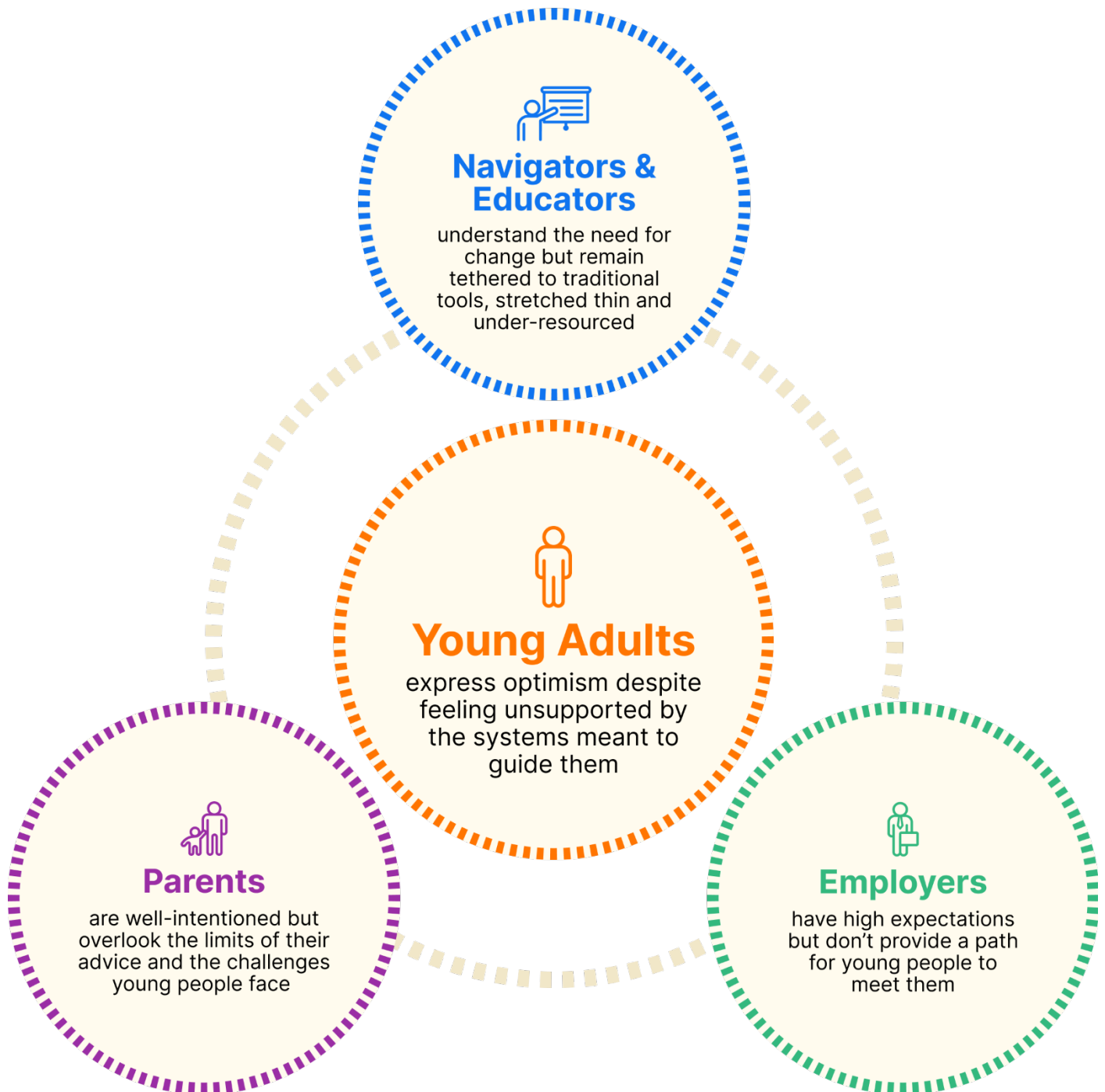
Defining the Broken Marketplace

A Generation Stalled by the System

America's youth strive for personal and professional success, but many struggle along broken pathways from high school into the job market because the people and institutions meant to support them are fundamentally out of sync.

The result? A generation navigating mismatched expectations, fragmented advice, and outdated systems—often alone.

Explore the full diagram below ↓ 



02

The Marketplace's Key Players

Young Adults

Young adults face real uncertainty about their education, career paths, and a job market that is changing faster than ever. Many feel unprepared and unsupported by traditional systems. Yet despite these challenges, they remain remarkably optimistic about the future. To fill the gaps, young people are increasingly turning to social media and AI tools to explore their interests, build practical skills, and seek new opportunities. These may not be perfect solutions, but they reflect a clear and growing hunger for guidance that too often goes unmet.

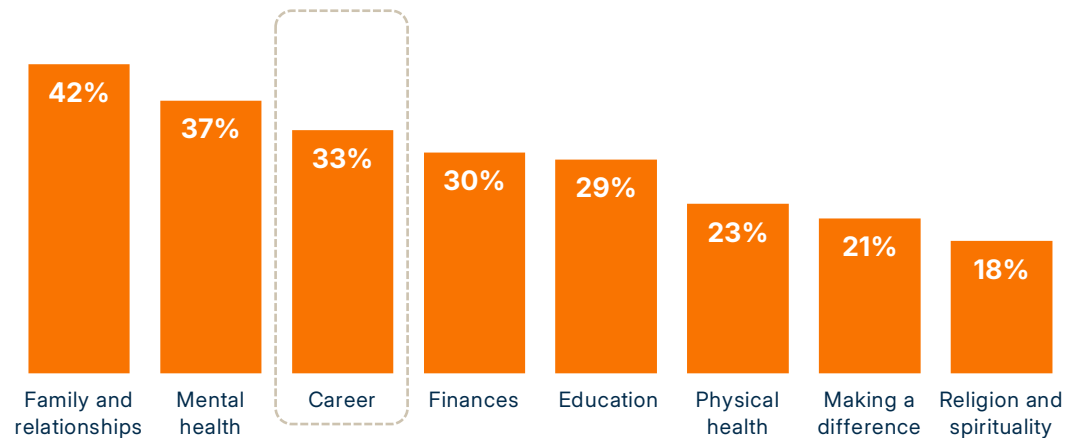
Uncertain Futures

The Broken Marketplace has left many young Americans stalled—or bypassing traditional milestones of adulthood altogether. While 73% say they see a path for their future, many are unsure how to get there, leading to delays in pursuing post-secondary education, committing to a career path, moving out of the family home, or entering the workforce full time.

Just 36% of young adults say starting a career is a top priority in the next five years and only 33% view career as being central to their

success. Instead, many are choosing to focus first on personal relationships or mental health, a reflection of both current challenges and shifting values.

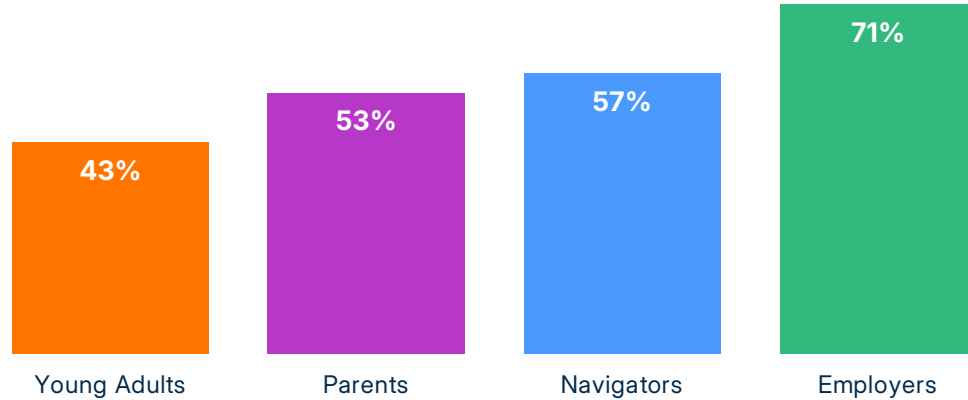
What are the areas in your life that are most important to your success?



"There are so many paths, but each path allows you to go down one path and not explore others... [There's] a lot of different options out there ... and each one expects something different ... there's so much knowledge [that I] can't get."
 - Male, 20 years old

Young adults also express deep uncertainty about their prospects in a rapidly evolving job market. Only 43% believe there are enough opportunities for job seekers in today's job market.

Believe that there are enough opportunities for all job seekers:

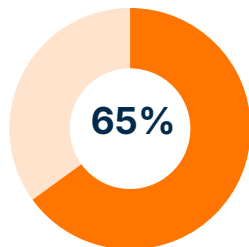


This anxiety is compounded by doubts about their own readiness: 46% feel unprepared or uncertain about how well-equipped they are for the kinds of jobs that may exist in the years ahead.

Adding to these concerns is the rise of AI. Over half (54%) are concerned or are unsure whether the roles they are working toward may eventually be replaced by AI.

Searching For Direction

Today's youth are actively seeking guidance as they navigate their identities and chart a path forward. Nearly two-thirds (65%) say they are still trying to discover what truly motivates them or where their passions lie.



65% of young adults are still trying to discover what motivates them or where their passions lie

For most, this journey isn't about testing ideas in theory; it's about exploration rooted in real experience—64% are looking for hands-on opportunities to explore career options and build practical skills before choosing a direction. Yet few will get that chance in a professional setting: just two in five employers offer internships.

"I really don't know what I want my ideal job to look like. I thought I knew what I wanted to do ... but ever since realizing what careers turn out to be, I don't really know ... Maybe people need to start narrowing down their ideas before they graduate [high school]."

- Male, 20 years old



Despite their drive, many feel the system is not meeting them halfway. Nearly half (45%) describe the job market and available support as broken and lacking meaningful guidance. And even among those who are employed full-time, only 41% of young adults consider their current job a career.

Without more accessible, responsive pathways for exploration and growth, too many risk stalling before they even get started.

Algorithm as the Advisor -----

In the absence of clear guidance, many are turning to social media to help chart their paths. With nearly half (48%) saying they do not know where to look for educational and career opportunities, many turn to the tools they know best: digital platforms.

Social media has become a central space for self-discovery and exploration. Half of young adults use it to better understand themselves, and for many, it also serves as a platform to navigate future possibilities: 79% engage with education-related content and 70% with career-related content. More than three in four (77%) say this content feels inspiring and helps them envision a way forward.

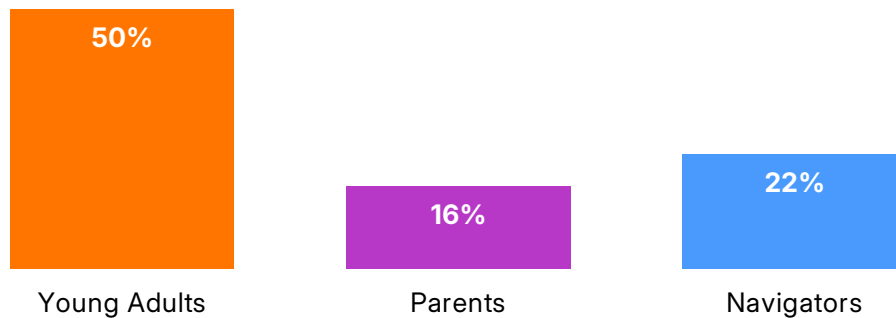
Yet despite its growing role, social media remains largely overlooked by parents and navigators as a legitimate source of support.

"My main source for advice [on my future] would be TikTok ... Honestly, it's like the new Google. It has [all the] information that you want, and instead of having to read a lot, it's in a video, it's a lot quicker ... They explain it a lot better ... They get more in depth."

- Female, 20 years old



Do you [use / encourage young adults to use] social media to help them learn about themselves?



One in five (20%) are also turning to AI tools to help navigate their futures, reflecting a shift where young people seek support and inspiration.

