



The Massachusetts Youth and Young Adult Labor Market: Trends and Barriers to Employment

Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development
Department of Economic Research

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About Barriers to Employment Report

The Department of Economic Research (DER) submits this Barriers to Employment report as required by section 7003-0100 in the [FY2026 General Appropriation Act](#) which states “the department shall submit a report to the house and senate committees on ways and means including, but not limited to: (i) sector by sector barriers to workers returning to work during the 2019 novel coronavirus pandemic, including the retail sector; and (ii) current programs that may be utilized to target the workforce in each sector”.

About Department of Economic Research (DER)

The Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD) Department of Economic Research produces, analyzes, and distributes various data, labor market reports, and other resources related to employment, unemployment, occupations, industries, and other components of the Massachusetts labor market. Our stakeholders include policy makers in state and local government, workforce development agencies, institutions within academia, employers, jobseekers, and others. Visit the [Department of Economic Research website](#) to learn more.

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Executive Summary

This report centers on the mechanisms that shape labor market participation among Massachusetts youth and young adults, with a focus on how structural, demographic, and regional barriers influence employment outcomes. By examining patterns of disconnection, labor force participation, and sectoral shifts, the analysis highlights the ways in which pandemic-era disruptions and persistent inequities affect the supply of entry-level workers and the accessibility of employment opportunities.

In 2024, there were an estimated 876,000 non-institutionalized youth and young adults aged 16-24 in Massachusetts, representing 15% of the total 16 and older population. An analysis of Massachusetts youth and young adult labor market outcomes (ages 16-24, hereafter referred to as “youth”) reveals a landscape marked by historically low unemployment, declining labor force participation, and increasing disparities in early work experience.

In 2024, the youth unemployment rate was 8.9%, less than two-thirds its level in 2006, yet it remains significantly higher than the overall state unemployment rate—typically about twice as high. While employment outcomes have improved for youth over time, persistent gaps show that youth face greater barriers to securing employment compared to the general population. Meanwhile, the disconnection rate—youth neither in school nor in the labor force—remained below the national average at 4.9%. This low disconnection rate signals a highly engaged youth population, yet aggregate figures mask substantial variation by region, demographic group, and barrier exposure.

Labor force participation among youth declined from 63.1% in 2006 to 61.7% in 2024, driven primarily by reduced early work experience. The share of young adults (19–24) with limited or no work history rose from 9.1% in 2009 to 12.7% in 2023, with low-income young adults experiencing a sharper increase. This trend reduces the pool of entry-level workers with prior job exposure. Notably, the decline in early employment is not offset by increased school enrollment, as post-secondary enrollment rates have remained stable.

Sectoral shifts further shape the youth labor market supply. Total employment in traditional entry-level sectors—retail trade and accommodation & food services—contracted by 7.6% and 5.5% respectively since 2019, reducing geographically distributed, flexible job opportunities. In contrast, health care and construction sectors expanded their share of youth employment, but these jobs are more geographically concentrated and often require specific skills or credentials. Consequently, young workers facing transportation or scheduling barriers may encounter reduced access to new opportunities, increasing disparities in labor market outcomes.

Disconnection is not evenly distributed. Hispanic or Latino youth (8.2%) and Black youth (6.9%) experience higher disconnection rates than White (3.9%) and Asian (2.2%) peers. Hispanic or

Latino youth comprise 16% of the 16–24 population but 27% of disconnected youth, while Black youth represent 7% of the population and 10% of disconnected youth. Gender differences persist, with young men (5.4%) more likely to be disconnected than young women (4.3%), largely due to higher college enrollment among young women.

Structural barriers also impact labor force engagement. Youth with disabilities face a disconnection rate of 15.4%, nearly four times that of peers without disabilities. Cognitive difficulty is the most prevalent disability type, affecting 77% of youth with disabilities in 2024. Transportation constraints, caregiving responsibilities, and economic instability further limit labor market attachment, especially among low-income and marginalized groups.

The landscape of youth workforce policy in Massachusetts features a range of programs and interventions designed to address the barriers identified above. These include federal and state-funded efforts such as the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), YouthWorks, and Connecting Activities, as well as targeted initiatives like MassMobility, sector-based training partnerships, MassEducate, MassReconnect, and MassAbility. Each program addresses specific mechanisms—such as transportation, skills development, financial support, and access for youth with disabilities—using a variety of tools and delivery models.

The Youth Employment Gateway Cities Learning Community Pilot, launched by the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, represents a unique opportunity to develop more coordinated strategies by linking these programs to address barriers in a holistic way. Pilot regions—Hampden County, Bristol County, North Shore, and Berkshire—display distinct combinations of employment, disconnection, and enrollment outcomes, informing the design of tailored workforce development strategies.

In summary, Massachusetts youth labor market dynamics are shaped by declining early work experience, sectoral shifts, persistent demographic disparities, and regional variation. These mechanisms affect the supply of entry-level workers, the accessibility of employment opportunities, and the allocation of workforce development resources. Policymakers should consider these patterns, as well as the evolving policy landscape, when designing strategies to strengthen youth labor market attachment and address barriers to employment.

Data Sources

All data in this report are derived from the American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS), unless otherwise specified. Data through 2024 are based on the ACS 1-year estimates, while data through 2023 use the ACS 5-year estimates. These sources represent the most recent data available at the time that the analysis was conducted.

Section 1: Labor Market Trends

In 2024, there were an estimated 876,000 non-institutionalized youth and young adults aged 16-24 in Massachusetts, representing 15% of the total 16 and older population. One third of this population was 16-18, while two-thirds were 19-24. Recent data from the American Community Survey show that these young people participated in a labor market characterized by historically low unemployment, declining labor force participation, and increasing disparities in early work experience. This section describes these trends and their implications for labor market supply and early work experience.

