

APA RESOLUTION Developmental Risks and Opportunities in Adolescent Employment

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BACKGROUND

According to the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), violations of child labor laws and state-level proposals to diminish long-standing child labor protections in the US are on the rise (Sherer & Mast, 2023).^{1,2} In Fiscal Year (FY) 2022, the number of adolescents employed in violation of child labor laws increased 37% when compared to the previous year, and 283% when compared to 2015 (Sherer & Mast, 2023). Among adolescents employed in violation of hazardous occupation laws, there was a 26% increase between 2021 and 2022, and 94% when compared to 2015 estimates (Sherer & Mast, 2023). In FY 2022, DOL found that 835 companies had employed more than 3,800 children in violation of labor laws (DOL, 2023). This trend is not stopping, as the DOL announced that in the first quarter of 2023 the Department was investigating more than 600 youth labor cases (Sherer & Mast, 2023). Moreover, these numbers should be considered underestimates because cases may go unreported. As stated by a former U.S. Secretary of Labor, “We see every day the scourge of child labor in this country, and we have a legal and a moral obligation to take every step in our power to prevent it.... This is not a 19th century problem—this is a today problem” (DOL, 2023).

Efforts by states to lower child labor standards undermine enforcement of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA; Sherer & Mast, 2023). The FLSA prohibits the employment of “oppressive child labor” in the United States, which the act defines—with some exceptions—as the employment of youth under the age of 16 in any occupation or the employment of youth under 18 years old in hazardous occupations. The Act includes several

exemptions, however, that create a complex set of thresholds that depend on several factors, including the child’s age, local school hours, the nature of the work (e.g., occupation, industry, and work environment), and parental involvement in the child’s employment (Donovan & Shimabukuro, 2016). Of significant concern is adolescent employment during the school year that may diminish educational attainment as a result of competing for youths’ time.³ Structural and systemic inequities lead to the greatest risk of exploitation and violations of child labor laws for underage youth,⁴ migrant youth (U.S. Department of Labor, February 2023), youth living in poverty and/or in families where the adult(s) is unemployed, youth of color, youth experiencing homelessness, and/or youth with developmental or physical disabilities. Youth with intersecting marginalized identities are at even greater risk of exploitation. For instance, migrant youth may turn to work for survival when they are unable to meet their basic needs for food and shelter, need to support themselves and/or their families, face pre- and postmigration trauma, encounter challenges in adapting to U.S. educational systems, and/or have limited support systems and resources (Berger Cardoso et al., 2019). Due to these factors and their immigration legal status, many migrant youth work under exploitative, low-paying, and/or hazardous work conditions. Although some migrant youth have shown tremendous strength and resilience (Skoog et al., 2017), these work circumstances may have detrimental consequences for their health, well-being, education, and social advancement (Berger Cardoso et al., 2019; Jayawardana et al., 2023) and, in turn, impact communities (United Nations, 2017).

1. This **statement focuses on U.S. child labor laws and research conducted with U.S. populations**. While this is a global issue, countries vary in the age at which children/adolescents may be employed, and therefore generalized research and policy have significant limits.

2. The **statement focuses on adolescents** (also referred to as youth) in the “child labor” force, generally 14 years and older as determined by the Fair Labor Standards Act for non-agricultural employment (<https://www.dol.gov/general/topic/youthlabor/agerequirements>), although younger children and adolescents are allowed to be employed in agricultural work with parental consent (<https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WHd/legacy/files/childlabor102.pdf>). The phrase “child/adolescent” is only used here because “child labor” is the common term encompassing adolescents.

3. Summer employment, school-work cooperatives, and unpaid volunteer work are distinguished from work during the school year in the psychological science literature, and therefore are outside the scope of this statement and research summary. Family businesses may also have unique features that are distinct from other work contexts.

4. The U.S. Department of Labor asserts that federal age requirements supersede state laws: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/state/age-certificates>

Under certain circumstances, there may be benefits to adolescent employment. When they choose to work and are not hired, unemployment among young people may lead to feelings of exclusion and marginalization. Some unemployed youth may face barriers to education, healthcare, social services, and civic engagement which, in turn, can impact their sense of identity, belonging, and self-esteem (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Social exclusion occurs when individuals are denied access to the resources and opportunities that are typically available to members of society (Pohlan, 2019). More broadly, the adolescent unemployment rate may be an important indicator of a country's economic and social well-being. Unemployment, in general, has important implications for a nation's future economic growth, development, and stability.