Parents

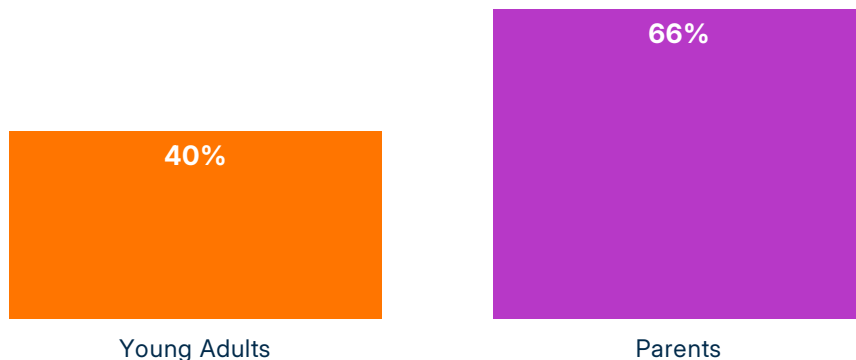


Parents are optimistic and confident in their role guiding their children, but often rely on outdated experiences while overlooking the modern realities and challenges that youth face.

See a Smoother Road

Parents often view the path ahead for their children as more promising than the ones their children are walking. While two-thirds of parents (66%) believe the American Dream is real and within reach for their child, only 40% of young adults share this optimism. More than half (53%) also say the current job market has enough opportunities, compared to just 43% of young adults.

Believe that the American Dream is real and achievable for [me / my child]



"I think [our son] has learned that if he chooses the right path ... then hopefully he can see more success [than me and his father], because it's not like we don't like our jobs. It's just things are expensive... I think he sees that."

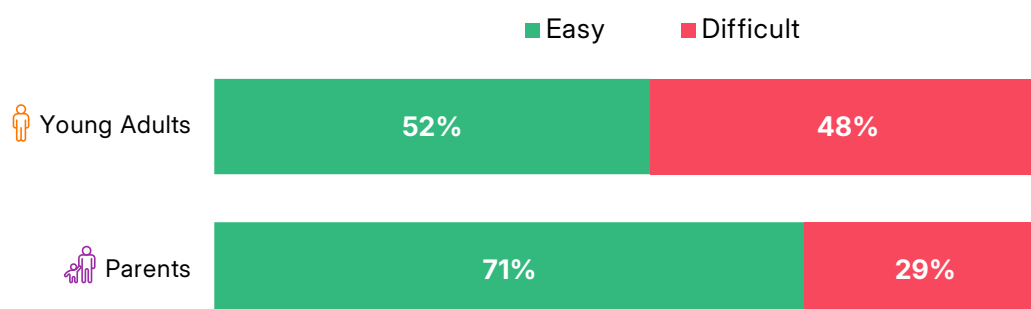
- Mother of a 17-year-old



Parents are also far more likely to believe that their child's transition into the workforce has been relatively smooth. Nearly three in four (71%) parents say their child had an easy time finding a job or internship, yet just 52% of young adults say the same.

Perceived ease/difficulty of looking for a job or internship

(Note: Data among young adults or parents of young adults who have applied to a job or internship before)

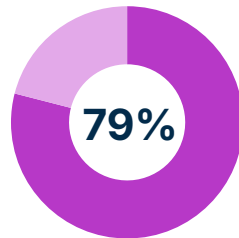


The disconnect between parents and their children is especially striking when it comes to the lingering impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Just over half of parents (52%) believe their child is still struggling with its effects, while 75% of young adults say they are still grappling with the consequences.

Outdated Guidance

While two in three parents (66%) say their child should take a different path than they did, the advice they give often reflects a different reality. Nearly 80% rely primarily on their own life experiences when offering guidance, rather than drawing from current resources or broader insights.

When you give your child help and advice, do you base your advice more on...?



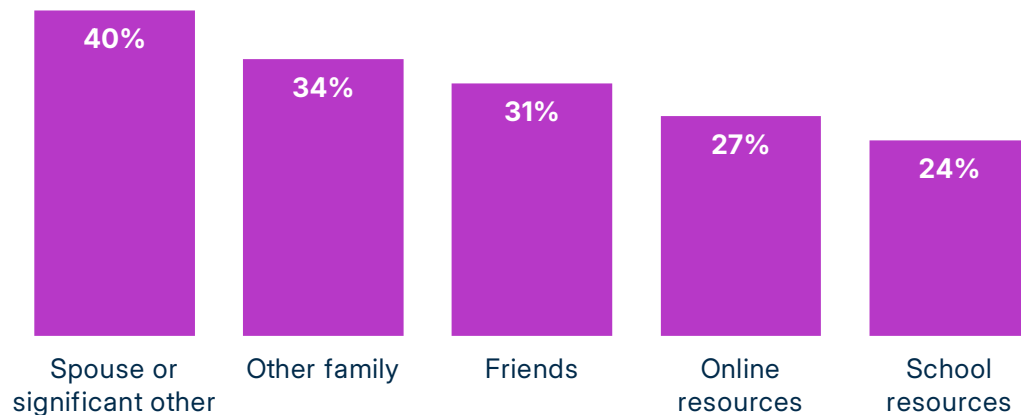
■ My own experiences

■ Other examples and resources

When parents do seek input, they are far more likely to turn to friends and family than to explore school-based support, online research, or expert tools.

What resources, if any, do you use when trying to help or give advice to your child as they are thinking about their next steps in life?

("School resources" based among parents who have children currently enrolled in school)



"We basically told [our son] there's no other option. You're going to college ... I think he also wanted to go to college ... so it wasn't forced. But if he didn't want to go, he's still going."
- Father of a 17 year old



Few parents engage with career-building opportunities. Just 24% say they are interested in learning about networking events or job fairs for their child—resources that can be critical in helping young adults navigate an increasingly complex and competitive job market.

Simply put, despite approving of their children taking a different path from their own, many parents are still handing their children advice from an outdated playbook.

Misplaced Confidence

Many parents feel confident in their ability to guide their child's future, but that confidence often exceeds reality.

Eighty-six percent believe they understand the steps their young adult needs to take to reach their educational and career goals. And 55% see themselves as a key resource in that journey, yet only 34% of young adults agree.

What's more, most parents (75%) say they wait for their child to initiate conversations about future planning, missing key opportunities to offer support when it might be needed most.

Percent who consider parents a key resource in young adults' future planning

(Selected 'Parents, guardians, or other family members are a key resource')



This disconnect goes beyond planning. It touches deeper questions of purpose and independence. While 73% of parents believe their child already has a strong sense of direction and does not need their guidance, young adults tell a different story: only 35% say they know what truly motivates them.

"I don't navigate [planning his future for him]. I'm there to be a support person ... [My son] is a driven kid, so I trust that he's making good decisions."

- Mother of a 23-year-old



Navigators

Navigators, defined in the study as educators, guidance counselors, community leaders, and career and workforce specialists, play a vital role in guiding young adults and often have the clearest view of the challenges young adults face.

Yet many are stretched thin, operating reactively under heavy caseloads, limited capacity, and poor coordination. Navigators often feel limited in what they can do about the broken pathways stalling the young people they work with every day.

Overwhelmed & Reactive -----

Navigators, though deeply committed, are often overwhelmed and feel like they are forced to work reactively. Dealing with high caseloads and limited resources, more than half (53%) say they typically offer help only when a young person seeks it out. While 69% report providing personalized support, they often do so at the expense of reaching a broader group.

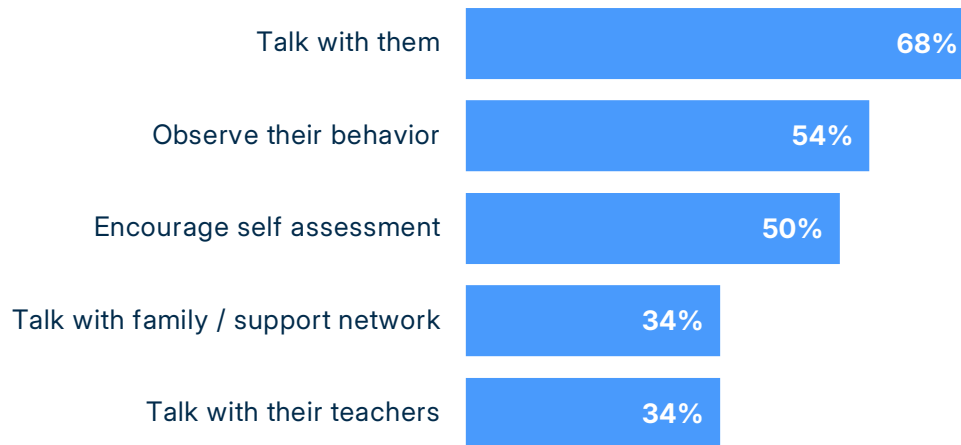
"Class sizes are a little bit too big. And so having to monitor 30 kids at a time ... can be difficult to do. If I have to spend a lot of time on a special education student, that makes it difficult for other students because now that time that I could be sharing with the whole class, I [spend] with one special education student."

- High School Career and Technical Educator



Collaboration is another major barrier. Only 34% say they engage with families or other navigators when assessing a young person's needs, and just 14% report working with potential employers. As a result, the guidance they provide is often based solely on youth input and can lack the broader context needed to be most effective.

How do **you** assess young adults' needs?



Outdated Tools & Guidance

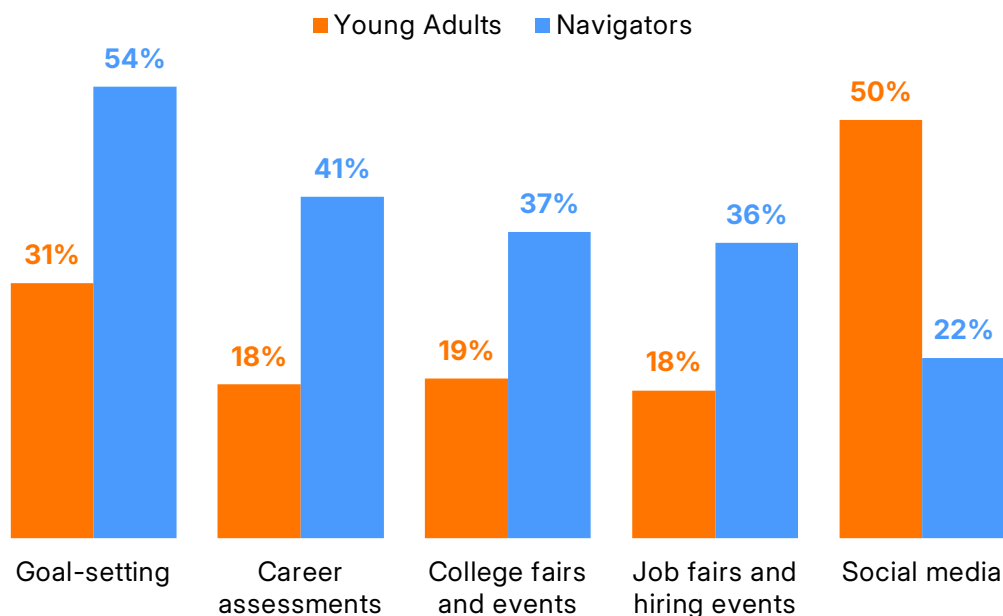
Navigators often promote tools and approaches that do not align with how young adults actually seek support. More than half (54%) encourage goal-setting, yet only 31% of young adults leverage this. While many young adults are turning to social media for self-discovery and career exploration, just 22% of navigators recommend it as a resource.

"I have students do certain assessments to learn more about their own strengths and values and look at how that would connect to certain careers within different industries. I also have them think about what an ideal lifestyle would look like for them and what pathway maybe they would need to take to achieve that."

- Community College Educator



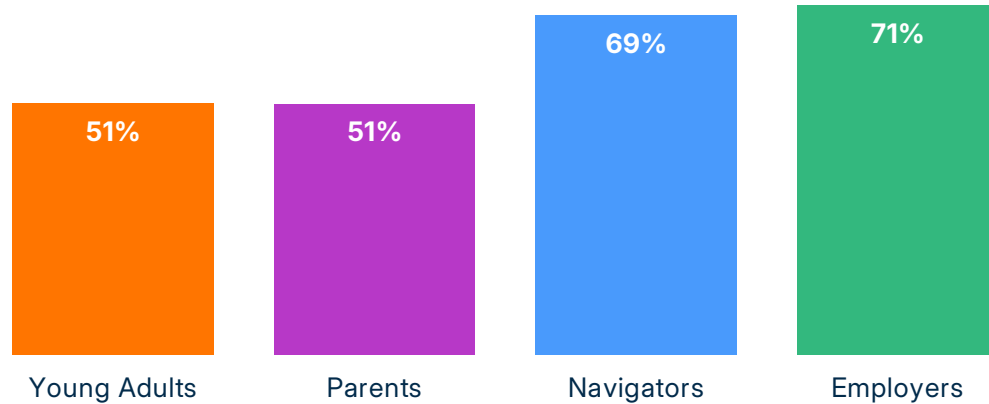
What tools do you [use / encourage young adults to use] to help them learn about themselves, if any?