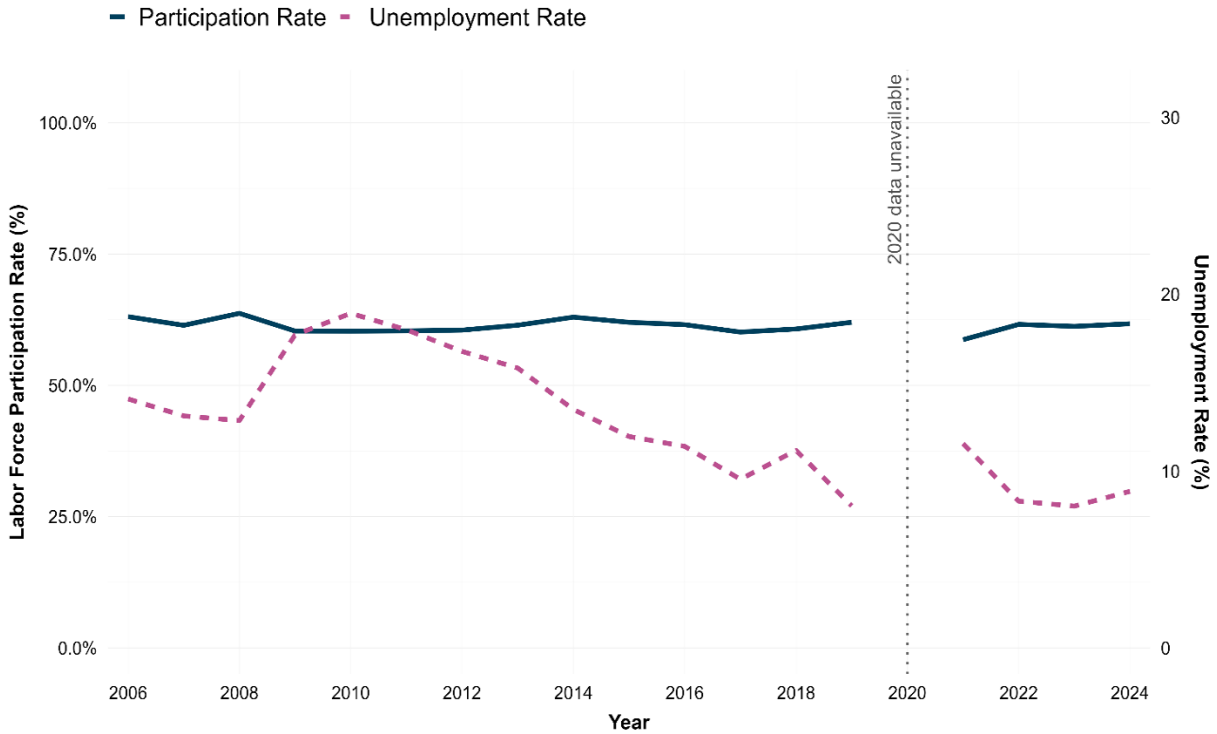
Labor Market Conditions and Participation Trends

Labor market indicators for Massachusetts youth (ages 16–24) have shifted over the past two decades. The unemployment rate declined from 14.1% in 2006 to approximately 8.9% in 2024, following a steady decrease after the Great Recession. While this trend suggests that youth pursuing work have found it easier to gain employment over time, the youth unemployment rate remains about twice as high as the overall state rate, underscoring persistent differences in labor market outcomes by age group. More recent data from the 2025 Current Population Survey indicate an uptick in youth unemployment, suggesting that labor market conditions for this group remain sensitive to broader economic changes.

Figure 1: Labor Force Participation vs. Unemployment Rate for Youth (Ages 16-24) in Massachusetts

Youth Labor Force Participation vs. Unemployment Rates

Massachusetts trends show declining participation alongside falling unemployment (2006–2024)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year Public Use Microdata Sample, 2006-2024. Data reflects Massachusetts youth ages 16-24.

The Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) for youth declined from 63.1% in 2006 to 61.7% in 2024. Most of this decline occurred immediately after the Great Recession and has since stabilized. This reduction reflects a smaller share of youth engaging with the labor market.

The disconnection rate—defined as the share of youth neither in school nor in the labor force—stands at 4.9% in Massachusetts, below the national average of 7.3%. This lower rate signals a highly engaged youth population in work and school compared to other states. In 2024, Massachusetts had the 23rd highest youth Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) ranking ahead of peer states including Washington (61.0%), North Carolina (60.5%), Florida (58.7%), Texas (57.2%), and New York (53.8%)—and ranked 2nd nationally in school enrollment.

The presence of out-of-state and international students in Massachusetts affects aggregate disconnection rates. Many non-Massachusetts-born young adults are counted as residents while attending college, which lowers the statewide disconnection rate for youth. After adjustment, the disconnection rate for Massachusetts-born youth is 5.4%, compared to 4.5%

for non-Massachusetts-born youth (6.5% for foreign-born, 3.0% for those born in other states). While this mechanism means that the state's aggregate disconnection rate may understate the prevalence of disconnection among long-term residents, the adjusted rate is still below the national rate.

School Enrollment and Labor Force Participation

Patterns in school enrollment interact with labor force participation to shape the supply of youth available for employment. Among youth ages 16–18, a 1.1 percentage point increase in school enrollment has coincided with a decline in labor force participation. This shift indicates that a greater share of youth is prioritizing education over early employment, which reduces immediate labor market supply but may enhance future workforce qualifications. In contrast, for young adults ages 19–24, enrollment rates have decreased by 1.1 percentage points since 2009. As a result, the decline in workforce participation for this older cohort cannot be attributed to increased post-secondary enrollment, suggesting that other factors are influencing labor market engagement.

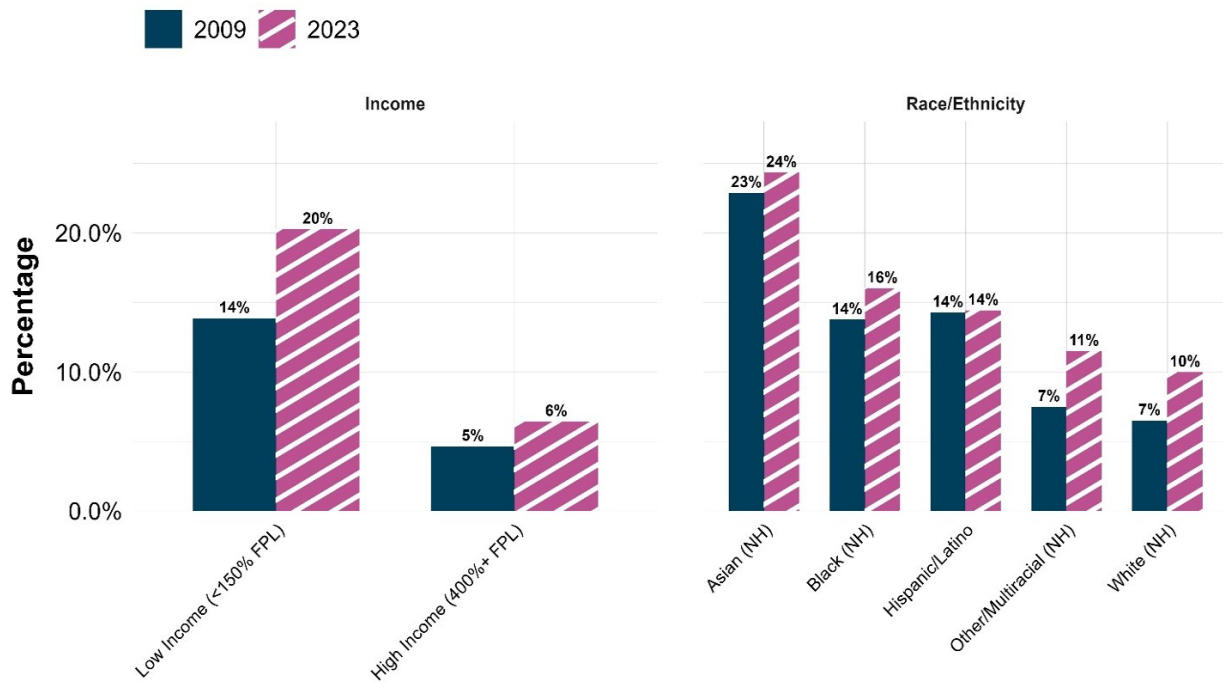
Trends in Early Work Experience and Limited or No Work History

The share of young adults (ages 19–24) entering their mid-20s with limited or no work history (have not worked in the past 5 years) has increased across household income groups. Among all young adults, the rate rose from 9.1% in 2009 to 12.7% in 2023—a 3.6 percentage point, or 40%, increase. For low-income young adults, the share increased from 13.9% to 20.3% (up 6.4 points, or 46%), while high-income young adults saw an increase from 4.6% to 6.4% (up 1.8 points, or 39%). These shifts occurred primarily in the years following the Great Recession, when labor demand was low, resulting in reduced opportunities for early work experience. The proportion of young adults not participating in early employment has remained elevated since that period, suggesting that structural shifts have had a lasting effect on the employment opportunities and decisions among young workers. This trend reduces the pool of young adults with prior work experience available to employers.

