



**Jobs for  
the Future**

# Preparing Today's Youth for the Jobs of the Future

**JFF's policy recommendations for serving youth in  
infrastructure, climate and semiconductor production careers**

## AT A GLANCE

Read JFF's nine policy recommendations for better serving youth who are disconnected from school and work, based on the perspectives they shared with us on infrastructure, climate, and semiconductor careers.

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## About JFF

Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all. [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org)

## About JFF’s Language Choices

JFF is committed to using language that promotes equity and human dignity, rooted in the strengths of the people and communities we serve. We develop our content with the awareness that language can perpetuate privilege but also can educate, empower, and drive positive change to create a more equitable society. We will continually reevaluate our efforts as language usage continues to evolve. [info.jff.org/language-matters](http://info.jff.org/language-matters)

# 01.

## Taking Stock of the Current Reality

The United States is experiencing unprecedented investment in infrastructure, semiconductor, and climate careers, along with a surge in technological innovations and automation. It's a turning point for the future of work; the careers of tomorrow will look vastly different from those of prior generations.

For example, new green jobs are emerging as existing careers embed green skills like energy efficiency, sustainable design, and renewable energy. [LinkedIn's 2023 Global Green Skills](#) report highlighted that green job postings are outpacing the number of individuals with the necessary skills to fill them by two times.<sup>1</sup> The report shows the skill gap is significant, with only one in eight people possessing green skills. Analysis by the [National Bureau of Economic Research](#) also indicates that both older workers and those without a college degree appear less likely to transition into a green job, highlighting the potential for widening inequities as communities transition to green energy.<sup>2</sup> Earlier this year, [Harvard Business Review](#) analyzed U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics employment projections and found that individuals 65 and over now account for the fastest-growing portion of the labor force.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the data “projected that by 2032 one in four U.S. workers will be 55 or older, and close to one out of every 10 will be 65 or older,” which will open millions of vacancies. At the same time, onshoring of semiconductor production is creating new opportunities, but data shows the industry is stuck in old ways, as the current workforce is dominated by white men—“Hispanic and black workers make up just 7.9% and 4.9% of the



semiconductor industry workforce”—and many of these roles are in “lower paying and more dangerous semiconductor jobs.”<sup>4</sup>

Young people are crucial to delivering the infrastructure, climate, and semiconductor talent our economy requires. However, more than [4.6 million](#) youth between the ages of 16 and 24 are neither enrolled in school nor working a job, leaving them disconnected from both learning and work.<sup>5</sup> Today, disconnection rates are highest for Indigenous youth (23.5%), followed by Black (18.9%) and Latine (14%) populations, highlighting inequities of access and opportunity.<sup>6</sup> Young people from all walks of life must be equipped to engage in the economy; our future depends on them. The current workforce is aging, and the time to equip young people is now.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), Infrastructure Reduction Act (IRA), and Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors (CHIPS) represent critical investments in the development of disconnected communities, though the funding and the implementation are flowing through different channels than traditional workforce programs. BIL, IRA, and CHIPS seek to raise the bar in reaching communities that face increased barriers to work, including workers without four-year degrees, those from rural communities, and those with records of arrest, conviction, or incarceration. They represent an unprecedented opportunity to prepare the workforce of tomorrow using apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships, and other skill-development programs.



## **SOME EXAMPLES OF YOUTH IN BIL AND IRA GUIDANCE AND NOTICES:**

The [Wildland Fire Management Program](#) provides funds to contract, employ, and train workers as part of multiple programs to reduce wildfire risk and restore federal, state, and tribal lands. The program specifies that these workforce needs can be met through existing locally based organizations that engage young adults, Native youth, and veterans in service projects, such as youth and conservation corps.

The [Healthy Streets Program](#) authorizes contracting priorities to youth and conservation corps members.<sup>7</sup> These youth help with tasks like mitigating the negative impacts of heat in urban areas, improving air quality, and installing permeable road surfaces that reduce the risk of flooding from stormwater runoff.