Most navigators also do not use evidence-based assessments to guide their work. Seventy-two percent say they rely instead on conversations with young people, their own professional intuition, and advice from peers. This well-meaning but informal approach may limit their ability to offer comprehensive and consistent support.

There is also a disconnect when it comes to views on higher education. Although 75% of navigators agree that a college degree alone is no longer enough to secure a good job, nearly as many (69%) still view it as a worthwhile investment. That confidence contrasts sharply with the perspectives of young adults and parents; only 51% of young adults and parents believe college is worth the time and money.

Believe that a 4-year college degree is worth the investment



Particularly Pessimistic

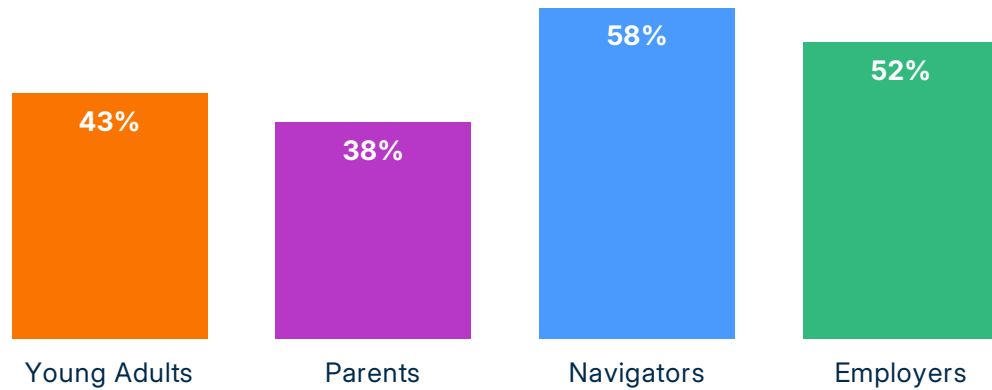
Navigators are often the most clear-eyed about the system's shortcomings; more so than parents and, in some cases, even young adults themselves.

Among all groups surveyed, navigators express the greatest skepticism about how well the current system is serving youth. Nearly three in five (58%) say the education and employment resources available to young people are failing them, compared to just 38% of parents.

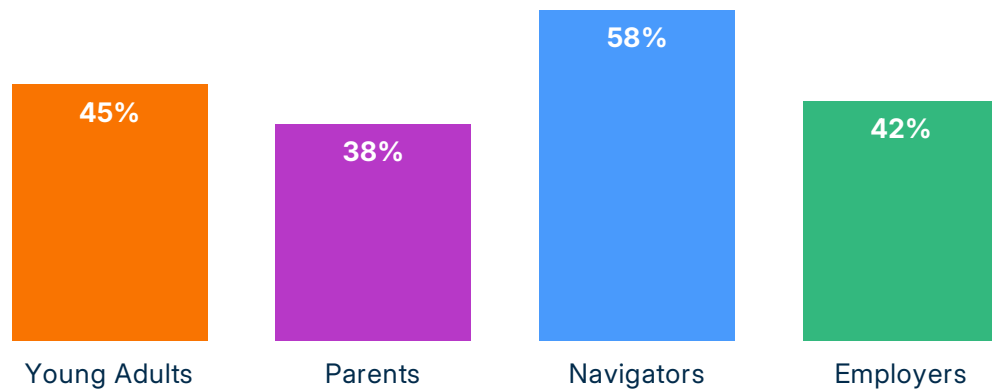
"Our students, who are struggling the most with this, are really not just needing more information. They're needing help taking steps, and they're needing that connection with someone to say, 'hey, I see your eyes light up when you talk about this'."
- High School Counselor



Believe that the educational system is broken and not providing effective guidance



Believe that the job market is broken and employment resources are not providing effective guidance



Only 34% of navigators believe young people know where to look for educational and career opportunities, compared to 60% of parents who believe their children do.

This pattern extends to perceptions of readiness. Just 42% of navigators say young adults are prepared for the jobs of the future. In contrast, 63% of parents believe their children are ready.

Navigators also offer a sobering view of the daily struggles young people face. Nearly all (97%) say the young people they work with are still dealing with the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many report directly observing signs of mental health strain: 68% regularly see anxiety, and 62% see stress in the young people they support.

Employers

Employers have the power to open doors for young adults, but too often, they keep them closed. Despite widespread claims of support for skills-based hiring, many employers continue to rely on outdated job requirements, rigid credentialing, and unclear application processes.

These hiring practices create unnecessary barriers, making it difficult for even the most motivated young adults to access early career opportunities.

Employment Catch-22 -----

Employers find themselves in a catch-22, largely of their own making.

While nearly all claim to be open to hiring and training early-career talent, most place steep barriers right at the entry point. Nearly four in five (77%) require at least one year of experience for entry-level roles, and half demand two or more.

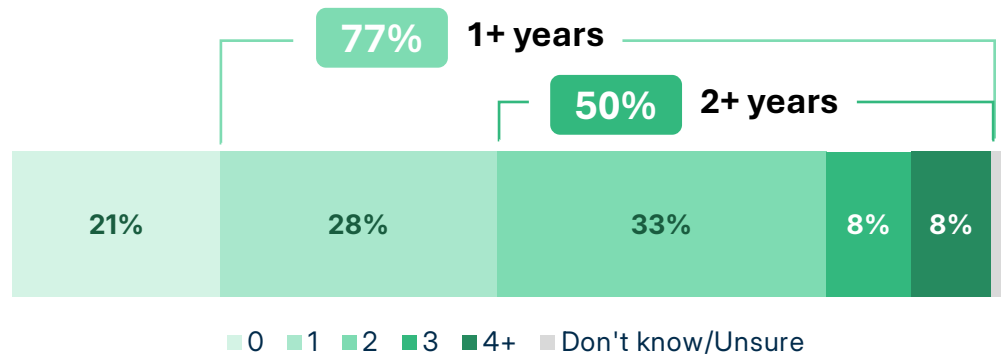
Many say they are willing to train those without experience, but young adults are not convinced: only 54% believe employers genuinely follow through on that promise.

"I think it's hard, because the corporate environment that we live in today has zero to no patience for training people... You just don't want to take a risk on someone who doesn't have experience because that means a lot for you."

- Head of People Experience, International IT company



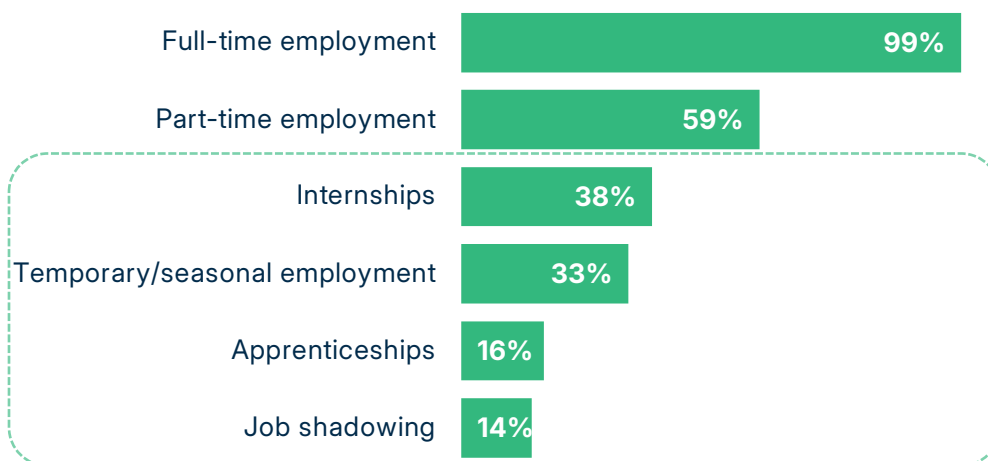
How many years of experience does your company prefer or require for entry-level positions?



At the same time, credentialing norms remain entrenched among employers. Forty-three percent still require at least a four-year degree for entry-level roles, often by habit, not necessity. In fact, 40% say they maintain the requirement simply because it is common practice, not because the degree is essential to job performance.

Despite identifying a lack of experience as a major barrier to hiring early-career talent, few employers offer the kinds of opportunities that could close the gap. Just 38% provide internships, and only 14% offer job shadowing experiences.

Which of the following forms of employment or training does your company offer?

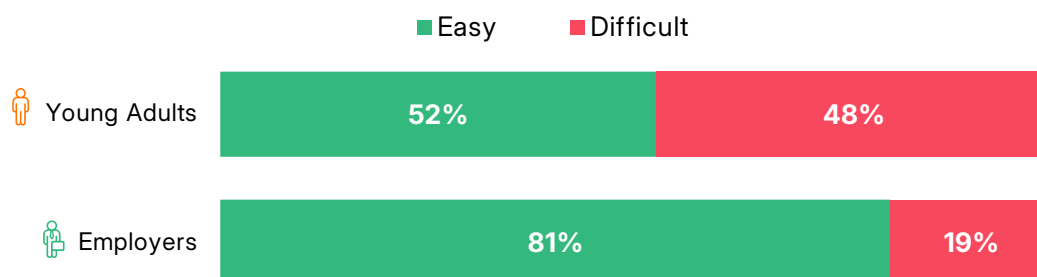


Broken On-Ramp

Most employers (81%) claim that entry-level jobs are easy to access and that, in fact, these roles are readily available in their organizations. But the systems in place tell a different story, especially from the perspective of young adults: 48% say their job or internship search was difficult.

Perceived ease/difficulty of looking for a job or internship

(Note: *Young adults* data among those who have applied for a job or internship before / *Employers* asked about getting a job within their organization)



The competition for these roles is intense. Over one-third of employers receive more than 100 applications for each entry-level

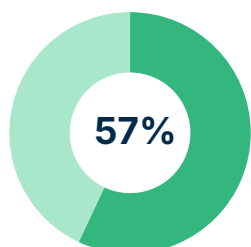
opening, and nearly 60% receive more than 50. Most of these come, according to employers, through online job platforms, creating a high-volume, high-noise environment for applicants.

To manage the flood of applications, 57% of employers rely on AI-driven filters. While efficient, this approach can inadvertently screen out qualified candidates.

Fewer than half say they provide feedback to all unsuccessful applicants, effectively leaving many young job seekers in the dark about why they were passed over or how to improve.

For many entering the job market for the first time, the process can feel especially opaque and discouraging.

Does your organization use an artificial intelligence tool to help sort through job applications or not?



57% of employers use AI to sort through job applications

"The human resources and recruiting, everything's AI now... So what I do is, I come up with a job description, and then two months later they come back with recruits."

– Senior Process Manager, Global Sales



Mismatched Expectations

While 96% of employers say retention and long-term commitment are important in the hiring process, more than half (53%) associate hiring young talent with high turnover.

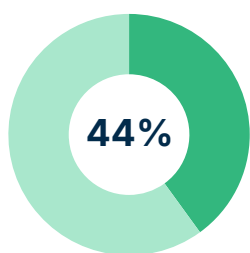
Many also see a disconnect between expectations and reality: 41% believe young candidates have unrealistic views about salary, benefits, and job responsibilities.

Forty-four percent also say young adults are not adequately prepared to enter the workforce—fueling a cycle of hesitation that restricts early-career opportunities and reinforces the disconnect between employers and emerging talent.

"Inappropriate expectations. ... These are folks that are expecting some interesting, different work schedule, or any capacity to work from home. ... And everything we're doing is in-person, 8 to 5, Monday through Friday. And so folks are trying to have different schedules and thinking that'll be possible."

- Regional Health Administrator, Health Services

Yet despite these concerns, few employers view themselves as part of the solution. Thirty-nine percent cite the time and financial cost of training young hires as a major barrier, and only 22% believe they bear primary responsibility for helping young adults succeed in the workforce.