The American Psychological Association (APA) has advanced clear policies in the field of psychology relating to population health, health equity, child and adolescent behavioral health, human rights, immigration, and poverty and socioeconomic status.⁵ Although adolescent employment sits squarely within the scope of previously adopted APA policies, there is a further need to elucidate the Association's position on this important and timely issue.

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS: THE CURRENT CONTEXT FOR CHILD/ADOLESCENT LABOR

The current state of adolescent mental health and systemic inequities, along with the potential for the detrimental effects on educational attainment, are such that the benefits and risks of adolescent employment demand urgent attention. Over the last decade, concerns about youth mental health have increased dramatically. Between 2020 and 2021, diagnoses of depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder among youth increased by 12%, with 1 of 5 adolescents considering suicide in 2021 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Rates of suicide, which have traditionally been high predominantly among White and Native American youth, have risen sharply among Black, African American and Latine youth (Sheftall et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic youth lost a parent or a caregiver at more than two times the rate of non-Hispanic White children, while American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander children lost caregivers at nearly four times that rate (Treglia et al., 2021). Also, at heightened risk for mental health concerns are youth with marginalized intersectional identities, including multiracial and LGBTQ+ youth (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). In 2022, nearly half of LGBTQ+ youth seriously considered suicide, a disturbing trend that increases among LGBTQ+ youth with multiracial identities (The Trevor Project, 2022). The detrimental effects of diminished mental health on

academic achievement, motivation and increased risk of school dropout are well documented (Pascoe, Hetrick, & Parker, 2020). Moreover, processes of "differential selection"—that not all youth are selected for all types of employment settings—magnify the benefits and risks for certain adolescents with resultant educational, behavioral health, and health inequities.

UNDERSTANDING CHILD/ADOLESCENT LABOR: WHAT WE KNOW AND WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW

ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

Adolescence (defined as beginning approximately at the onset of puberty and extending into the early 20s) is a time of both opportunity and risk (e.g., National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), 2019a, 2019b, 2020). Marked developmental changes in brain development, interpersonal relationships, identity, cognition, and the potential for risk behaviors render adolescence a "sensitive period of development" wherein resilience and the future life course may be changed for better or worse (NASEM, 2019a, 2019b).

Furthermore, both favorable and detrimental exposures in adolescents' lives (e.g., educational opportunities, access to resources and opportunities, family dynamics, environmental harms) make adolescence a critical time to compensate for, or exacerbate, inequities and injustices in terms of current and future health and well-being, educational achievement, economic advancement, criminal legal system involvement, and employment opportunities/earnings. It is within this crucial developmental context that youth employment occurs.

STATE OF THE SCIENCE REGARDING ADOLESCENT EMPLOYMENT

Despite the longstanding participation of adolescents in the workforce, their employment has not been studied extensively for long-term impacts on development, health, well-being, or transition to adult work (Frone, 1999; Staff et al., 2023). Moreover, the body of research on adult employment provides little guidance due to the unique developmental circumstances for adolescents. Significant research is lacking in the psychology subfields studying employment (e.g., Industrial/Organizational Psychology, Vocational Psychology) that has extended methods and findings with adults to younger workers.

Existing research is mixed on the benefits and risks of employment during the school year on adolescent health, well-being, and educational advancement. Drawing on developmental theory, some scholars have argued that employment during adolescence may have positive effects for adolescent psychosocial

5. See APA Council Policy Recommendations listed in reverse chronological order in reference list.

development (e.g., improved autonomy, identity development, and social development through interaction with adults outside of school and family (e.g., Frone, 1999; Staff et al., 2023). Some youth and parents surveyed have anecdotally reported benefits of youth employment (e.g., Mortimer, 2010). In some communities, adolescent employment may be preferred over idle time after school. However, empirical findings about the benefits of employment have not been consistent. For example, research has been contradictory regarding whether work during adolescence promotes self-efficacy (e.g., in the context of supervisory support; Cunnien et al., 2009) or reduces self-efficacy (e.g., in the context of excessive work demands; Mortimer & Staff, 2004). McLoyd and Hallman (2020) caution that some developmental differences (e.g., differing levels of autonomy or self-reliance) may precede employment, consistent with differential selection to employment; that is, some adolescents may choose to work and are selected over others.

