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## The Workforce Development Pipeline from Cradle to Career

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Population projections in the United States provide important context for long-run workforce development strategies. The average annual growth rate for adults aged 18 to 64 is expected to drop from above 1 percent (which it averaged from 1990 to 2010, according to U.S. Census Bureau figures) to below 0.5 percent during the next four decades. During this time, the average annual growth rate for the population over age 65 is expected to exceed 1 percent—one indication that the labor supply may struggle to keep up with demand for skilled workers (Vespa, Armstrong, and Medina 2018).

Over time, the economy may adjust to these demographic changes. For example, as labor supply tightens, higher wage offers could encourage older workers to delay retirement and workers marginally attached to the labor force to actively look for a job. In addition, businesses could turn to using more technology that requires less labor.

However, instead of leaving these future adjustments to chance, policymakers and business leaders have opportunities to make investments now in the workers of tomorrow, which could lead to gains in workforce productivity and a number of benefits to society. In the three chapters that follow, the authors look at how investments in early childhood and youth, as well as strategies for helping the formerly incarcerated gain employment, can boost the number of skilled workers in the economy.

## **CHILDHOOD: A SENSITIVE PERIOD FOR DEVELOPING WORKFORCE SKILLS**

Data show there is a sizable share of workers who have low skill and education levels. In 2016, 23.4 million adults aged 18 to 64 did not hold a high school degree or its equivalent—almost 12 percent of this age segment of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau 2016). Increasing the high school graduation rate and overall educational attainment levels of the workforce would increase the supply of skilled workers. Strategic investments in early childhood and youth development could go a long way toward meeting this goal.

All ages in childhood are vital for growth and development, but the early years and adolescence are particularly important, as highlighted in subsequent chapters by me and Rivera-Batista et al. During early childhood, neural connections occur at a fast pace—more than a million per second in the infant brain. After the first few years of life, the pace of neural connection growth slows as the brain prunes some connections and reinforces others based on a child's experiences. Brain development during this period provides the building blocks for future learning and development (Center on the Developing Child 2018). Adolescence represents a second period of brain malleability, starting with the onset of puberty and lasting as late as the mid-20s. Brain development during this period largely addresses executive function, which includes the capacity for self-regulation (Steinberg 2014). With support from parents, schools, and communities, adolescents are more likely to develop capacities and skills, including self-regulation, critical thinking, and planning, that lead to success in adulthood and the workforce.

Research also makes clear that adverse experiences in childhood, such as the stresses of growing up in poverty, exposure to abuse or neglect, and household dysfunction, such as an incarcerated parent or parental mental illness, can impair healthy development, with implications that can last a lifetime (Dong et al. 2004). Children who arrive at kindergarten behind their peers tend to stay behind, and children without support to navigate the challenges of adolescence are at risk of not acquiring important work and life skills.

Ensuring children have a strong start and have continued support for development through adolescence benefits all of society; its benefits

include reduced costs in public budgets for education, health, human services, and crime, as well as the potential for higher tax revenue. Healthy child development also leads to a more productive workforce and a better chance for employers to find the skilled workers they need to fill open positions.

## **CONNECTING EX-PRISONERS TO EMPLOYMENT**

Emily Engel notes in her chapter, “Reintegrating the Formerly Incarcerated into the Workforce,” that, as of 2014, about 1 in every 110 adults was in prison or jail, and 1 in 52 were on parole or probation. This translates into a large number of adults who have challenges attaining employment because of the associated stigma and rules that bar ex-felons from being eligible for some jobs. In addition, the formerly incarcerated are less likely to have a high school degree, which also serves as a barrier to employment.

After leaving prison, the formerly incarcerated often lack social and professional networks to support reintegration into the labor force and society, and their workforce skills have likely atrophied. Engel discusses programs that assist the formerly incarcerated through a number of strategies, including individualized coaching, job training programs, and job placement. These programs often aim to cultivate “soft skills,” such as interpersonal communication, time management, and working effectively on teams. Program success is often measured by gains in employment and wage rates and reductions in recidivism.

## **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

While each of the essays in this section focus on a different population, from early childhood to adult, common themes emerge in working with children and the formerly incarcerated to improve the size and skills of the labor force.

*Quality and intensity of programs* are key ingredients to boost outcomes for children and adults. Effective teachers and research-

based approaches are consistent with positive child outcomes in early learning programs. Quality and intensity are also important for youth development programs, such as using outcome data to individualize a curriculum. Among programs for the formerly incarcerated, engaged coaches and relatively time-intensive training and work schedules have produced successful outcomes. As indicated in the essays, programs with higher quality and intensity may cost more than less intensive programs, but their positive impact on children and adults may actually yield higher rates of return to society.

*Two-generation approaches* can lead to stronger family stability and positive environments for child development. For example, high-quality and affordable child care allows parents to enter the workforce and be less likely to miss work or lose a job because of problems with child care arrangements. As Rivera-Batista et al. discuss in their chapter, “Workforce Policies and Programs to End Child Poverty in Puerto Rico,” the Boys and Girls Club of Puerto Rico’s youth development program includes a component to help children’s parents gain workforce skills and pathways to employment, which can ultimately improve family economic stability.

*Improving policy and systems* is key to providing support for children and families at scale. While it is important to cultivate quality programs in communities, addressing barriers to providing and accessing services through policy and systems change can lead to a wider reach. My chapter, “Early Childhood Investments: Paving the Way for the Future Workforce,” highlights key policy and system issues regarding the availability, quality, and affordability of child care. Solving policy and system-level constraints can foster better conditions for the creation or expansion of high-quality child care programs.

The formerly incarcerated population raises several policy considerations in regard to workforce development, including processes for skill development in prisons, barriers to employment after prison, and the laws and sentencing practices that lead to the nation’s relatively high incarceration rates.

*Continuity across different stages and types of services* is also vital. A number of different government agencies, nonprofits, businesses, and health and education organizations provide resources to help children enter school prepared, graduate from high school, and pursue postsecondary education and work opportunities. There are many

transition points between these resources, which can have implications for a child's success. Providing continuity during transitions, data sharing, and resource alignment can help children and their families navigate the cradle-to-career pipeline. In addition, the transition from incarceration to living outside prison is a particularly sensitive period, and a time when the employment programs that Engel's chapter highlights can provide a stable bridge.

## PREVENTION VS. REMEDIATION

The chapters in this section emphasize that investing in children and the formerly incarcerated at specific points in time—early childhood, adolescence, and the transition from prison—lowers the number of problems arising downstream and produces individual, societal, and economic benefits. These preventative efforts can reduce costs to government budgets, lead to better employment outcomes and life prospects, and, ultimately, address the growing demand for skilled labor.

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