For more information on Notices of Funding Opportunities (NOFOs) and who to connect with, check out this [resource from the National Governors Association](#) and this [toolkit from Results for America](#).<sup>8</sup>

## **SOME EARLY EXAMPLES OF BIL AND IRA IN ACTION** (excerpts from the [Local Infrastructure Hub's Priority Workforce Related NOFOs](#)):<sup>9</sup>

Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP), BIL—Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Wisconsin: The

Interstate Renewable Energy Council, in collaboration with multiple partners in each state, launched a pilot program in three states to develop, pilot, and nationally deploy a data-driven outreach campaign for subgrantees throughout the United States focused on hiring a new generation of WAP workers, including women and young people disconnected from school and work.

Rebuilding America's Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE), BIL—Burlington, Vermont:

The project focuses on providing safer and more accessible streets for pedestrians, bicyclists, and other nonmotorized users in the downtown area. It includes a workforce development component to offer multiple pathways for residents to learn the right skills and provide support for youth development and opportunities. This includes a Youth Development and Skills Gap study aimed at better understanding youth definitions of success, obstacles they face in achieving success, the skills they need to succeed, and how they perceive others can help them succeed, as well as a multi-pathway training program that exposes youth to a greater breadth of skills, including digital literacy, critical thinking, and problem solving; initiative and entrepreneurship; communication and collaboration; emotional intelligence and self-awareness; and effective oral and written communication.

While these federal policies stop short of setting aside funding specifically for young people, as funding is deployed across the United States, cities and states can create targeted plans to use BIL, IRA, and CHIPS dollars to serve youth through local policies, incentives, and partnerships. Policymakers can also encourage braiding of these funding streams with other workforce investments to integrate core

services like youth reconnection, career exploration, mentoring, or leadership skills alongside technical skills.<sup>10</sup> State and local policymakers can harness these investments to accelerate the trajectory of youth of color, those with records or in foster care systems, and immigrants into infrastructure, climate, and semiconductor jobs, creating a bright and inclusive future in their jurisdictions.

# 02.

## Understanding What Young People Need

While attention on youth is needed across America's investment agenda, their path into these job opportunities is not easy. [According to economist Raj Chetty's](#) research, where a young person grows up has a huge impact on economic advancement.<sup>11</sup> In fact, "moving a child out of public housing to a low-poverty area when young (at age 8 on average)...will increase the child's total lifetime earnings by about \$302,000." And at a time of unprecedented student loan debt (42.8 million borrowers with an average balance of \$40,681 school debt), studies highlight that "holding student loan debt delays the transition to adulthood in terms of marriage and home ownership."<sup>12</sup> According to a report by the [Federal Reserve Board](#), there are "only about six in ten attendees of four-year institutions completing a degree, and even lower rates at two-year schools."<sup>13</sup> And it found "strong negative effects of non-completion among student loan borrowers on a variety of measures of financial well-being," highlighting that debt affects youth who are working or in school and youth disconnected from work and school.

Not only is the economic outlook for young people different than it was 50 years ago, but also youth are carrying a heavy emotional load. Research found that between 3.4 million to 5.4 million youth under age 18 aid adults in offering care to family members due to "illness, age-related decline, disability, or other health condition."<sup>14</sup> And many immigrant young people serve as the primary communicator for their household, given limited English and technical literacy skills of adult family members. The burden on their mental health is high, as "one in seven 10-19-year-olds experiences a mental disorder," primarily depression, anxiety, and behavioral disorders, according to the World Health Organization.<sup>15</sup> And economic instability is common, according to the Deloitte Millennial Survey, with three in 10 Generation Z members and millennials saying they "do not feel financially secure" and roughly six in 10 of that group saying they live paycheck to paycheck.<sup>16</sup>