Scholars in adolescent employment caution that “the long-term consequences of adolescent employment for contemporary cohorts of youth in the United States may differ in important ways from the past, especially given the historical and community variation in work opportunities for youth” (Staff et al., 2023, p. 294). This is especially true considering the economic, educational, and social stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sociocultural and economic context for adolescent employment, including the aforementioned youth mental health crisis, is critically important for understanding its short- and long-term effects (e.g., Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006), making it difficult to generalize prior research findings to the present time. There are also important variations over time in the type of employment undertaken by adolescents (e.g., agriculture/construction versus clerical/retail), with likely differential effects on their health, well-being, and developmental outcomes. Indeed, recently adolescents are undertaking jobs that are typically done by adults. For example, shortages in the construction and farming industries are being filled by migrant youth and youth living in poverty (Desilver, 2022).

QUANTITY OF WORK VERSUS QUALITY OF WORK EXPERIENCE

Most extant studies have focused on the effects of work quantity (i.e., number of hours worked) in relation to limited outcomes, leaving a knowledge gap about the effects of work quality on adolescent health, educational, social, and economic outcomes. This gap is especially noteworthy since some features of work may be uniquely important for adolescent development (e.g., psychological and physical safety, learning new skills, supervision/mentorship, opportunities for leadership, social support e.g., Staff et al., 2023).

EFFECTS OF CHILD/ADOLESCENT EMPLOYMENT ON EDUCATION

As noted above, research across historical periods has inherent limitations to generalizability to present-day adolescents regarding the relationship between employment and educational or vocational outcomes. However, work during the school year remains a potential competitor with education, with the latter serving as a proxy for economic advancement. As Zimmer-Gembeck and Mortimer (2006) have noted, “Human capital formation is closely linked to school attendance” (p. 2). Therefore, a consistent concern pursued in prior research is the effect that adolescent employment has on education, including academic performance, school attendance, engagement, and high school completion. Surveys with nationally representative cohorts (e.g., Monitoring the Future Survey, High School Longitudinal Study, National Education Longitudinal Study, Education Longitudinal Study) and community samples (e.g., Youth Development Study)⁶ have shown that intensive adolescent work (defined as work in excess of 20 hours per week) is associated with school disengagement, namely poorer school performance, lower grade point average, increased absenteeism, missed school days, and increased dropout rates (e.g., Staff et al., 2023).

Research findings have been mixed regarding the impact of adolescent employment on pathways after high school. Intensive employment during high school has been associated with less time in higher education and a lower likelihood of completing college when compared to moderate work or no employment during high school. Yet a possible benefit also exists for some adolescents for the school-to-work transition following high school, such as an increased likelihood of full-time work or higher earnings (Staff et al., 2023). Thouin, Dupere, and Denault (2023) have found that adolescent identity commitment may mediate the relationship between work during high school and integration into a career.

It is critical to emphasize, however, that demographic variables serve as moderators for the potential risks and benefits of youth employment, including socioeconomic status (e.g., Staff et al., 2020), race/ethnicity (e.g., Bachman et al., 2013; Hwang & Domina, 2017; Staff et al., 2023), parent education (e.g., Bachman et al., 2013), and gender (e.g., Frone, 1999; U.S. Department of Labor, 2000); all affect opportunities for employment, work contexts, and the intensity of employment. Similarly, scholars in vocational psychology (e.g., Blustein et al., 2002) have emphasized that socioeconomic status plays a pivotal role in the school-to-work transition. As Staff, Freelin, and Mortimer (2023) have noted, “Youth do not arrive in the workplace randomly, as they must rely on their prior achievements and orientations to navigate a variety of structural and social forces that enhance or impede their likelihood of finding, securing, and keeping

6. Surveys with prior cohorts may not reflect the cultural diversity of the current population of youth in the US.

a job during high school; these factors may also influence the characteristics of jobs they obtain” (p. 299).

All adolescents have the right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), including those with disabilities (34 CFR 300.101), and those who are undocumented (in *Plyler v. Doe* [1982], the Supreme Court ruled that undocumented students are entitled to public education under the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution). Indeed, in the US, compulsory education laws require adolescents to attend school, usually until the age of 16 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Laws also exist to protect adolescents from the harm of missing too much school, including truancy penalties such as fees and fines or court proceedings for parents as well as fees, fines, juvenile court proceedings, and loss of driving privileges for teens. Research shows that adolescents who lose school time face a variety of lifelong consequences, including higher rates of unemployment and underemployment, and increased risk of housing insecurity, incarceration, and over representation in mental health conditions (Lynch et al., 2016).