Figure 2: Share of Young Adults (19-24) With Limited or No Work History by Demographics

Share of Young Adults (19-24) With Limited or No Work History

Disparities have widened for low-income youth and persist across racial & ethnic groups



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year Public Use Microdata Sample, 2009 and 2019-2023. Data reflects Massachusetts youth ages 19-24.

Demographic breakdowns show similar patterns: White (non-Hispanic) young adults increased from 6.5% to 10.0% (up 3.5 points, or 53%), Black (non-Hispanic) young adults from 13.8% to 16.0%, and remained flat among Hispanic or Latino young adults (14.3% to 14.4%).

Parallel to this, among enrolled students ages 19–24, the share with no work history increased from 10.7% in 2009 to 16.4% in 2023 (a 5.6 point, or 52%, increase). For low-income students, the share rose from 13.0% to 20.6% (up 7.6 points, or 58%). The decline in early work experience is present among both students and non-students, with a greater increase among low-income young adults.

Implications

The decline in labor force participation among Massachusetts youth is closely linked to a reduction in early work experience, particularly among students. The increase in the share of high-income with limited or no work history, alongside falling unemployment rates, indicates

that some young adults may not be participating in early employment even as the labor market for youth has improved over time. For some youth, non-participation may be associated with alternative activities such as academics or enrichment, which do not contribute to labor market supply. In contrast, the increase in non-work among low-income young adults, along with persistent disparities by race and income, suggests that barriers to employment and labor market dynamics may also affect early work experience. For these young adults, limited access to jobs, transportation, or networks may reduce participation, impacting the available pool of entry-level workers.

Overall, the decline in youth labor force participation reflects both changes in individual activity patterns and structural labor market factors, with variation across demographic groups. These changes affect the supply of youth with early work experience available to employers, which may influence recruitment and training practices.

The reduction in early work experience among youth results in a larger share of young adults entering the labor market with less exposure to workplace norms, soft skills, and job-specific experience. This shift may increase onboarding and training needs for employers and alters the supply of prepared entry-level workers.

The structure of youth employment in Massachusetts, including the types of jobs held by connected youth and the extent to which these roles provide opportunities for skill development and career advancement, is examined in the following section. This analysis builds on the trends in participation and early work experience described above, providing context for how labor market structure shapes the distribution of early employment opportunities.

Section 2: Youth Labor Market Structure and Shifts

The youth labor market in Massachusetts is shaped by the industries and occupations where youth work, as well as the structure of their employment. Most youth jobs are part-time, and student workers are concentrated in retail and accommodation & food services. As youth age and leave school, their employment patterns shift, reflecting broader labor market trends and educational attainment.

The Distinctive Youth Labor Market

The Massachusetts youth labor market is segmented by industry and occupation, with clear distinctions by education and school enrollment status. Young workers enrolled in high school are predominantly employed in accommodation & food services (38%) and retail trade (28%), with these two sectors accounting for over 65% of their jobs. Within these sectors, most positions are part-time and concentrated in entry-level occupations such as food preparation & serving (29%) and sales (25%), with smaller shares in office & administrative support (8%) and arts, entertainment, and recreation (9%).

Young workers enrolled in college, while still present in food service and retail, are more likely to work in educational services (16%) and health care & social assistance (13%). Their occupational profile is more diversified, with notable shares in educational instruction & library occupations (14%), office & administrative support occupations (12%), and health care support occupations (4.5%). These jobs often reflect work-study programs or campus-based employment and tend to offer higher wages and more opportunities for skill development compared to those held by high school students.

Employment among youth (16–24) that are not enrolled in school is less concentrated in retail (14%) and accommodation & food services (13%) and are more concentrated in sectors offering full-time work employment opportunities such as health care & social assistance (15%) and construction (9%). Their occupational distribution also diversifies, with increased representation in business & financial operations, management, and technical roles as they age into the 25–27 group. However, those without post-secondary credentials remain overrepresented in lower-wage sectors and entry-level occupations, with limited access to higher-wage, career-track roles compared to their college-educated peers.

These patterns demonstrate that both industry and occupation are segmented by education and enrollment status, shaping the early work experiences and long-term economic trajectory of youth in Massachusetts. The distribution of young workers across sectors and occupations

determines the types of skills and workplace exposure they acquire, which in turn affects the supply of entry-level workers with relevant experience for the broader labor market.

Shifts in Youth Employment: Sectoral Trends

The youth labor market has undergone significant changes in recent years, with both sector-level Current Employment Statistics (CES) data and microdata from the American Community Survey (ACS) showing shifts in the structure of youth employment:

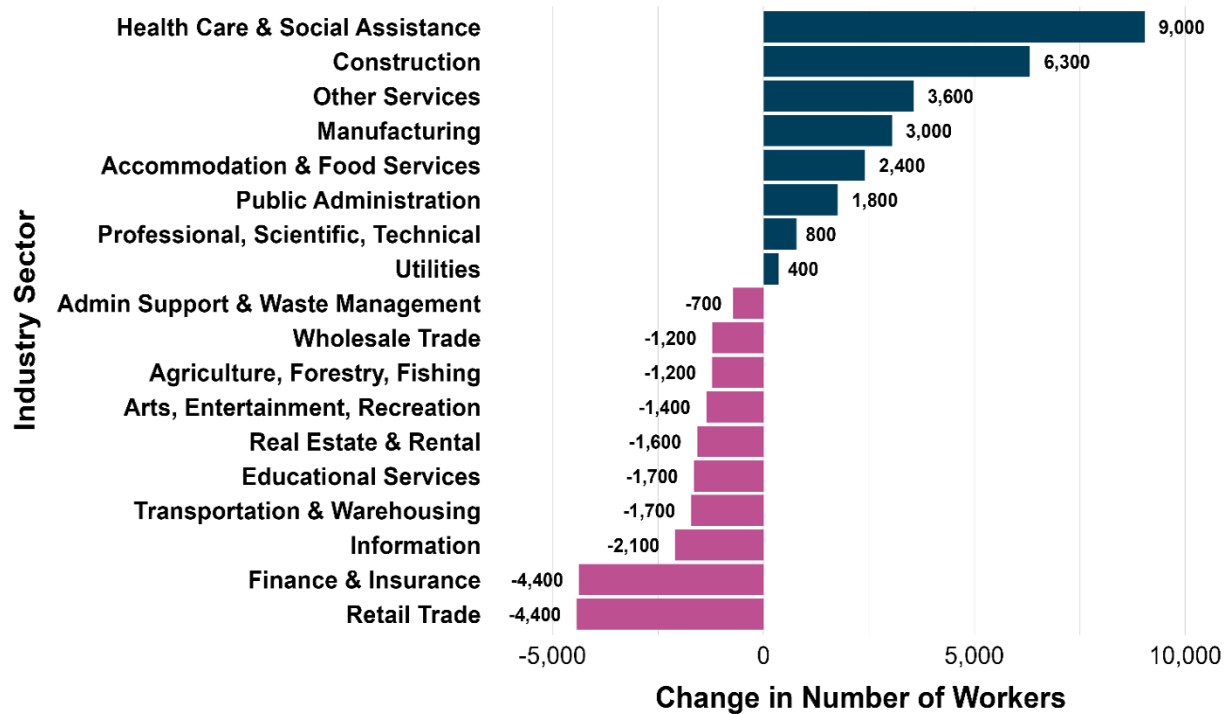
Traditional Youth Employment Sectors Have Declined: Employment in Massachusetts' two largest youth job sectors—retail trade and accommodation & food services—remains below pre-pandemic levels. In 2019, retail trade employed 351,900 workers annually, compared to 325,000 in 2025 (a decline of 26,900 jobs, or -7.6%). Similarly, total accommodation & food services employment fell from 316,500 in 2019 to 299,000 in 2025 (a decline of 17,500 jobs, or -5.5%). These two sectors account for nearly half of all youth jobs, so their contraction indicate a material reduction in the most common early work opportunities for youth workers.

Youth Employment Has Shifted to Other Sectors: ACS microdata show that youth employment is becoming less concentrated in traditional entry-level sectors. Between 2019 and 2024, the share of young workers in retail trade fell from 18.2% to 17.0% (a loss of 4,425 workers), while accommodation & food services' share remained flat (+0.2 points, +2,410 workers). In contrast, health care & social assistance increased its share from 8.7% to 10.4% (+9,039 workers), and construction rose from 5.2% to 6.4% (+6,322 workers). Other sectors with growth include manufacturing (+3,043 workers), other services (+3,558), and public administration (+1,762).

Figure 3: Net Change in Employment Among 16–24-Year-Olds by Sector, Massachusetts, 2019–2024

Net Change in Employment Among 16–24-Year-Olds by Sector

Massachusetts, 2019–2024



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year Public Use Microdata Sample, 2019 and 2024. Data reflects net changes in employment among Massachusetts youth ages 16-24 across industry sectors.

The contraction of retail and accommodation & food services—sectors that traditionally offer geographically distributed, flexible entry points—reduces the number of accessible jobs for youth. In contrast, growth in health care, construction, and manufacturing increases opportunities in sectors that may require specific skills or credentials, altering the composition of available entry-level jobs.

Youth Employment in Entry-Level Food Services Roles Has Increased Due to Growing Demand in Health Care:

Occupation data reveal that food preparation and serving jobs grew in absolute terms (from 76,383 to 84,992 workers, 2019–2024) and in their share of youth employment (+1.5 points). These jobs are increasingly found outside the traditional accommodation & food services sector, especially in health care and social assistance. Office and administrative support and computer and mathematical occupations saw declines in both share and absolute numbers,

while healthcare practitioners and technical, educational instruction and library, and construction and extraction occupations all grew.

These occupational shifts indicate that while some entry-level roles remain prevalent, their sectoral context is changing, which may affect the types of skills and experience youth acquire before transitioning to full-time employment. As a result, the supply of youth with experience relevant to high-demand sectors may increase, while opportunities in declining sectors become less accessible.

Barriers and Access Implications: Both CES and ACS data indicate a contraction of traditional youth job sectors and an increase in health care, construction, and some public sector roles. These changes reflect a shift in early work opportunities, with fewer jobs in traditional entry-level sectors and more jobs in fields such as health care and construction.

The decline of retail and accommodation and food services—sectors that are widely distributed geographically and offer flexible, accessible entry points for youth—may limit access to early employment. These sectors often provide jobs close to home with schedules that accommodate school and family obligations. In contrast, growth sectors like health care, construction, and manufacturing tend to be more geographically concentrated, often located in specific facilities, business parks, or industrial zones. This concentration can create barriers for young workers who lack reliable transportation or need jobs with flexible schedules. For example, hospital and manufacturing jobs may require early, late, or rotating shifts, and construction work is often tied to specific sites that may not be accessible by public transit. These structural changes in the youth labor market may increase disparities in access to new opportunities, particularly for youth in lower-income or transit-poor communities.

Education and Career Trajectories: Sorting and the Wage Premium

Education plays a critical role in shaping labor market outcomes for young adults. Young adults who enter the workforce directly after high school gain more early work experience than those who pursue post-secondary education. However, by ages 25–30, trends diverge among workers based on their educational attainment.

Workers 25–30-year-old high school graduates remain concentrated in many of the same sectors as worker 16-24 with a bachelor's degree, namely retail (17%), accommodation & food services (12%), and construction (12%) with median earnings of \$35,000. At the same time, their bachelor's degree-holding peers shift into professional, scientific and technical services (21%), education (13%), and health care and social assistance (15%) during ages 25-30 with median earnings of \$60,000—a gap of \$25,000 per year. Bachelor's degree holders move

decisively away from traditional entry-level sectors, with only 7% remaining in retail, 3% in accommodation and food services, and 3% in construction.

These patterns highlight the wage premium associated with educational attainment. While workers who enter the labor market directly after high school start earning money soon and gain initial on the job experiences, they are more likely to work in sectors lower pay and limited upward mobility as they reach 25-30. Conversely, those with a degree are more likely to access jobs in high paying sectors.

The types of occupations available to young adults also vary significantly by education level. High school graduates concentrate in lower-wage, entry-level occupations at ages 25-30, while bachelor's degree holders are more likely to work in professional, technical, and managerial roles.

Key occupation differences among young adults aged 25-30:

- High school graduates are overrepresented in transportation and material moving (13%), construction and extraction (12%), food preparation and serving (10%), office and administrative support (11%), and production (7%) occupations.
- Bachelor's degree holders are far more likely to work in business and financial operations (15%), management (14%), computer and mathematical (10%), educational instruction & library (9%), and healthcare practitioners and technical (8%) occupations.
- The largest "education premium" is seen in business and financial operations (+13.7 points), management (+9.0), and computer and mathematical occupations (+8.4), all of which are rarely accessible to those without a bachelor's degree.

These occupational differences reinforce the mechanism by which educational attainment shapes not only the industries where young adults work, but also the types of career ladders and wage trajectories available.

Implications

The structure of youth employment in Massachusetts is changing. The decline of traditional student job sectors and the shift in employment patterns to more geographically concentrated sectors indicate that youth may face more barriers to finding employment. Additionally, the data shows that youth have more career opportunities when they pursue post-secondary education. Many young workers who forgo higher education do not transition out of entry-level work as young adults and face limited access to higher-wage jobs as they age, suggesting the need for stronger career supports for young adult workers. As the youth labor market evolves, disparities in access and outcomes may persist or widen, depending on the distribution of opportunities and barriers across demographic groups.