Youth want workforce policies and programs that reflect their unique needs. If policymakers listen, they will create more inclusive opportunities that benefit communities, local businesses, and youth themselves. Jobs for the Future (JFF) held a series of focus groups with young people ages 16 to 24 focused on their career aspirations and perspectives on infrastructure, climate, and semiconductor production occupations. Some early highlights include:

**Green/climate jobs feel very vague and confusing to youth.**

Youth emphasized the importance of trusted resources that demonstrate what jobs are available, what skills are required, and what benefits are offered. Youth articulated a desire to combat climate change or support the environment but felt many jobs simply use the phrase “green job” to attract young people, yet the jobs themselves aren’t that environmentally friendly. Another said green jobs don’t feel real.

**Good jobs are about so much more than wages to young people.**

Youth need to provide for themselves and their families but are keenly aware that doing so requires much more than a living wage. Youth highlighted the importance of loving the work, being able to bring who they are to the workplace, feeling safe to speak up or adapt their work style, and receiving health care or child care.

**Mentoring was repeatedly mentioned as one of the most crucial supports for youth.**

Youth emphasized that training is great but must be paired with personal connection. They said it is crucial to have a supportive and encouraging adult to listen, feel heard and valued, see others like them who are where they want to be, and be able to ask questions of someone a little further along the career path. Youth emphasized the importance of receiving candid, honest feedback. One young person noted, “We need mentors who can have tough conversations and not sugarcoat things.”

**The impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on entry-level job opportunities was a concern.**

Youth want to learn but are concerned about the pace of change due to AI and the relevance of available education programs. One youth mentioned, “While AI can be a powerful tool to generate ideas or automate tasks, we need to also consider the skills that young people gain in their first job and make sure these aren’t being erased in favor of automation. ...AI needs to support the human worker.” Another youth shared, “If AI is constantly improving, young people will have to do more and more just to get their first role, and training doesn’t seem to be keeping up.”

# 03.

## Using This Moment to Get Young People on a Path to Economic Advancement

Employers desperately need talent, communities require innovative ideas to solve pressing workforce challenges, and young people want to make a difference while providing for themselves and their families. Never has it been more important to prepare young people for these in-demand careers. Serving youth, particularly disconnected youth, well requires building more youth-centered policies and systems responsive to youth needs.

Informed by the voices of young people and insights from the [Workforce Transformation Policy Council \(WTPC\)](#), a group of future-focused workforce development leaders from around the country who serve youth every day, **JFF has developed nine policy recommendations for better serving youth who are neither working nor enrolled in school—also known as “opportunity youth”—through IRA, BIL, and CHIPS.**<sup>17</sup> As funding flows into communities, state and local policymakers and workforce, transportation, and energy agencies can use these recommendations to guide investments.





**1** *Dedicate a portion of your infrastructure, climate, and semiconductor production funding to workforce development* and encourage agencies, local jurisdictions, and employer partners to use some of the funding to create pathways for youth who have been disconnected from school or work.

**PENNSYLVANIA:** The governor signed an [executive order](#) declaring that the commonwealth would reserve at least 3% of all of the funding received from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) and IRA to fund workforce development and on-the-job training, investing as much as \$400 million over the next five years in workforce training to create [10,000 new jobs](#).<sup>18</sup> This work will be undertaken through the new Commonwealth Workforce Transformation Program.

**2** *Prioritize expanding paid work experiences with meaningful exposure to workplace culture, norms, expectations, and skills for young people.* Apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships are an opportunity to make jobs that provide work-based learning the norm. Encourage companies to shift to skills-based hiring, removing unnecessary degree requirements that create barriers to entry.