Missing significant amounts of school time and dropping out of school are associated with both “pull” (McDermott et al., 2019) and “push” factors. On the one hand, work may be viewed as a pull factor, such as when it is a requirement for some families to survive and/or when it serves as a means to instill key life skills. On the other hand, push factors may also lead to increased numbers in adolescent employment. These include exclusionary discipline practices that are often disproportionately applied to students of color and those with disabilities (Carter, et al., 2017; Curtis, 2014; Losen et al., 2015; Skiba et al., 2011). Furthermore, the unequal distribution of resources (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016) and efforts to promote school attendance (U.S. Department of Education, 2019) calls into question how systems can do better at keeping kids in school. The contexts in which students live, study, and work are interrelated and often, in combination, result in inequity. Similarly, high school completion and health are closely linked (e.g., Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007).

EFFECTS OF ADOLESCENT EMPLOYMENT ON HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The effects of adolescent employment on health and well-being have not been widely studied. For decades, considerations about safety in youth employment have been raised (e.g., National Research Council, 1998). Indeed, youth are injured at work in greater numbers than adults, prompting the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to propose “core competencies” on workplace safety and health before entering the workforce (Okun et al., 2016). It is important to emphasize that differential selection processes contribute to inequities

among adolescents who “choose,” or are chosen for, hazardous or riskier jobs (e.g., migrant youth).

Noting the variation across states in terms of restrictions on hours of work on school days, working at night, and prohibitions against adolescents working in hazardous jobs, Mortimer (2010) cautioned that parents/caregivers should monitor these aspects.⁷ Healthy adolescent development is a complex interaction of the brain, body and environment (NASEM 2019b) and rests on both exercise (Bustamante et al, 2023) and sleep (Paruthi et al, 2016; Telzer et al, 2015). Additionally, both physical and psychological safety is necessary for healthy development.

The limited research examining the effects of employment on adolescent behavioral health and well-being (on earlier cohorts) has had complex findings (American Psychological Association, 2019). Early research noted a link between intensive work and “delinquent” behaviors. Subsequently, working intensive hours (>20 hours/week) during adolescence has been associated with “precocious” or adult-like behaviors (e.g., underage use of alcohol, use of marijuana, engaging in sexual activity earlier), although these differences may not continue into adulthood (e.g., Staff et al., 2023). Whether propensity toward problem behaviors is antecedent to, or a consequence of, work exposure is unclear. At least one study (Bozick et al, 2022) has found that adolescents with externalizing behavior problems were likely to work more hours than peers without pre-existing problem behaviors. In contrast, McLoyd and Hallman (2020) did not find childhood behavior problems to predict the intensity or duration of adolescent employment.

Research has also suggested that stressful work conditions, including interference with school, may be associated with lower well-being, although there may not be a long-term impact on adult mental health. Bachman et al. (2013) noted that the relationship between intensive work hours and problem behaviors varies according to race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, with White and higher SES youth showing the negative impacts). They argue that processes of selection in employment are more stringent for Black, Latine, and low-socioeconomic youth, and that these young people may work for different reasons than their White or more affluent peers.

DIFFERENT TRAJECTORIES FOR ADOLESCENT EMPLOYMENT ACROSS DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

Important differences appear to exist in developmental trajectories related to adolescent employment across racial/ethnic groups. For example, using the Child Development Supplement of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, McLoyd and Hallman (2020) conducted a study with variables measured in childhood and subsequent employment in adolescence. Among

7. The U.S. Department of Labor offers parents guidance in this regard: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/youthrules/parents>

those adolescents who were employed during high school, race moderated findings in two important ways: (1) White youth with high expectations for college completion were less likely to work intensively, while Black youth with high expectations for college were more likely to work intensively; and (2) greater self-reliance in childhood predicted both shorter duration and lower intensity of employment for Black youth but higher intensity of employment for White youth.