The youth population who remain disconnected from both education and the labor market is examined in the following section. This analysis explores the structural and demographic barriers that contribute to persistent disconnection, building on the changes in labor market structure and occupational sorting described above. Understanding these barriers provides further context for disparities in labor market attachment and the mechanisms that influence workforce participation among youth.

Section 3: Analysis of the Disconnected Population

As described in Section 1, most non-institutionalized Massachusetts youth ages 16-24 are connected to school, work, or both, with a disconnection rate of 4.9%—below the national average. This section focuses on the approximately 40,000 young people who are disconnected from both education and the labor force.

While the aggregate rate is low, persistent disconnection is shaped by a range of barriers, including disability, transportation constraints, caregiving responsibilities, and household economic instability. The following analysis examines the demographic characteristics and structural barriers associated with youth disconnection in Massachusetts.

Demographics

Although Massachusetts' overall disconnection rate is low compared to national averages, this aggregate figure masks important differences across demographic groups. One area of difference is across genders. Approximately 5.4% of young men ages 16-24 are disconnected, compared with 4.3% of young women. A key factor contributing to this gap is that young women are more likely than young men to remain connected through higher education. Among Massachusetts residents ages 19-24, roughly 70% of young women are enrolled in or have pursued some college education, compared with just over 60% of young men.

Among disconnected youth ages 19-24, more than half of both males and females report a high school diploma as their highest level of education, with only a minority having any postsecondary experience. This pattern suggests that for many, disconnection occurs after high school graduation.

Table 1: Hispanic and Black youth have higher disconnection rates than their peers

Race & Ethnicity	Disconnection Rate (%)
Hispanic/Latino	8.2%
Black	6.9%
Two or More Races	6.1%
Other Race	5.6%
White	3.9%
Asian	2.2%

Note: American Indian/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander populations have been removed due to small sample sizes. Ages 16-24 population. Source: 2023 5-year ACS PUMS.

Disconnection rates also vary by race and ethnicity, with some groups experiencing higher rates than others, potentially reflecting broader structural inequities. For example, Hispanic/Latino youth (8.2%), Black youth (6.9%), and those with multiracial backgrounds (6.1%) experience higher disconnection rates than their peers, including White youth (3.9%) and Asian youth (2.2%).

Hispanic or Latino youth are particularly overrepresented among the disconnected population. Although they make up approximately 16% of Massachusetts residents ages 16-24, they account for about 27% of all disconnected youth in this age group. Similarly, Black youth represent roughly 7% of the total 16-24 population but approximately 10% of disconnected youth. By contrast, White youth comprise about 60% of the 16-24 population but only about half of disconnected youth.

Together, these differences by gender and race/ethnicity underscore that disconnection among youth in Massachusetts is not evenly distributed across the population. At the same time, demographic characteristics alone do not explain why some youth become disconnected. Rather, these patterns reflect unequal exposure to underlying barriers—such as health limitations, caregiving responsibilities, transportation constraints, and economic instability—that shape the ability of youth to remain connected to school and work. The following section examines these barriers in greater detail.

Structural Barriers

Disability

Youth with disabilities face significantly higher rates of disconnection. The data reveal that 15.4% of youth with disabilities are disconnected from both school and work, compared to just 3.9% of their peers without disabilities—a four-fold difference. Of the 40,000 disconnected individuals aged 16-24, about a quarter of them have reported a disability. This highlights the

important role disability plays in youth disconnection in Massachusetts. These disparities reflect the additional challenges that youth with disabilities often encounter when navigating educational institutions and the labor market, including accessibility barriers, accommodation needs, and discrimination.

While it is less common to have a disability as a younger person than an older person, by far, the most common reported disability among youth is cognitive difficulty. In 2024, 77% of the approximately 65,000 youth with disabilities reported a cognitive difficulty, making it the dominant disability type within this population.

The Census Bureau defines cognitive difficulty as serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions due to a physical, mental, or emotional condition. For youth, this category captures learning disabilities, developmental disabilities, and mental health conditions.

The second most common disability type is independent living difficulty, reported by 45% of those 16-24 with disabilities in 2024, up from 38% in 2019. Independent living difficulty reflects challenges performing tasks necessary for living independently—such as running errands alone, managing daily responsibilities, or navigating services—due to a physical, mental, or emotional condition. This limitation often co-occurs with cognitive difficulty, particularly for those with developmental disabilities or mental health conditions. Consequently, independent living difficulty often functions as a downstream effect of cognitive limitations, rather than a separate or unrelated disability.