44% of employers say young adults are ill-prepared for the workforce

03

The Fractures in the Marketplace

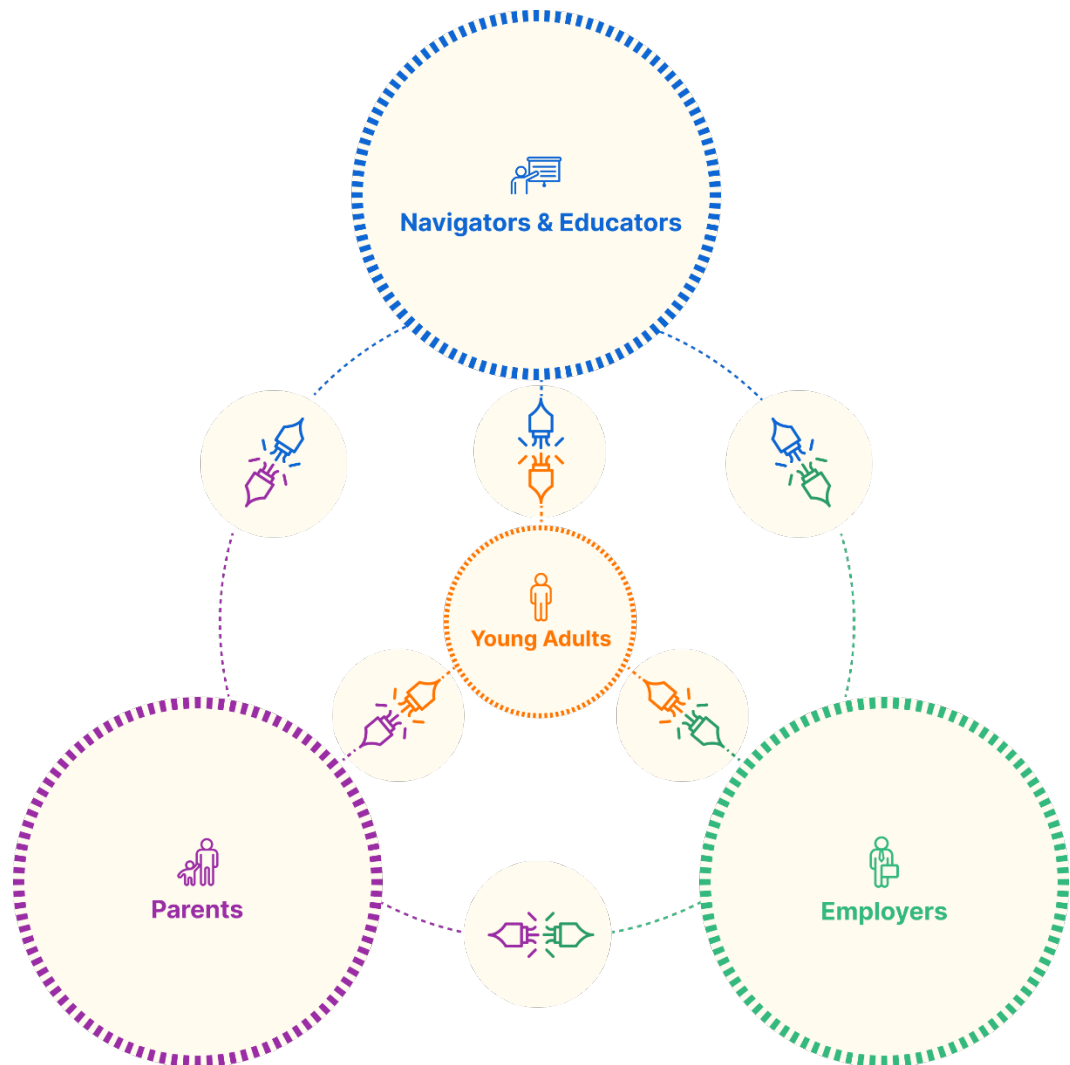
A System Out of Sync

Despite a shared desire to support young adults, the ecosystem surrounding them is deeply fragmented. Each group —parents, educators, employers, and navigators — operates with different assumptions about young people, who is responsible for helping them, and how best to guide them forward.

At the heart of the disconnect is the widening gap between young adults and the very systems designed to guide them. While 76% of young people believe they have the skills to succeed, nearly half feel unprepared or uncertain about their preparedness, for the jobs of the future. More than 40% believe the education and employment systems they rely on are broken.

Yet those around them often see a different picture. Parents tend to overestimate their children's confidence and preparedness. Employers cite unrealistic expectations and high turnover, but few offer meaningful early career opportunities. Navigators, stretched thin and often reactive, rarely coordinate with other stakeholders.

These misalignments do more than create confusion. They produce mixed messages, uncoordinated efforts, and critical gaps in support that leave too many young people without a clear path ahead.



Parents vs. Young Adults

- **55%** of parents see themselves as a top resource for their child's future planning yet just **34%** of young adults agree.
- **66%** of parents think the American Dream is achievable for their child, but just **40%** of young adults agree.

- **73%** of parents see their child as having direction and not needing their help, but only **35%** of young adults report knowing exactly what drives them.

Navigators vs. Young Adults

- **69%** of navigators say a four-year degree is worth the investment compared to just **51%** of young adults.
- **41%** of navigators believe that guidance counselors are a key resource for young adults, but just **20%** of young adults in school or training agree.
- **22%** of navigators encourage young adults to use social media for self-discovery while **50%** of young adults cite social media as a key resource.

Employers vs. Young Adults

- **71%** of employers say there are enough good opportunities for all job seekers, but only **43%** of young adults agree.
- **81%** of employers think it's easy for young people to get a job in their organization, but only **52%** of young job applicants found the job search easy.
- **71%** of employers think a four-year degree is worth the investment, but only **51%** of young adults agree.

Parents, navigators, and employers not only hold different views from young adults, but are also misaligned with one another—and frequently operate in isolation. These siloed efforts can result in missed opportunities to provide consistent, coordinated support.

Parents and **Navigators** are not aligned on how to guide young adults. This mutual disconnect limits how effectively either group can complement the others efforts.

- Only **24%** of parents with a child enrolled in school leverage resources at their children's schools — like guidance counselors and teachers — when guiding their young adults on the next steps.

- Only **32%** of navigators consider young adults' family situations in determining how to best help them.

Parents and **Employers** hold contrasting views of opportunity, fostering misunderstanding and undercutting trust in the system.

- **46%** of parents say their child has little or no support from employers when making decisions about their future.
- **74%** of employers say their organization is dedicated to investing in young people and preparing them for success.
- **71%** of employers believe there are enough opportunities in the job market for young people, compared to just **53%** of parents.

Navigators and **Employers** rarely engage at all.

- **86%** of navigators say that they do not collaborate with potential employers of their students.
- **52%** of employers think that there are not enough programs on job readiness or skill building for young adults.

Each group sees part of the problem. But without stronger connections between them, those insights rarely translate into coordinated action. As a consequence, young adults are left shouldering the burden of navigating a broken system largely on their own.

04

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS:

Social Media

Social Media Fills the Guidance Gap

The void of relevant and reliable support has been filled by social media for many young adults. An increasing number of young adults are now turning to social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube as tools for self-discovery and career guidance. This trend coincides with young adults' perceived inadequacy of the traditional education and career support systems available to them.

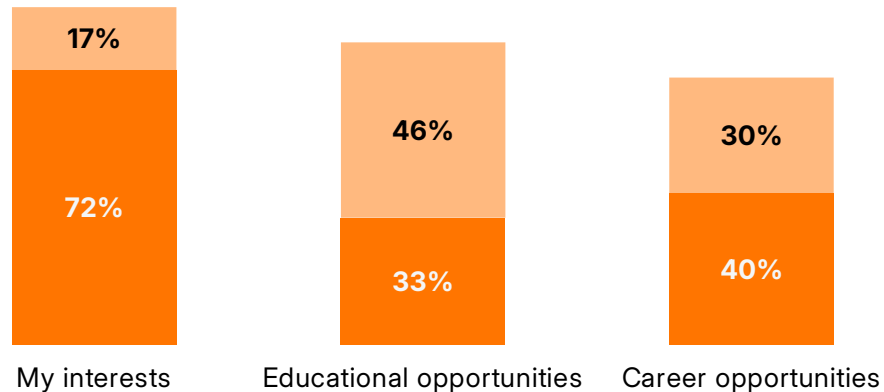
Intentional Use for Career Exploration -----

For today's young adults, social media plays an increasingly intentional and influential role in exploring identity and career options. Sixty-five percent say they are still figuring out their passions and interests, and 72% are actively using social platforms to aid that discovery. Social media is not just a space for entertainment; it is becoming a dynamic tool for shaping aspirations.

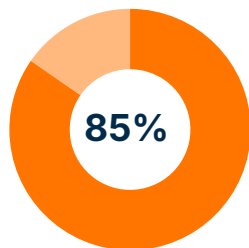
Four in ten young people report actively seeking career-related content on social media, while another 30% encounter it passively during casual scrolling.

Do you use social media to learn more about the following or not?

■ Yes, I actively seek this out ■ Yes, I have seen this content but did not seek it out



Fifty-two percent say that social media has had a positive impact on their life in general. More specifically, among those who use social media for career content, 85% say it leaves them feeling inspired. This suggests that seeing someone's progress toward goals can provide a motivational blueprint for many.



Among those who seek career content on social media, 85% say it leaves them feeling inspired

"I watch videos on 'day-in-the-life of whatever' to try to see what people actually get up to in their jobs. We've been doing the career test since like seventh grade... it doesn't feel like it's grounded in anything."

- Female Young Adult, 19 years old



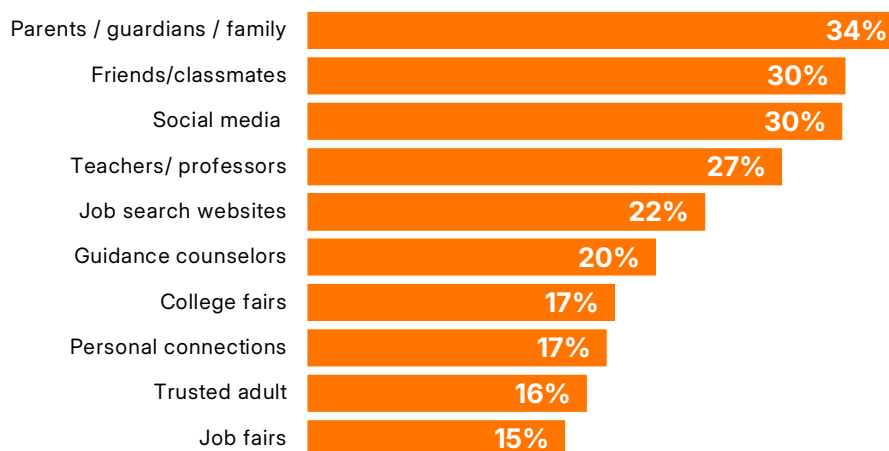
Eroding the Role of Parents and Educators -----

When it comes to preparing for the future, young adults now see social media as just as influential as their parents and peers — and more so than many traditional sources of guidance. Thirty percent say they turn to social platforms for future planning, matching the number who rely on friends and just behind those who consult parents or other family members (34%).

In comparison, more traditional supports rank notably lower: only 27% cite teachers or professors, 20% mention guidance counselors, and even fewer point to college (17%) or job fairs (15%) as meaningful influences.

What are the key people, places, or resources you go to for advice on planning for your future?

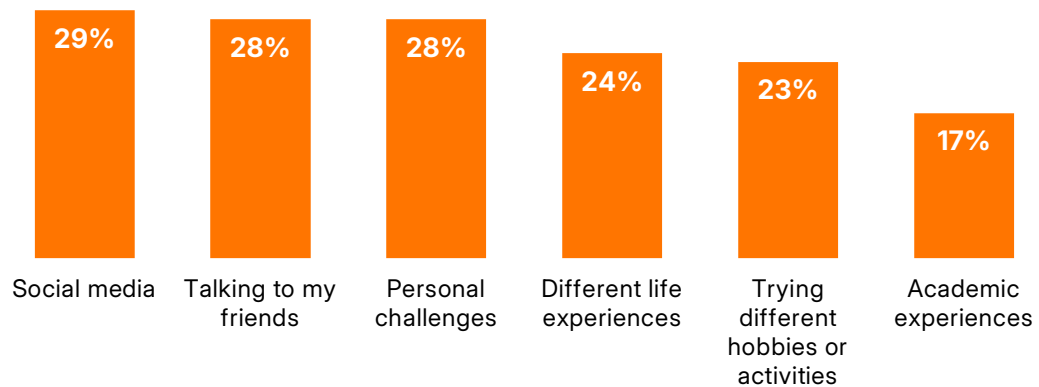
(Note: Data shown for "Teachers/professors", "Guidance counselors" and "College fairs" is among those currently enrolled in school.)