Virtually all scholars in adolescent employment emphasize the need to better understand *differential selection into employment* (i.e., varied opportunities for diverse types and intensity of employment across racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups, racial discrimination) and self-selection (i.e., choosing to work versus not, reason for work, level of academic aspirations). For example, Staff, Freelin, and Mortimer (2023) highlight complex differences among Latine, Black and White youth in rates of employment (with White youth being more likely to be employed) and the likelihood of intensive work hours (with White youth less likely to work intensively). Processes of selective hiring, including hiring into positions that are intensive and stressful, may promote educational and health inequities. Yet research is limited on the potential sources of disparities in both entry and outcomes for adolescents in the labor force (e.g., social determinants of health, immigration legal status, developmental and/or health conditions, and intersectional identities).

CRITICAL NEED FOR MORE RESEARCH

Given the changing landscape of adolescent employment, as well as the many current threats to education, health and well-being, there is a critical need for new research—in the current historical context—on the impact of adolescent work across a range of outcomes. Indeed, prior research has not included the most vulnerable, that is, migrant youth whose reasons for work and access to education are often quite different from the samples studied. Furthermore, adolescent employment, and its relationship to education and the school-to-work transition, may have important implications for educational and health equity. Additionally, processes of differential selection into employment need to be better understood. Therefore, future research must carefully sample diverse racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups across a range of occupational settings in relation to a range of outcomes in academic achievement, adult work stability, and health and well-being.

In order to inform best and safe practices for adolescent labor, and to maximize the potential benefits while minimizing short- and long-term risks, additional research is needed to understand: (1) the impactful features of adolescent employment, including the quantity and quality of adult supervision and mentoring in work settings; (2) the reasons youth work (e.g., supporting the family, saving for college, wanting spending money); (3) the physical and mental health benefits and risks; (4) the impacts on social relationships and family dynamics; (5) the long-term

effects for lifespan development; (6) opportunities for education, career choice, and long-term economic and social advancement; and (7) the differential effects on employment among historically marginalized youth, youth with intersectional identities, and/or youth with physical and/or developmental disabilities.

MAIN MOTION: THAT COUNCIL ADOPTS THE FOLLOWING POLICY STATEMENT:

A CALL FOR ACTION

In highlighting existing knowledge gaps, APA calls upon the field of psychology and policymakers to support increased research, monitoring, intervention, advocacy, and policy to inform and guide safe labor practices for adolescents, protect educational attainment and opportunities for future earnings, promote equity, prevent exploitation and abuse, strengthen families, and reduce risk of short-term and long-term harm for lifespan development.

Specifically, APA makes a call for all stakeholders—including, but not limited to, psychologists, healthcare professionals, employers, educators, and policymakers—to:

- Advocate for federal and private funding and new avenues for research on adolescent labor within the present-day context, including extension of the research on adult employment and longitudinal developmental science with diverse populations that may clarify unique risks and opportunities for employment during adolescence that affect the lifespan.
- Advance equity and social justice efforts to protect the human rights and well-being of marginalized youth and their families in the labor market. This includes promoting research with diverse populations that examines biopsychosocial factors at multisystemic levels (micro, meso, exo, macro) for developing policy, considering that the landscape for adolescent employment differs among youth from various backgrounds, family contexts, and lived experiences.

APA calls on institutions, organizations, and federal and state agencies working with youth to develop and disseminate culturally and linguistically responsive educational programs to increase awareness among adolescents, their parents/caregivers and employers about their legal rights and protections.

APA calls on educational and school systems to uphold their affirmative responsibilities and implement programs that ensure school attendance and completion. These systems need to educate adolescents and parents/caregivers about the labor market to prevent exploitation and ensure academic advancement. Schools should increase their engagement in positive prevention strategies to reduce dropout rates and address chronic absenteeism rather than rely primarily on punitive truancy strategies, which may worsen education inequities.

APA calls on employers, in collaboration with psychologists and other subject matter experts, to adopt best practices for adolescent employment, including establishing safe working environments for them (including work hours) across diverse work settings, along with adequate enforcement to ensure compliance.

APA calls on state and federal agency officials to increase enforcement of laws, regulations and penalties for industries and employers engaging in exploitative and detrimental youth labor practices that compromise the health, well-being, and economic advancement of adolescents in the labor market. This includes modernizing and expanding hazardous occupation limits to better protect adolescents at work, increasing staffing of the DOL's Wage and Hour Division to investigate child labor violations, and enforcing age verification.

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