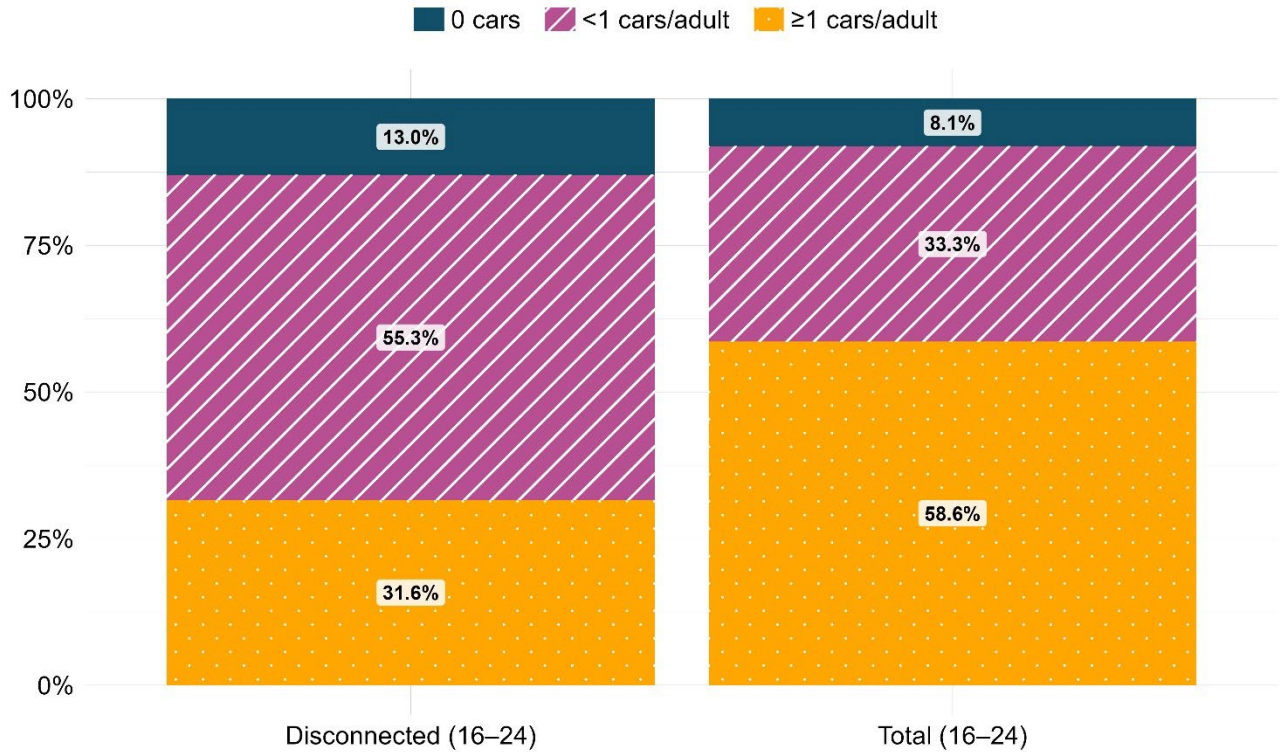
Transportation Access

Transportation access emerges as another important structural barrier for disconnected youth in Massachusetts. As shown in the figure below, household vehicle availability differs sharply between the overall youth population and those who are disconnected. Nearly 60% of total youth live in households with at least one vehicle per adult, while less than one-third of disconnected youth have this level of access.

Figure 4. Disconnected youth and young adults are much more likely to live in households with limited vehicle access

Vehicle Access: Disconnected vs. Total

Distribution by vehicles per adult in household



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 2023 5-year Public Use Microdata Sample. Data reflects Massachusetts youth ages 16-24.

Low vehicle access has important implications for educational and labor market participation, particularly in regions where public transportation is limited. Youth living in households with constrained vehicle access may struggle to attend school consistently, commute to work, or participate in training programs that require travel beyond their locality. These challenges are especially acute for shift-based jobs that involve nonstandard hours or varying work locations—such as construction roles or health care jobs that require overnight or early-morning shifts—when transit service may be limited or unavailable. As a result, even when education or employment opportunities exist, transportation barriers can significantly restrict the ability of youth to access and sustain them.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that transportation is not simply an inconvenience, but an enabling condition for youth connection. Addressing transportation barriers—through expanded transit access, subsidized transportation, or employer-provided work flexibility—could improve the connection potential for those disconnected. Without such supports, limited

vehicle access can continue to function as a gatekeeper, restricting participation in education, training, and employment regardless of the number of available opportunities.

Childcare

Caregiving responsibilities—particularly among young parents—represent another important source of youth disconnection. In Massachusetts, approximately 8% of disconnected young women ages 16-24 reported having given birth in the past year, compared with 1.5% of all women ages 16-24. This disparity suggests that young mothers are overrepresented among the disconnected population, reflecting the challenges of balancing childcare with school or employment during early adulthood.

The need to care for a young child may also increase the risk of longer-term disconnection, particularly in a high-cost state such as Massachusetts. Childcare expenses are substantial: according to the 2025 MIT Living Wage Calculator, median annual statewide childcare costs are estimated at \$22,352 for one child and \$39,767 for two children. For comparison, the median annual earnings of an individual aged 16-24 in Massachusetts who is not enrolled in school are below \$23,000, placing formal childcare well beyond the reach of many young parents.

As a result, young parents—especially young mothers—may face strong economic incentives to remain out of the labor force or education system and assume primary caregiving responsibilities, unless other adults in the household are able to provide support. In the absence of affordable childcare options or flexible work arrangements, caregiving demands can function as a significant barrier to re-engagement in school or work.

Household Financial Considerations

Lastly, household financial instability is another factor that may contribute to prolonged youth disconnection. Many of the barriers discussed earlier—such as limited access to reliable transportation or affordable childcare—are closely tied to a household's financial capacity. With enough resources to maintain a vehicle or pay for childcare, disconnected youth may be better positioned to pursue education, training programs, and employment opportunities.

The following analysis focuses on disconnected youth ages 16-24 who live in households with at least one prime-age adult (defined as ages 32-64), under the assumption that these adults are most likely to provide the primary source of financial support within the household. Youth who do not reside with any prime-age adults are excluded from the analysis.

Table 2: Youth and Young Adults Are More Likely to Be Disconnected in Households with Adult Joblessness

Household Adult Employment Status	Disconnected Youth/Young Adults	Disconnection Rate
All Prime-Age Adults Employed	18,000	4.7%
Mixed Prime-Age Employment Status	7,800	7.2%
No Prime-Age Adults Working	6,400	12.2%

Note: Prime-age adults are defined as ages 32-64. Analysis includes youth and young adults ages 16-24 living in households with at least one prime-age adult. Mixed employment status indicates households with multiple prime-age adults where some work and others do not. Source: 2023 5-year ACS PUMS.

The table above shows the relationship between prime-age adult employment status and youth disconnection within the household. Among households in which none of the prime-age adults are employed, the disconnection rate for youth ages 16-24 is 12.2%, more than 2.5 times the rate observed in households where all prime-age adults are employed (4.7%). Youth living in households with mixed prime-age employment status—where some adults are working and others are not—experience a disconnection rate of approximately 7.2%.

These patterns suggest that household-level economic instability may also be associated with youth disconnection. One pathway is through limited material resources: households with fewer working adults may struggle to mitigate barriers such as transportation constraints, childcare costs, or tuition and training expenses. A second pathway operates through social and professional networks. Adults who are out of work may have fewer active employer connections, weaker access to job-referral networks, and less current labor market information to share with younger household members.

Individuals Living in Institutional Settings

While the analysis thus far has focused on the non-institutionalized youth population ages 16-24, 2024 1-Year ACS estimates indicate that approximately 3,400 Massachusetts residents ages 16-24 were living in institutional settings. Many of these individuals are justice-involved and face significant barriers upon reentry into the community. A criminal record can limit access to employment opportunities, while time spent in an institutional setting may disrupt education, work experience, housing stability, and social support networks. These challenges can make it more difficult for justice-involved young people to successfully transition into the labor market, even after release.

Implications

The barriers described above—disability, limited transportation access, caregiving responsibilities, and household economic instability—often interact to create compounding

disadvantages that increase the likelihood and persistence of disconnection. These patterns reflect the influence of structural barriers on youth labor market attachment.

These barriers affect the likelihood of youth remaining connected to education and employment. The next section examines how these mechanisms operate across Massachusetts regions, providing further context for how structural and demographic factors shape geographic disparities in labor market attachment and outcomes for youth.

Section 4: Regional Dynamics and Geographic Disparities in Youth Employment

Youth labor market outcomes vary substantially across Massachusetts' 16 Workforce Development Areas (WDAs), reflecting differences in local economic conditions, industry composition, and educational infrastructure. This analysis examines regional patterns in youth employment.

Data Considerations: College Student Population Effects

Regional labor market indicators are significantly influenced by the presence of major colleges and universities. Greater Boston and Franklin/Hampshire WDAs contain disproportionately large college student populations, which affects several key metrics for youth:

- **Disconnection Rates:** College students are classified as “connected” regardless of employment status, artificially lowering disconnection rates in regions with large student populations.
- **Labor Force Participation:** Given that students that are enrolled in school are less likely to participate in the labor market, difference in college aged populations create different participation patterns across regions.
- **Employment-to-Population Ratios:** School enrollment rates vary by region, affecting the denominator in employment calculations.