**THE U.S. CLIMATE ALLIANCE:** A coalition of 24 governors launched the [Governors' Climate-Ready Workforce Initiative](#) to grow career pathways in climate and clean energy fields, strengthen workforce diversity, and jointly train 1 million new registered apprentices by 2035 across the alliance's states and territories.<sup>19</sup>

**ARIZONA:** The governor issued an [executive order](#) allocating at least 1% of allowable program funds for on-the-job training and other workforce development activities in manufacturing, construction, green energy jobs, broadband, and IT.<sup>20</sup>

**ALASKA, CALIFORNIA, COLORADO, NEW JERSEY, NORTH CAROLINA, PENNSYLVANIA, SOUTH DAKOTA, UTAH, AND VIRGINIA:** Removed degree requirements for the vast majority of state jobs, creating an important signaling mechanism to the market and leaning in on skills-based hiring.<sup>21</sup>

**3** *Require collaboration with local workforce development agencies, community colleges, and K-12 systems in the development of infrastructure, climate, and semiconductor programs* to increase access for often-overlooked communities, including immigrants, disconnected youth, and Black and Indigenous individuals. Prioritize removing the gap between high school and higher education through early workforce development, including career exposure, dual enrollment, and pre-apprenticeship mapped directly to apprenticeship opportunities.

**MICHIGAN AND ARIZONA:** The Michigan governor [implemented a statewide workforce plan](#) focused on training 5,000 new infrastructure workers, which requires interagency collaboration; appointed workforce leads in impacted agencies; and states that the department “shall, where permissible, allocate some portion of new funding received for each project from federal programs for infrastructure workforce development, at an amount not to exceed five percent of the funding received for the project.”<sup>22</sup> The Arizona governor, through an [executive order](#), created the Talent Ready AZ Workforce Cabinet, which outlines priority occupations, populations, and partners for collaboration to improve access to good jobs.<sup>23</sup>

**ILLINOIS:** The [Green Generation \(G2\)](#) youth [sustainability workforce](#) development program is a collaboration between the Community Economic Development Association of Cook County, the University of Illinois, and Urban Efficiency, LLC, funding.<sup>24</sup> The program was piloted in the South Side suburbs of Chicago, Illinois, and “provides transformative experiences to youth through immersive training on leadership, advocacy, and technical aspects of home energy performance and urban sustainability.”<sup>25</sup>

**4** *Charge state departments of labor and education to infuse labor market data in K-12 classrooms, expand career guidance, and build core employability skills alongside academic learning, including problem solving, empathy, teamwork, and persistence.*

**NEW YORK, MICHIGAN, AND MINNESOTA:** The [American Federation of Teachers Educational Foundation](#) is expanding a partnership with Micron to implement an Advanced Technology Framework in high schools across the three states.<sup>26</sup> The goal of the program is to provide students “with the skills needed for careers in the microchip industry, fostering talent and bridging the gap between education and industry demands.”

**IDAHO:** The state is doubling down on pathways to semiconductor jobs by [building exposure opportunities for K-12 kids](#).<sup>27</sup> The Idaho Out-of-School Network uses mobile Think Make Create (TMC) labs “at schools, afterschool activities, summer camps, and other events across the state to bring STEM directly to students,” primarily girls, Latine and Black students, or those from rural populations. Further, “each independently operated TMC Lab serves a different youth program from pre-K to 12th grade. Each TMC Lab offers hands-on STEM learning through a quality out-of-school time program.”

**5** *Invest in data hubs or dashboards and statewide skills taxonomies, which make labor market information, emerging green skills, and career pathways easily accessible to all. Use this unprecedented opportunity as an accelerator for public-private data integration partnerships and advance public-facing scorecards for training programs.*

**CALIFORNIA:** The governor created the [California Jobs First Council](#), which formalizes workforce, public service, and core infrastructure and climate agencies to create and expand pathways into good jobs.<sup>28</sup> It is developing a “statewide industrial strategy that includes a statewide economic snapshot and identification of priority sectors, a statewide projects portfolio, a business expansion, attraction, and retention strategy, and a workforce development strategy,” which will support the state in better understanding needs and creating mechanisms to fill them.