Despite this, just about one in four navigators and one in six parents report encouraging young people to use social media for self-exploration. Instead, many promote traditional tools and methods (like goal setting, career assessments, and job and career fairs), despite young adults rarely engaging with them.

The shift towards social media as a guidance tool is also evident in how young people reflect on personal growth. When asked what helped them learn most about themselves, social media emerges as the top answer, more so than even their own life experiences.

What kind of experiences, if any, have been most influential in helping you learn about yourself?

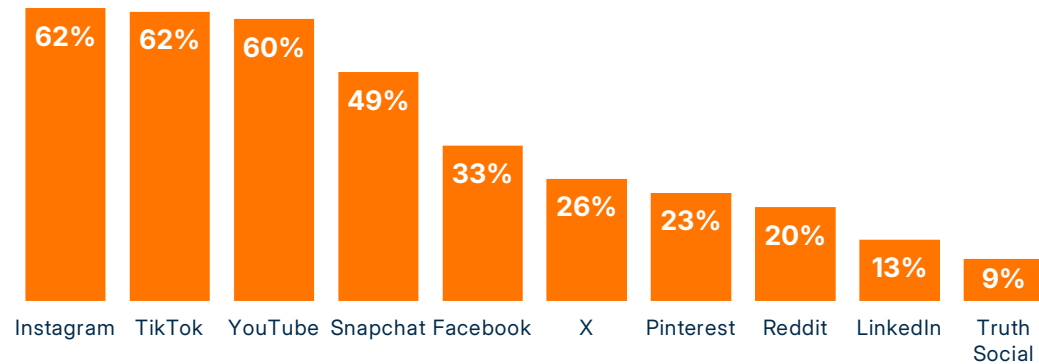


New Gateways to Career Discovery: YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram Lead the Way -----

Among young adults who seek career guidance on social media, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are the most trusted and frequently used platforms. Daily usage rates among this sub-group of young adults are at or over 60% for all three platforms. YouTube is not only frequently used, but also highly trusted with this group: 79% say they trust the education and career information they find on YouTube. Instagram and TikTok follow closely, trusted by 70% and 67%, respectively.

Daily usage of social media platforms

(Note: Among young adults who actively seek career content on social media)



"I did use YouTube a bit in trying to lay out career paths. There's a lot of people who talk about what your career path might look like as, say, a data analyst, and so I watched a bunch of those videos. Like good places to start on your technical abilities, what kind of position, what you might start in, what kind of stuff you might do when you first start out."

- Male, 23 years old



05

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS:

Artificial Intelligence

AI: Future Proof or Future Peril?

Young adults are rapidly embracing AI as a tool for exploration, skill-building, and future planning. But across the ecosystem, there is little consensus on how to navigate AI's growing influence.

Young adults and parents often see opportunities, whether through AI-assisted learning or new career pathways, while educators express concern about its impact on critical thinking, development, and long-term preparedness.

Meanwhile, the growing use of AI in hiring and task automation may be introducing new barriers for entry-level job seekers, rather than removing them.

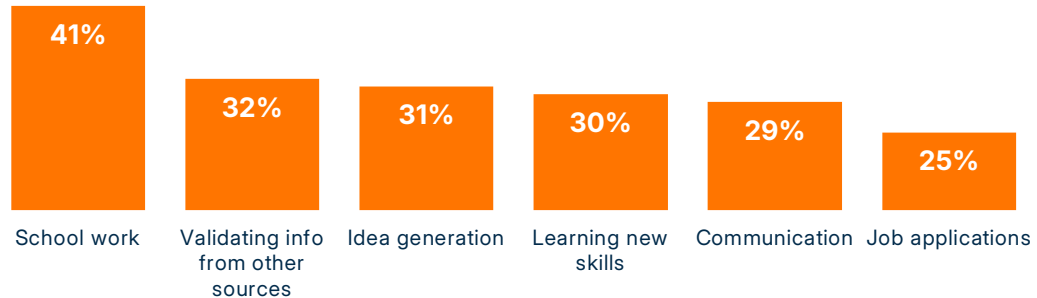
A Learning Tool, or a Crutch? -----

Young adults are already using AI as a learning and career tool: 41% for schoolwork, 30% for skill-building, and a quarter for job applications.

Which technology tools, if any, do you use regularly for the following tasks?

(Showing % of young adults using chatbots and/or AI assistants)

(Note: Data shown for "School work" is among those currently enrolled in school.)



Amid this embrace of AI, navigators are wary: 71% believe young people are becoming too reliant on AI and 60% say the emerging technology is undermining the development of key workforce skills.

Top AI-related concerns among navigators include reduced critical thinking (57%), loss of soft skills like teamwork and communication (54%), decreased human connection (50%), and exposure to misinformation (49%).

"I like tech, but I think sometimes that we abuse it. AI is another whole thing with kids and how they should use it ... one of the biggest skills that kids need for the future is the ability to tell a story... it's about critical thinking. Thinking critically ... and writing well."

- AVID Specialist

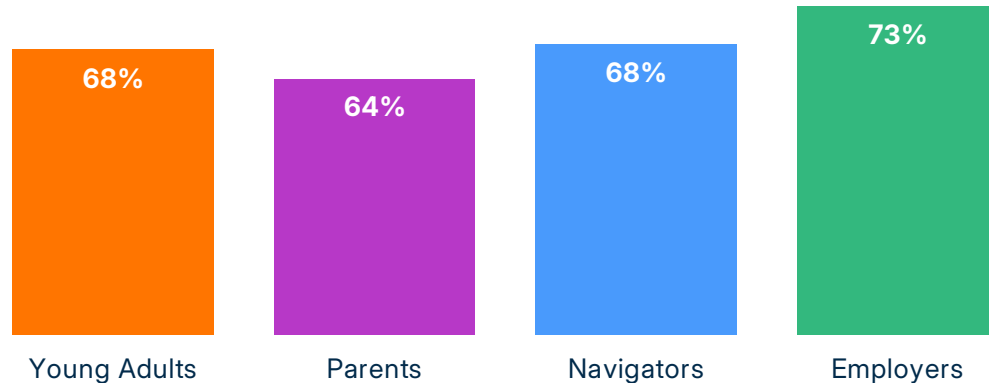


Weighing the Risks with the Benefits

Navigators are balancing their concerns about the use of AI with its potential as a career and learning enabler: 68% say AI will help young adults secure more career opportunities. Employers (73%) and parents (64%) share this optimistic outlook.

In your opinion, do you think AI technologies will help [you / your child / young adults] secure more career opportunities or make it more difficult?

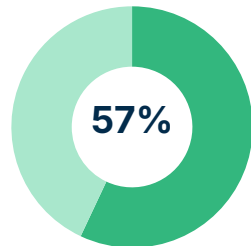
*(Showing % selected **secure more career opportunities**)*



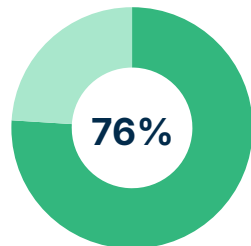
Employers Embrace AI in Hiring

Employers are integrating AI into their hiring processes: 57% use it to filter large candidate pools. However, even as 73% of employers believe AI will ultimately create more job opportunities for young Americans, 76% of those using it already in their hiring screening fear the new technology may be excluding strong applicants.

While employers prioritize efficiency, the unintended consequence may be a hiring process that is less transparent, less accessible, and more likely to miss qualified candidates.



57% of employers use AI in their hiring systems



76% of employers using AI in their hiring systems think their process may exclude strong candidates

This is the AI paradox: the same tool that inspires also excludes.

06

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS:

Mental Health

Mental Health Before Milestones

Facing an uncertain future, young adults are embracing their mental health as a priority and an area of their life they can have more control over. For many, mental health is not simply a concern but a foundation for how they define success and make decisions in early adulthood.

Shifting Priorities

Many young Americans consider mental health a prerequisite to progress and a core part of how they define success. For more than a third (37%), mental health ranks among the most important factors to their success, second only to family and their relationships while surpassing career, finances, and education.

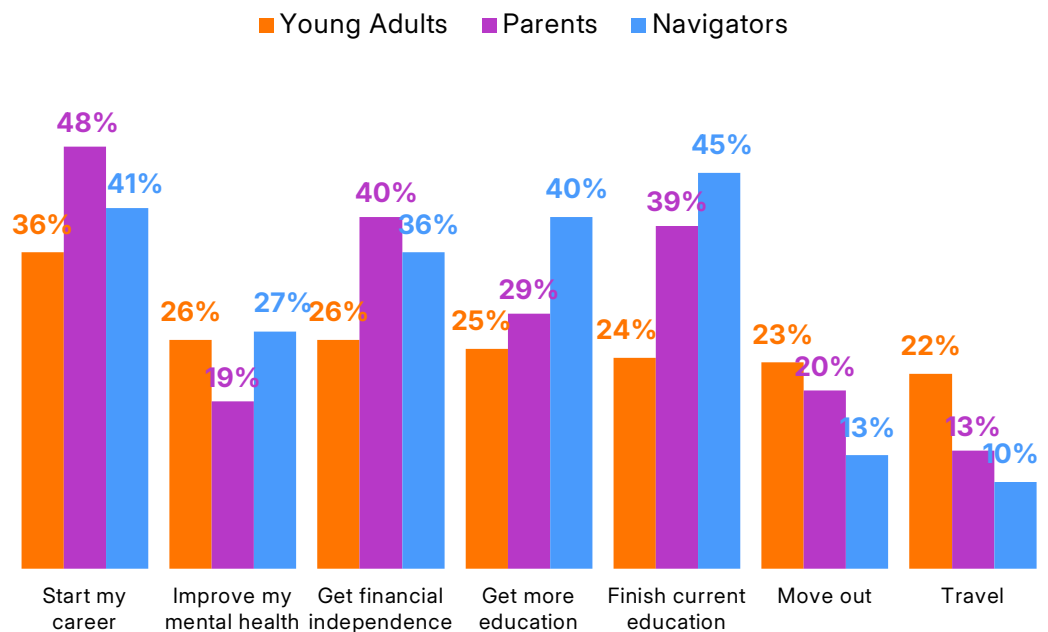
This emphasis translates into action: 29% say mental health is a top area where they would welcome outside help, ahead of financial planning, money management, or job training.

Yet a generational gap towards the issue persists. While young adults rank mental health as their second-highest priority over the next five

years, parents place it seventh when asked what they believe their child prioritizes. Navigators show greater awareness than parents, but they still tend to underestimate the importance of mental health relative to more traditional goals like education and career.

What are [your / your child's / the young adults you work with] top priorities over the next 5 years?

(Showing % selected among the top 3 priorities)



"I'm focusing on my mental health, and I feel scared to tell my parents as of now that I'm still not ready to start my career. Because they could say: 'well, it's time, you know, you need to find a job.' I want them to just understand it a little more and put themselves in my shoes and recognize that this is tough or not easy."