These effects should be considered when interpreting regional comparisons, particularly for Greater Boston and Franklin/Hampshire WDAs.

Regional Labor Market Performance

Youth employment outcomes demonstrate considerable geographic variation across Massachusetts, revealing distinct regional economic patterns and labor market dynamics.

Table 3: Regional Comparison of Key Youth (Ages 16-24) Labor Market Indicators by WDA. Source: ACS PUMS 2019-2023 5yr

Workforce Development Area (WDA)	Disconnection Rate	Youth Labor Force Participation Rate	Adult Labor Force Participation Rate	Employment-to-Population Ratio	School Enrollment Rate
Hampden County WDA	8.8%	54.2%	61.0%	47.6%	58.8%
Greater New Bedford WDA	7.7%	64.6%	63.1%	57.4%	57.8%
North Central WDA	7.4%	65.5%	67.1%	57.8%	57.8%
North Shore WDA	6.7%	60.8%	67.7%	55.6%	61.8%
Bristol County WDA	5.7%	66.5%	66.9%	58.2%	60.0%
Greater Lowell WDA	5.5%	62.8%	69.2%	58.5%	65.5%
Brockton WDA	5.2%	67.2%	69.6%	58.5%	59.5%
Cape & Islands WDA	5.1%	67.6%	60.8%	62.8%	57.5%
Berkshire County WDA	5.0%	63.8%	61.9%	58.4%	64.1%
Central MA WDA	5.0%	61.4%	67.6%	55.1%	69.0%
Lower Merrimack Valley WDA	4.7%	68.3%	69.7%	61.1%	58.7%
South Shore WDA	3.9%	63.1%	68.4%	56.3%	63.9%
Metro South/West WDA	3.8%	56.4%	69.4%	50.9%	70.3%
Metro North WDA	3.5%	59.2%	71.5%	53.5%	67.3%
Boston WDA	3.2%	56.5%	70.6%	50.9%	74.8%
Franklin/Hampshire WDA	3.0%	52.9%	62.3%	46.9%	79.9%

Note: Source: ACS PUMS 2019-2023 5yr.

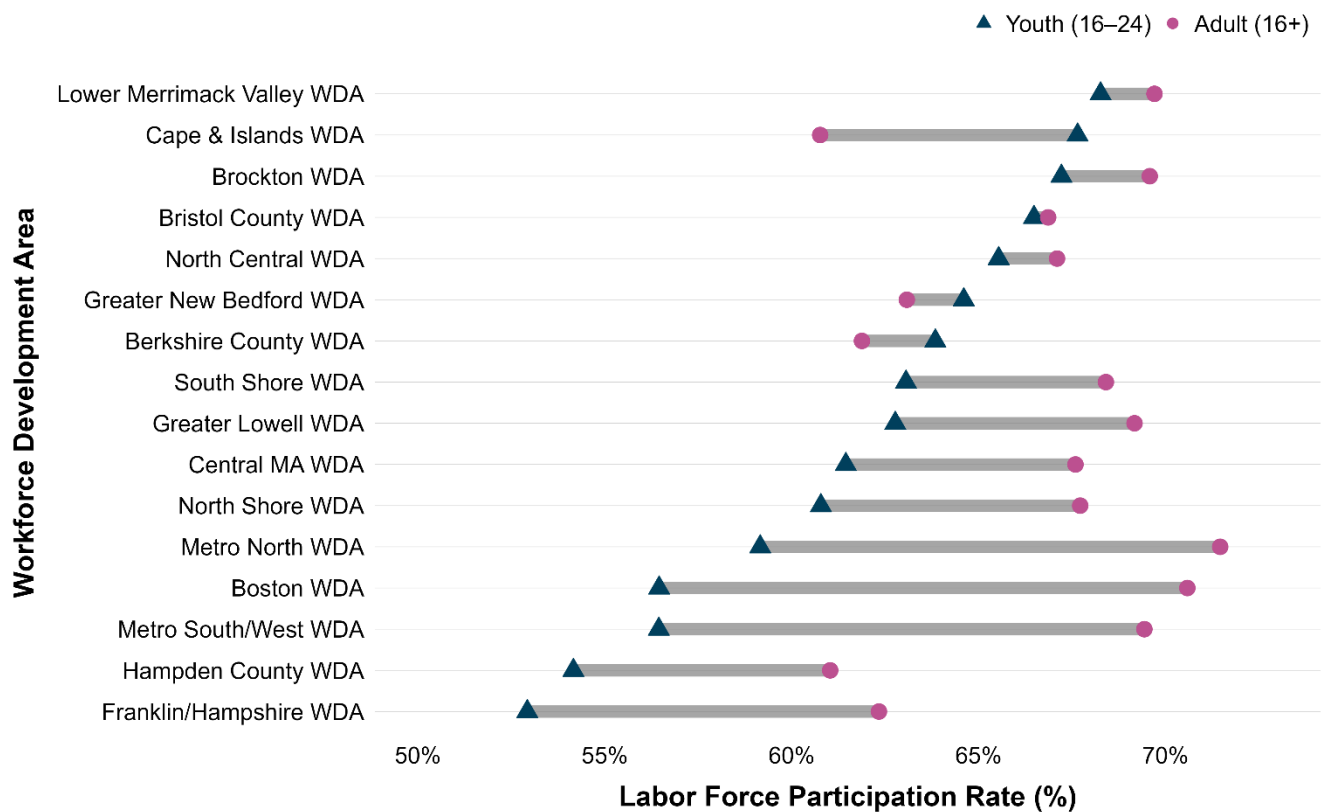
In most labor markets, adult labor force participation rates typically exceed those of youth, reflecting greater workforce attachment and lower school enrollment among adults. However, the data show that in the Cape & Islands WDA, the youth LFPR is 67.6%, which surpasses the adult LFPR of 60.8% by 6.8 percentage points. Similarly, in Berkshire County, youth LFPR (63.8%) exceeds adult LFPR (61.9%) by 1.9 points. In contrast, Boston WDA exhibits a youth LFPR of 56.5%, trailing the adult rate of 70.6% by 14.1 points, while Metro North and Metro

South/West show gaps of 12.3 and 13.0 points, respectively, with youth rates lower than adults. These patterns indicate that some regions, particularly those with tourism-driven economies, draw youth into the workforce at rates comparable to or exceeding adults, while college-dense metropolitan areas display larger participation gaps due to higher rates of full-time enrollment among youth. This reversal of traditional patterns highlights how local economic structure and educational enrollment shape workforce participation dynamics.

Figure 5: Youth vs. Adult Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) by Workforce Development Area

Labor Force Participation Rate: Youth vs. Adult by WDA

2019 - 2023 Average



Grey segments indicate WDAs where youth LFPR exceeds adult LFPR. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 2023 5-year Public Use Microdata Sample. Data reflects Massachusetts youth ages 16-24.