**6** *Embed job quality standards into your policies and procurement processes to ensure infrastructure, climate, and semiconductor dollars are used to create good jobs and expand access to them. Take advantage of the [revised uniform guidance](#), which supports job quality, equitable recruitment, and hiring, as well as environmental sustainability.<sup>29</sup> Pass policies that [create living wage, local hire, stable scheduling, leave, or safety protections](#) to protect all workers, creating a better work environment for the next generation.<sup>30</sup> Create scorecards to provide public insight into the number and quality of emerging occupations.*

**MICHIGAN:** Michigan’s new [Community & Worker Economic Transition Office](#) is embedding “job quality standards throughout worker-targeted programs, ensuring that transition-impacted workers have meaningful access to good paying, high skill clean energy and infrastructure jobs.”<sup>31</sup>

**ILLINOIS:** The state passed the [Climate and Equitable Jobs Act](#), which not only dedicates \$78 million to workforce development in clean energy but also enacts equity standards, requires project labor agreements and prevailing wages, and establishes three Regional Climate Works Pre-apprenticeship Centers/Prime Accelerator Hubs to help clean energy businesses grow.<sup>32</sup>

**7** *Encourage the braiding of IJJA, BIL, and CHIPS funds with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Community Development Block Grants, and other sources to create integrated workforce programs. Take advantage of the [executive order](#) that directs agencies to make all efforts to improve jobs and support*

for caregivers, increase access to affordable care for families, and provide more care options for families.<sup>33</sup> Raise awareness of agency provisions, such as the [Department of Transportation](#)'s supportive services policy, that create allowances for the use of BIL, IRA, and CHIPS funding to deliver support alongside training.<sup>34</sup>

**OREGON AND PENNSYLVANIA:** BIL, CHIPS, and IRA programming and funding are incorporated into the states' WIOA state plans, which run through 2027, setting the tone for braiding of funding and encouraging recruitment from individuals enrolled in WIOA youth, adult, and dislocated worker program. Dislocated workers include individuals who have been laid off, terminated, or notified of a layoff or termination and are unlikely to return to their previous occupation or industry.<sup>35</sup>

**8** *Use community benefits agreement requirements and incentives to bring youth voices to the table in decision-making processes and create youth-centered programming.*

**GEORGIA:** This [community benefits agreement](#), established for constructing the Mercedes-Benz Stadium, included provisions for youth programs, job training, and educational opportunities.<sup>36</sup> According to public sources, young people were actively involved in the negotiation process and helped shape the final agreement.

**NEVADA:** This [community benefits agreement](#), created for developing the Las Vegas Stadium, included provisions for youth programs, job training, and community development initiatives.<sup>37</sup> According to public sources, young people were involved in the negotiation process and helped ensure that the agreement addressed the needs of their community.

**9** *Charge labor agencies to create youth-friendly worker rights training and resources to ensure young workers understand the legal protections and reporting mechanisms that exist as they move into infrastructure, climate, and semiconductor jobs.*

**NEW YORK:** The [New York Department of Labor](#) created a Youth Workers Bill of Rights using easy-to-understand, youth-friendly language to educate first-time workers entering the labor market by explaining New York workers' rights and protections specific to workers under 18.<sup>38</sup> The Bill of Rights is distributed to all young workers receiving their working papers and is also available as a [pocket guide](#) and [downloadable poster](#).<sup>39</sup>

These recommendations are just the beginning. Stay connected so you don't miss upcoming policy deep dives, expanded examples of what is working, and considerations for the incoming administration, available early next year.

# 04.

## Learn More About This Work

In the meantime, check out policy recommendations on [serving Black, Latine, Indigenous, and other individuals, transforming training, and harnessing the power of data](#).<sup>40</sup> You can also explore our [workforce toolkit](#), which provides 10 shifts workforce agencies can make to better take advantage of infrastructure, semiconductor, and climate funding.



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