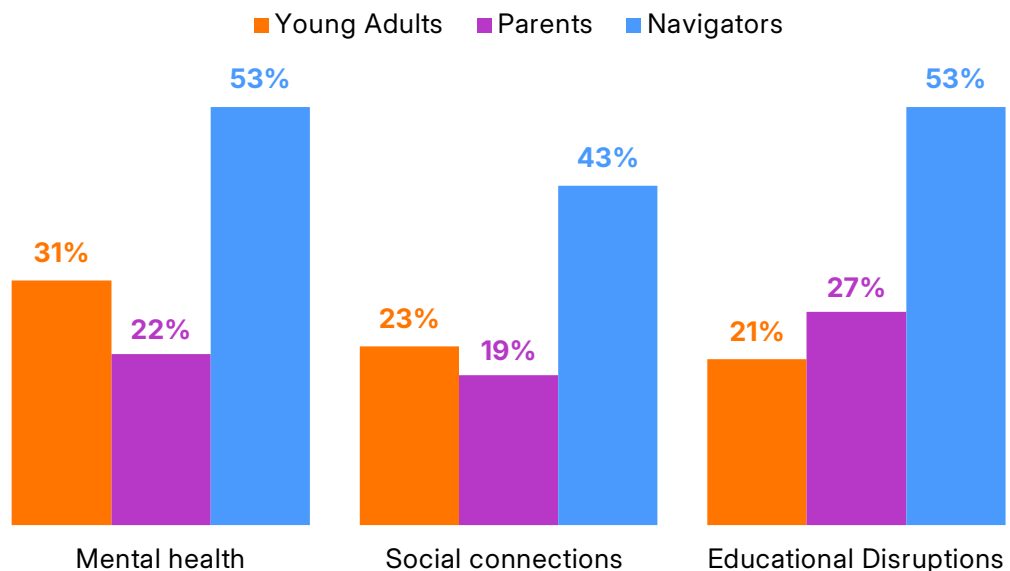
- Female, 22 years old



The Role of the COVID-19 Pandemic -----

Three in four young adults say they still feel the impact of COVID-19 and 31% cite mental health as a persisting challenge from the pandemic. This suggests that the most enduring impact of COVID-19 for young adults may not be on institutions or access, but on internal resilience and emotional well-being.

Which challenges, if any, are [you / your child / young adults] still struggling with today due to COVID-19?

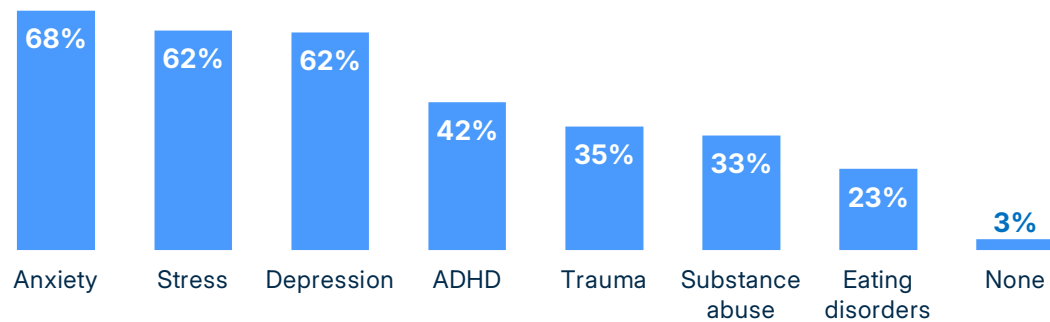


Navigators See the Impact, But Parents Underestimate It -----

While mental health ranks among the most serious barriers that young adults face, there's a notable divide in how their support network perceives the issue.

Navigators, who work closely with young adults, identify it as the second-leading obstacle preventing young people from reaching their goals. This perspective is rooted directly in experience: 68% of navigators directly observe anxiety among the youth they work with, and 62% observe stress.

What specific mental health issues, if any, are you observing among the young adults you work with?



Yet, most navigators feel unprepared to respond: only 34% believe adequate mental health support exists, and 95% face barriers when trying to help.

"There are so many issues and mental health concerns and crises that are popping up. So, do I feel like I'm supporting students? Absolutely. Do I feel like I'm necessarily having the time or ability to make sure they have a tangible path for after high school? No."

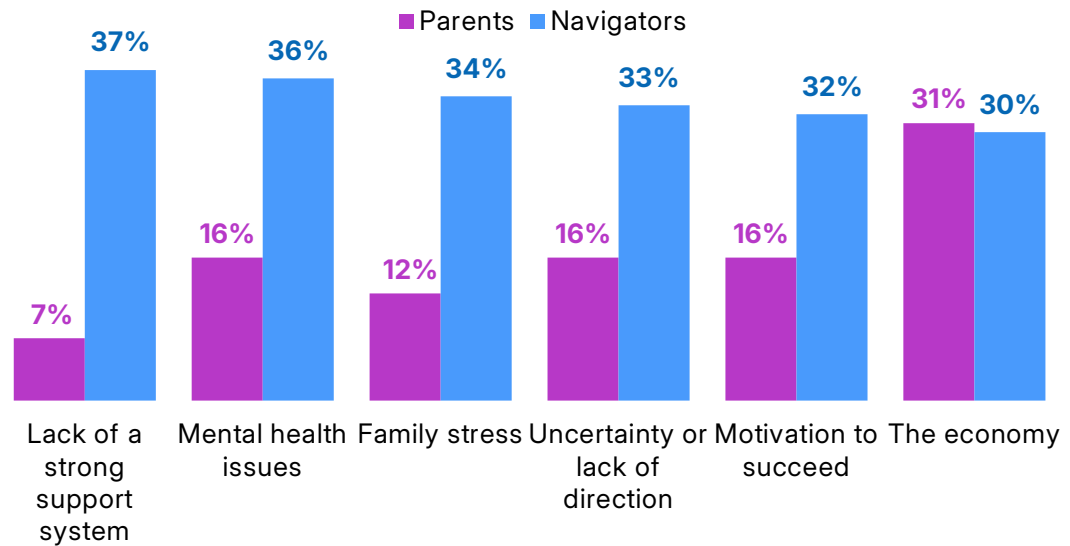
- High School Counselor



In contrast, parents tend to focus more on external barriers — like the economy — than on internal struggles. Just 16% of parents see mental health challenges as a barrier their child faces in pursuing their goals, compared to 36% of navigators who see this as a common barrier for young people.

What are the most common barriers [your child / young adults] face(s) in achieving their goals?

(Note: Showing top 6 selections by navigators)



07

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS:

Young Women

Quiet Crisis Among Young Women

Even as young women achieve higher academic success, many enter the workforce feeling unprepared, uncertain, and overwhelmed. Compared to their male peers, women report lower confidence in their job prospects and less clarity about their future, even those with a college education. Adding to these challenges, many also report higher levels of mental health issues and greater uncertainty about their motivations and passions.

Confidence Gaps and Lack of Faith in the System

Despite educational gains, 50% of women aged 18-24 do not feel prepared for the jobs of the future, compared to 40% of young men in the same age group. Even among the college-educated, 44% of young women do not feel ready versus 34% of their male counterparts.

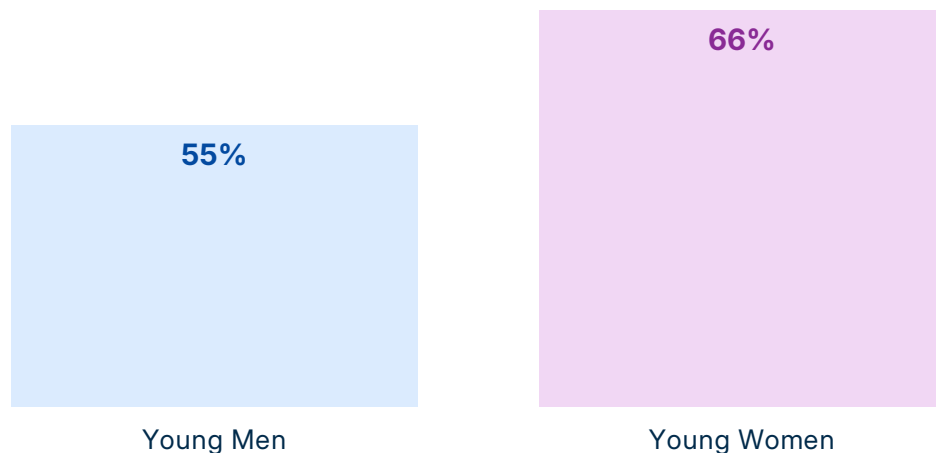
Uncertainty about opportunity is just as stark. Sixty-one percent of young women, including 58% of those with a college degree, are unsure if there are enough jobs available for them. In contrast, only 52% of young men and 50% of college-educated males feel the same.

Young women also report less confidence in the hiring process than young men — with 42% saying they don't trust employers to even review their applications, compared to 33% of men. They are also more concerned than men about the impact of AI on their careers (35% vs. 27%). These concerns add up: 66% of young women say the American Dream feels out of reach, compared to 55% of their male peers.

"I am of the mindset that I will probably never own a house ...it's actually unfathomable to have that amount of money."
- Female, 19 years old

Say the American Dream is not reachable nor real

(Showing believe the American Dream is not reachable for me or do not believe in the American Dream)



Uncertain Pathways

Even with access to support systems and higher education, many young women are less likely to have clarity of direction. Only 29% of all young women, including 31% of college-educated women, say they know what drives them, compared to 42% of young men.

Support networks don't fully close the gap either. Among young women who say they have a support system in place, only 30% feel they know exactly what motivates them versus 45% of young men with a support system.

This uncertainty also shapes how they view their work. Sixty-two percent of employed young women see their current job as a career or a stepping-stone to one, compared to 73% of young men. The difference remains even among those with a college degree: 61% of college-educated women see their current role as a career path versus 74% of college-educated men.

"I feel like I've had the pressure of 'you need to be someone now'. And I feel like right now, it's okay to realize that I'm 21 and this is the most crucial time of my life... Sometimes I stray away from talking to people about my future because I'm worried it's going to be an ongoing discussion."

- Female, 21 years old



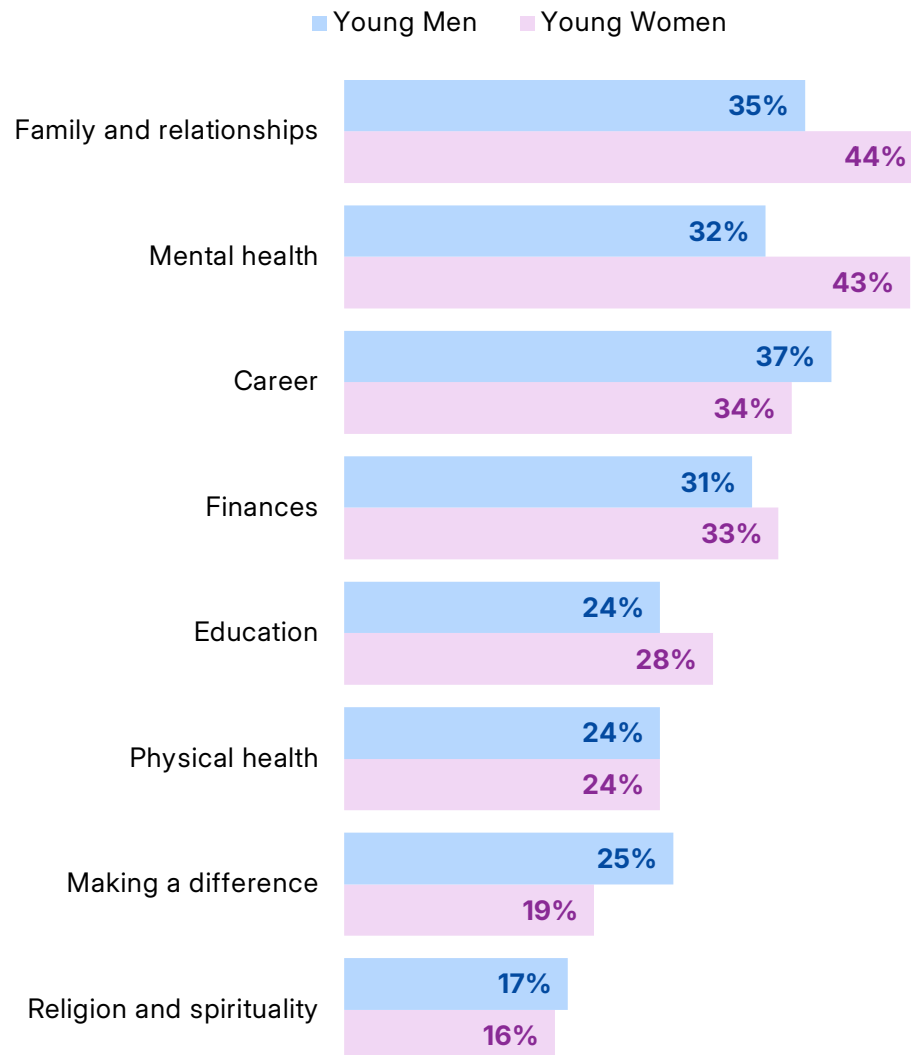
Mental Health Struggles -----

Mental health is a pressing concern for young women, who report significantly higher levels of struggle than their male peers. Over half of young women (51%) say have faced or currently face mental health challenges, compared to just 36% of young men.

The need for support is just as pronounced: nearly one in three young women (32%) identify mental health as a top area where they need external help, compared to 24% of young men.

Young women are also more likely to see mental health as essential to their personal and professional success: 43% view mental health as a top priority, compared to 32% of young men.

What are the key areas in your life most important to your success?



08

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS:

4-Year Degree

Skills Over Degrees: A Value-Action Gap

The traditional four-year college degree continues to be the default pathway after high school, even as questions mount about its relevance and return on investment in today's rapidly evolving job market. This contradiction between increasing doubts about the value of a bachelor's degree and deeply entrenched norms that keep it as the gold standard leads to mismatched expectations, confusion, and inertia. The result? Young people must navigate a landscape that says one thing but rewards another.

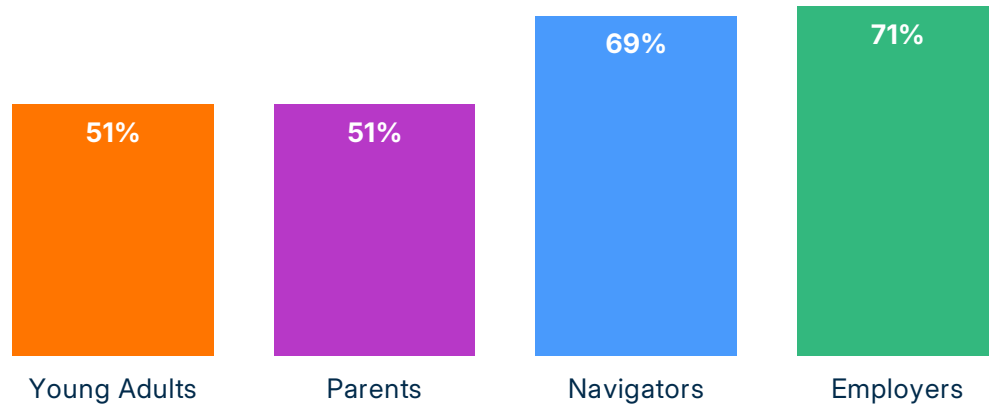
A Degree's Diminishing Return -----

Belief in the return on investment of a college education is eroding. Just 51% of young adults and parents now say a four-year degree is worth the cost or are unsure, citing high tuition and uncertain job outcomes as primary reasons.

Employers and navigators, who are often removed from the financial burden of college, remain more confident in the degree's value,

suggesting a potential blind spot in how these gatekeepers weigh educational return on investment.

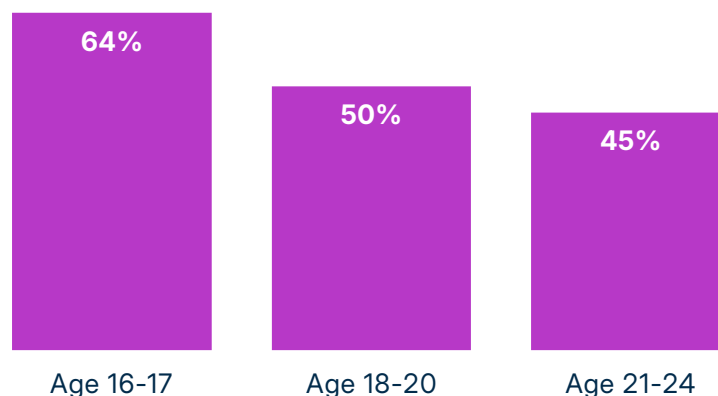
Believe that a 4-year college degree is worth the investment



The skepticism about the value of a four-year degree grows among parents of older young adults, as they gain more proximity to the realities of both college and non-college paths. Furthermore, 44% of all parents say their opinion about the best post-secondary path for their child has changed in the past five years.

Believe that a 4-year college degree is worth the investment

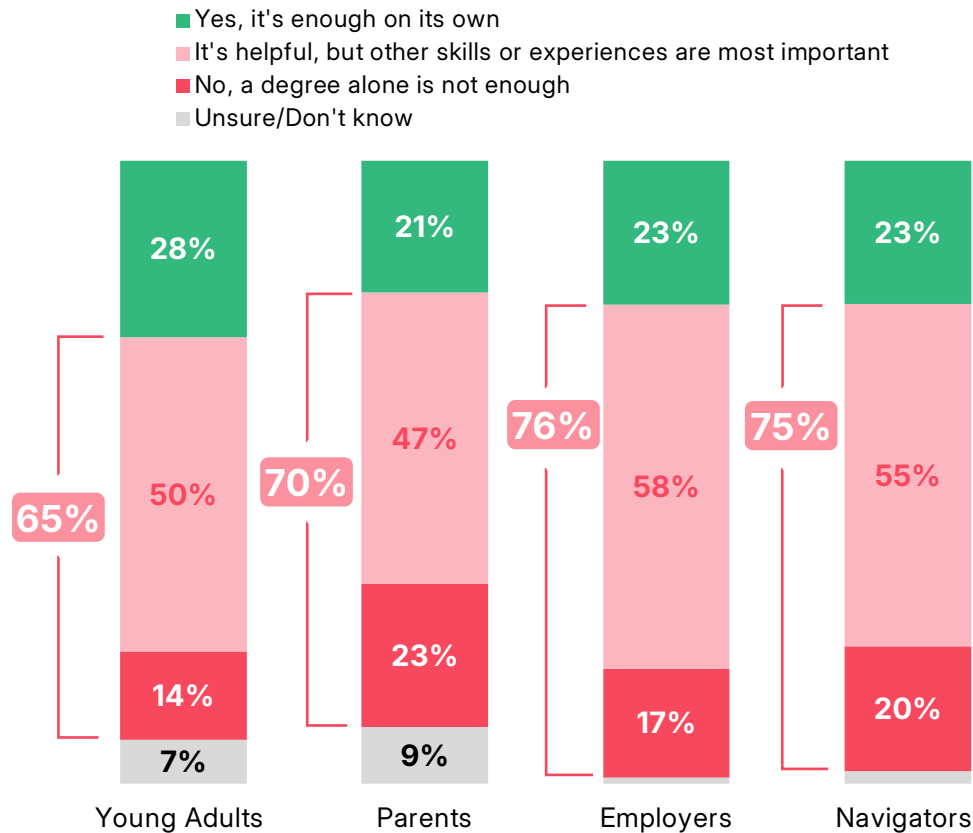
(Among Parents by Age of Child)



There is widespread agreement, however, that a college degree is no longer enough: young adults, parents, and employers all say that skills matter more than credentials.

Do you think having a 4-year degree is enough for young adults to get a good job these days or not?

(Percentages below 2% not shown)



This tension between rising skepticism and enduring expectations leaves many young adults feeling confused and misunderstood.

"College used to kind of guarantee a job, and that's also not guaranteed now. You hear about people who got really long degrees, and they have to work at Starbucks or Target."

- Non-Binary Young Adult, 22 years old



Support for Alternative Paths Clashes with Familiar Advice

Though openness to alternative paths is growing, most guidance still favors college. Sixty percent of parents prefer their child exploring alternative paths, yet 53% still encourage a four-year degree. Seventy percent of navigators also recommend the four-year path.

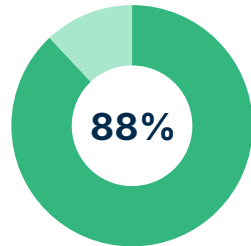
Encourage [their child / young adults] to pursue a 4-year degree or higher as a post-secondary path



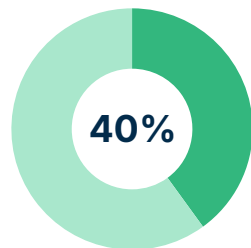
Employers Want Skills, But Still Hire Degrees

Employers express strong support for skills-based hiring, but institutional habits and industry norms prevail. Though 76% are open to easing degree requirements, 88% still value educational credentials. Forty-three percent require at least a Bachelor's degree

for entry level roles, and 40% say it is driven primarily by industry norms, not role necessity.



88% of employers still see educational attainment as an important factor in hiring decisions



40% of employers who require a degree for entry-level roles say it is because of industry norms, not job necessity

Despite growing conversation around skills-first hiring, employers still rely heavily on the traditional college pipeline. Four-year institutions remain one of the top sources of entry-level talent, second only to online applications and employee referrals. This continued reliance reinforces credentialism, even as employers acknowledge its limitations.

"It would be a huge plus for a candidate to have a Bachelor's and a Master's degree. We consider that as experience, so we add some time into their profile for those degrees."

- Hiring Manager, IT



09

SEGMENTING THE

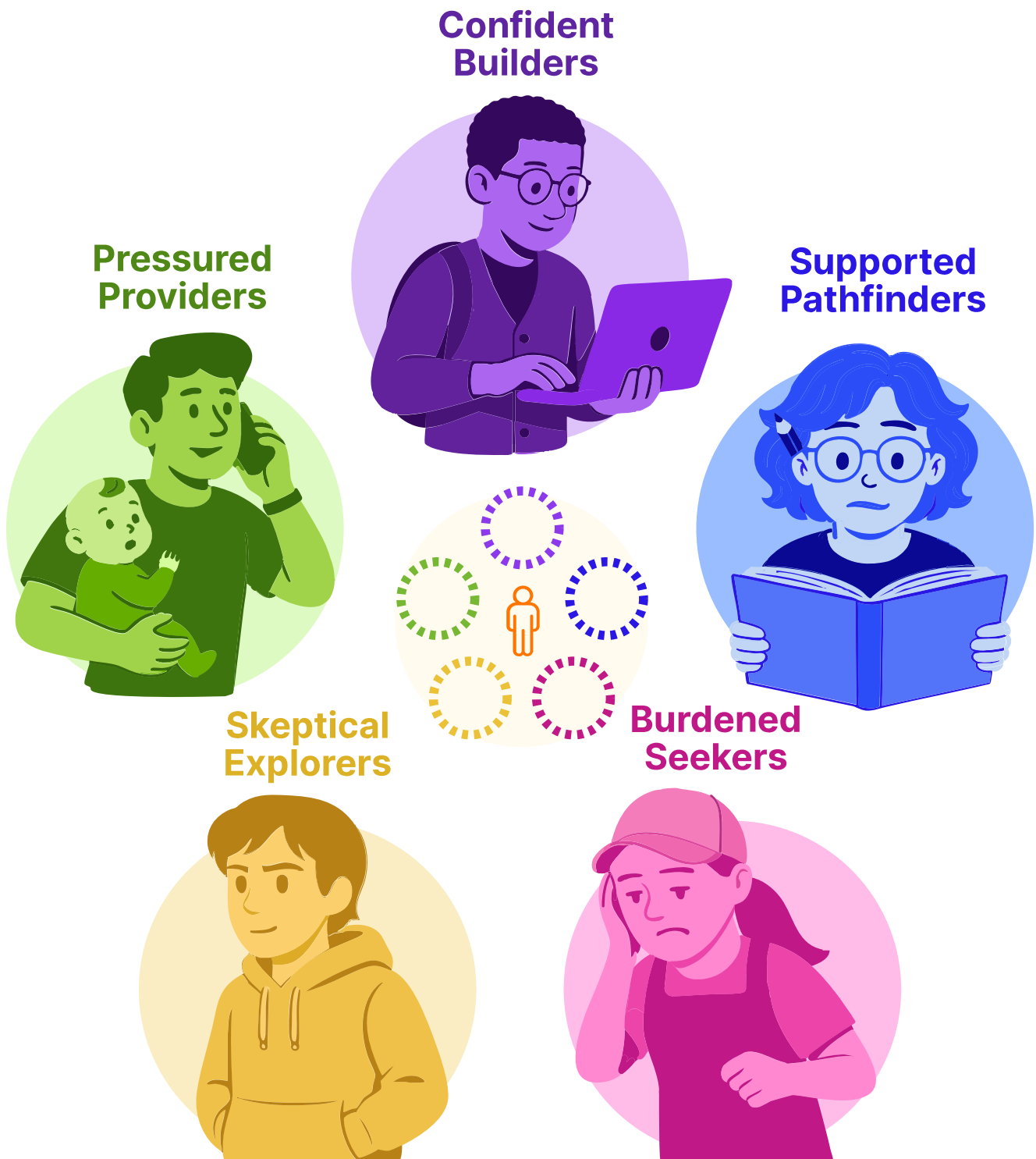
Young Adult Population

Key Young Adult Segments

Young adults are not a monolith. Their experiences, mindsets, and circumstances vary widely and so do their needs. A one-size-fits-all approach simply does not work.

To better understand this diversity, we conducted a statistical segmentation analysis of young adults ages 18-24 based on a range of factors, including demographics, life experiences, personal goals, and self-expressed needs. The result: five distinct groups, each facing different barriers and requiring different kinds of support.

Some are confident but lack access. Others are still searching for purpose or direction. Some already feel left behind. Yet despite these differences, the system continues to treat them the same.

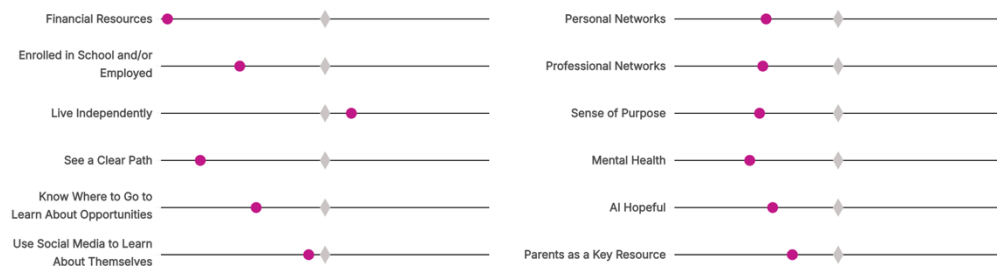


Burdened Seekers (24% of young adults) -----

They are navigating a storm without a map. Many wake up unsure how they'll get to their next shift—or if they even have one. They've faced more than their share of challenges—including unstable housing, food insecurity, and disconnection. They are also juggling responsibilities, navigating multiple hardships, and staying alert for their next opportunity. Yet, they remain confident that they can overcome challenges, believing in the possibility of better days. They know there are opportunities out there for them to find—but those opportunities feel like locked doors. Burdened Seekers need support accessing essential resources—such as food, housing, and transportation—as well as high-touch job search assistance. This includes navigating opportunities aligned with their interests and skills, building resumes that reflect their lived experiences, and connecting with professional networks that can help open doors to new roles.



- **90%** are in low-income households, and **43%** have struggled with food access.
- **51%** have lost a job, and **41%** say their current work is just to get by.
- **28%** are fully disconnected: neither enrolled in school nor employed.

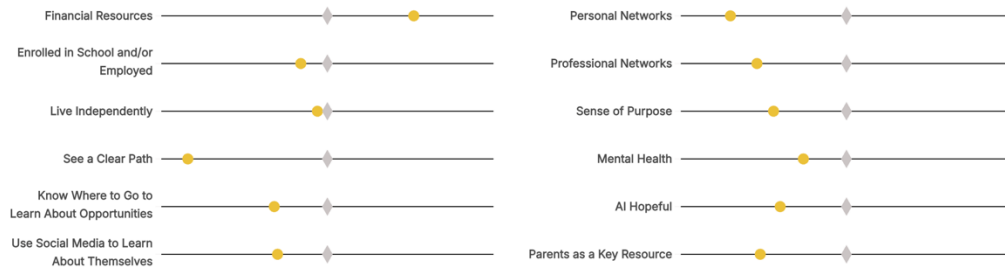


Skeptical Explorers (20% of young adults) -----

They're going through the motions—juggling jobs and trying different paths, but nothing has added up to a real career. They feel stuck, uncertain, and overlooked by systems that are meant to guide them. Confidence is low, and support networks are thin. With few trusted voices to lean on, many are unsure where to turn next. Eager to jumpstart adulthood on their own terms, Skeptical Explorers have faced challenges with previous paths and now approach future planning with curiosity and a desire for opportunities that encourage personal and professional exploration. They aim to grow in every area—career, health, independence, and new experiences—and need support exploring entrepreneurial paths alongside confidence-building goals like moving out, improving their physical and mental well-being, and traveling.



- **44%** say they have no one to help them reach their goals, despite most living at home.
- **64%** are employed but **40%** work multiple jobs.
- **79%** feel the American dream is out of reach or not real.

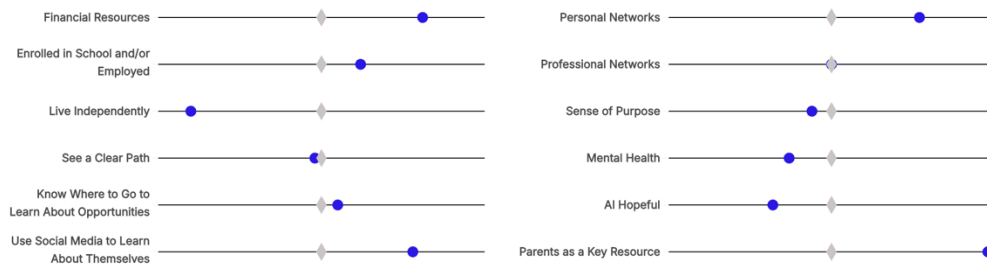


Supported Pathfinders (17% of young adults) -----

On paper, they're doing everything right—enrolled in school, living at home, and supported by their parents. But beneath the surface, they're unsure of what lies ahead. They trust the system and their mentors, but don't yet have a clear sense of direction or independence. As major milestones and life transitions approach, uncertainty builds—not from fear, but from not knowing which path to take or what's possible. What they need isn't just encouragement, but structured, confidence-building support that helps turn questions into a clear, achievable way forward. This includes financial planning, goal-setting guidance, and defined pathways that connect education to career opportunities.



- **91%** live with their parents, and **79%** are enrolled in school or training (most in 4-year colleges).
- **58%** receive strong support from friends and family, including advice, encouragement, and financial assistance.
- **47%** report mental health struggles.

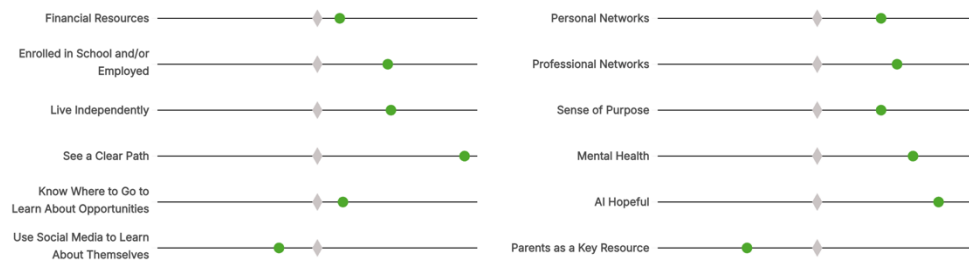


Pressured Providers (18% of young adults) -----

Many are full-time workers, parents, and breadwinners—already carrying more than most young adults. Though employed and independent, they feel the burden of financial strain. They believe in the American Dream, but it feels just out of reach. They show up, tap their networks, but often struggle with decisions. They need flexibility, practical strategies and support to manage busy lives while building a better future for themselves and their families. Whether advancing their careers or launching a business, they are seeking personal resources that offer stability—such as childcare, health insurance, transportation, and counseling—and professional resources that can accelerate their progress, including mentorship and financial planning.



- **50%** are first- or second-generation Americans.
- **79%** are a primary provider in their household, and 34% have children.
- **29%** are overstretched: working and in school full-time.

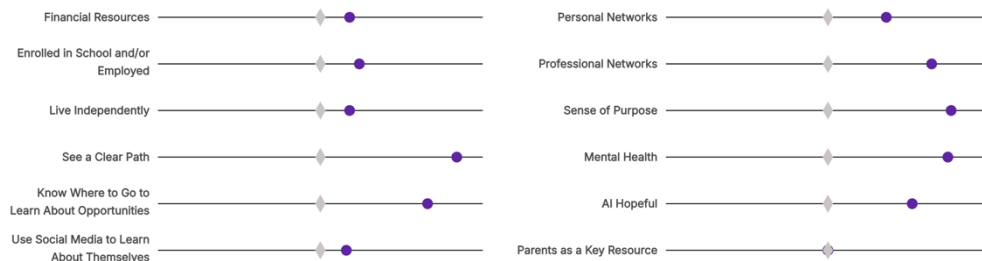


Confident Builders (21% of young adults) -----

They've got goals—and a plan to get there. These young adults are fueled by ambition and a belief that the future is theirs to shape. Whether they're working toward a degree, building a business, or mapping their next move, they're taking charge. They trust in the system, in their networks, and most of all, in themselves. They aren't waiting for permission. They're setting goals, embracing risks, and leveraging every tool they can—from mentors to social media—to move forward. But even the most confident need a boost. Eager to take a big step forward, these young people need strategies and support to grow their professional and leadership skills, advance in their jobs, explore entrepreneurship, manage their money, and experience more of the world.



- **91%** are confident in their ability to overcome challenges, and **89%** feel prepared for the jobs of the future.
- **54%** know exactly what drives them.
- **22%** prioritize starting a business in the next five years.



Key Segments Data

Demographics

		Total	Burdened Seekers	Skeptical Explorers	Supported Pathfinders	Pressured Providers	Confident Builders
Age	18-20	40%	40%	35%	78%	18%	33%
	21-24	60%	60%	65%	22%	82%	67%
Gender	Male	51%	44%	49%	39%	61%	61%
	Female	49%	56%	51%	61%	39%	39%
Race	White	45%	40%	46%	58%	37%	47%
	Hispanic	29%	36%	28%	23%	31%	27%
	Black	16%	15%	12%	5%	24%	20%
	Asian	6%	4%	6%	12%	7%	3%
	Other	4%	5%	7%	2%	2%	3%
U.S. Generational Status	1 st or 2 nd Generation	32%	30%	26%	29%	50%	25%
Urbanicity	Urban	36%	40%	33%	22%	44%	39%
	Suburban	46%	36%	48%	59%	47%	43%
	Rural	18%	24%	18%	20%	9%	18%
Household Type	Living with Parents	48%	41%	55%	91%	23%	40%
Household Income ⁴	Low	40%	90%	13%	16%	34%	33%
	Middle	32%	8%	42%	33%	46%	35%
	>Middle	17%	0%	21%	30%	18%	23%
Household Finances	Primary contributor	48%	44%	39%	14%	79%	62%
Parenthood	Have Children	19%	21%	17%	4%	34%	19%

⁴ Not showing those who do not know household income.

Circumstances

	Total	Burdened Seekers	Skeptical Explorers	Supported Pathfinders	Pressured Providers	Confident Builders
Currently Employed	69%	56%	64%	55%	92%	81%
Currently in School	56%	47%	53%	79%	55%	51%
Enrolled in School and/or Employed	85%	72%	80%	91%	95%	91%
College-educated (enrolled or graduated)	29%	15%	23%	45%	35%	33%
Have People to Help Them Achieve Goals	77%	65%	56%	94%	90%	89%
Have the Right Professional Connections	59%	45%	43%	59%	73%	78%
Parents are a Key Resource in Future Planning	31%	27%	22%	57%	22%	31%

Mindset

	Total	Burdened Seekers	Skeptical Explorers	Supported Pathfinders	Pressured Providers	Confident Builders
See a Clear Path Forward	75%	56%	54%	73%	98%	96%
Know Where to Go to Learn About Opportunities	52%	34%	39%	56%	57%	77%
Use Social Media to Learn About Themselves	50%	46%	41%	66%	42%	55%
Have a Sense of Purpose (Knows What Drives Them)	36%	23%	25%	34%	45%	54%
Experienced Mental Health Challenges	43%	52%	46%	47%	37%	33%
Hopeful that AI Will Help Them Secure More Career Opportunities	69%	59%	58%	61%	88%	82%
Think a College Degree is Worth The Time & Money	49%	32%	29%	62%	63%	68%
Believe in the American Dream	39%	24%	21%	45%	44%	67%