Disconnection rates among youth range from 8.8% in Hampden County to 3.0% in Franklin/Hampshire, a nearly threefold difference. In absolute terms, Hampden County had approximately 5,100 disconnected youth from 2019-2023. In comparison, Metro South/West has a disconnection rate of 3.8%, less than half of Hampden County, but 4,400 discounted youth. This demonstrates that both rate and scale are relevant for understanding the

distribution of youth not engaged in work or education, which has implications for the allocation of workforce development resources.

School enrollment rates among youth range from 79.9% in Franklin/Hampshire to 57.5% in Cape & Islands. University-dense regions such as Franklin/Hampshire (79.9%), Boston (74.8%), and Metro South/West (70.3%) report higher enrollment, while tourism and rural regions like Cape & Islands (57.5%), North Central (57.8%), and Greater New Bedford (57.8%) show lower rates. These differences reflect the influence of local educational infrastructure and economic opportunities on youth engagement in school, which in turn affects labor force participation and employment outcomes.

Youth Employment Gateway Cities Learning Community Pilot: Overview

The Youth Employment Gateway Cities Learning Community Pilot represents the Commonwealth's policy response to the regional disparities documented in this analysis. Led by the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, the pilot engages four regional teams—Hampden County, Bristol County, North Shore, and Berkshire—to expand paid, supervised work experiences for youth. Each team, comprising a workforce board, Gateway Cities, and anchor employers, receives resources and technical assistance to address the specific barriers identified in their region: transportation constraints, fragmented data systems, and limited business engagement. Drawing on Boston's summer jobs model, participating regions set collective placement goals for Summer 2026 while building sustainable partnership infrastructure to bridge the gap between where youth live and where jobs are emerging in health care and construction.

Analysis of Pilot Program Regions

The four WDAs participating in youth workforce development pilot programs demonstrate distinct labor market characteristics, each presenting a different combination of employment, disconnection, and enrollment outcomes.

Berkshire WDA shows moderate labor market performance, with an employment-to-population ratio of 58.4%, disconnection rate of 5.0%, school enrollment of 64.1%, and labor force participation of 63.8%. The region's indicators are balanced, and youth labor force participation exceeds adult rates, reflecting the tight labor market conditions in the region.

Hampden County combines the highest disconnection rate (8.8%) with the second-lowest employment-to-population ratio (47.6%), below-average labor force participation (54.2%), and low school enrollment (58.8%). This combination indicates a concentration of youth not engaged in either work or education, reflecting workforce attachment challenges rather than educational trade-offs. It is notable that Hampden County has the highest number of

disconnected youth among all WDAs, despite having a significantly smaller youth population than regions like the Boston WDA and the Metro South/West WDA.

Bristol County shows moderate performance across all indicators, with a disconnection rate of 5.7%, employment-to-population ratio of 58.2%, school enrollment of 60.0%, and labor force participation of 66.5%.

North Shore reports a disconnection rate of 6.7%, employment-to-population ratio of 55.6%, school enrollment of 61.8%, and labor force participation of 60.8%. The combination of below-average employment rates and above-average disconnection suggests that some youth face challenges in transitioning from school to work.

Implications

Regional variation in youth employment outcomes reflects differences in local economic structures, educational infrastructure, and demographic composition. College student populations significantly influence some regional indicators, particularly in university-dense areas. The reversal of traditional age-based labor force participation patterns in tourism regions, such as Cape & Islands, compared to the large participation gaps in university-centered regions like Franklin/Hampshire, shows how local economic specialization shapes youth workforce engagement. The four pilot program regions occupy the middle ground of this spectrum, with disconnection rates ranging from 5.0% to 8.8% and school enrollment rates between 58% and 64%.

Both the rate and absolute number of disconnected youth are relevant for workforce development planning. For example, Hampden County, with a disconnection rate of 8.8% (5,100 youth), and Boston, with a lower rate of 3.2% but 3,500 disconnected youth, both present substantial challenges that require appropriately scaled interventions. These findings underscore the importance of tailoring workforce development strategies to local economic and demographic conditions, rather than applying uniform approaches across regions.

Section 5: Youth Workforce Policy

Massachusetts' youth workforce policy represents a range of programs that addresses mechanisms limiting access to employment, including spatial mismatch, skills gaps, and employer/employee matching. This section describes some of the interventions currently used to support youth participation in the labor force.

The WIOA Framework and Out-of-School Youth

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) provides federal funding for youth workforce activities. In FY 2026, Massachusetts received a federal allocation of \$14 million for the WIOA funded youth program, which is distributed to the 16 MassHire Workforce Development Areas. The Massachusetts WIOA Combined State Plan 2024 describes a transition from employment-focused programs to career pathways, with at least 75 percent of youth formula funds allocated to Out-of-School Youth (OSY). This allocation shifts resources from broad prevention to re-engagement strategies for youth experiencing barriers such as homelessness or justice system involvement. This approach concentrates services on populations with a higher risk of labor market exclusion.

The YouthWorks Developmental Model

Commonwealth Corporation's YouthWorks program—which received \$22 million in state funding for the 2025-2026 program year—uses a tiered model that aligns supports and training with each low-income young person's age and employment readiness. For participants ages 14 to 15, the program emphasizes service and project-based learning to develop foundational work habits. Youth ages 16 to 17 are placed in individual subsidized positions that connect academic skills to work tasks, while those ages 18 to 21 receive sector-specific technical training aligned with regional industries. For young adults ages 22 to 25, YouthWorks provides support for the transition to unsubsidized employment and navigation of adult workforce systems. All participants are paid at least \$15.00 per hour and complete 15 to 25 hours of career readiness training, ensuring that the experience is both educational and compensated. The program serves as a key source of funding for summer youth employment programs.

The Connecting Activities Framework

While YouthWorks focuses on subsidized employment, the Connecting Activities (CA) initiative, administered by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), serves as a key infrastructure for brokering unsubsidized, private-sector placements.

Brokerage and Intermediary Function

Connecting Activities funds are awarded exclusively to the 16 regional MassHire Workforce Boards, which act as intermediaries between school districts and local businesses. These boards hire "Connectors" or career specialists who work directly within high schools to recruit employers, structure internships, and prepare students for the workplace. This model outsources the employer engagement function—often a challenge for schools—to workforce professionals with established business networks.

Tools for Quality and Assessment

To ensure educational value, the program mandates the use of two primary instruments:

- **The Massachusetts Work-Based Learning Plan (WBLP):** A diagnostic tool that serves as a job description and performance evaluation. It measures student growth in specific "employability skills" (e.g., attendance, initiative) and technical competencies.
- **Signal Success:** The state's standardized soft-skills curriculum, which is used to prepare students for the behavioral expectations of the workplace.

Strategic Integration

Connecting Activities has become the operational engine for broader state education initiatives. It provides the placement infrastructure necessary for high schools that participate in [Innovation Career Pathways](#), which mandates that students complete 100 hours of internship or capstone experience in high-demand fields. Furthermore, the program is driving the adoption of the [Massachusetts Educational Financing Authority \(MEFA\) Pathway](#) as the centralized digital portfolio system for tracking student career development and work-based learning data.

Mechanisms of Connection: Structural Interventions

To address barriers identified in Section 3—specifically transportation, skills mismatch, and limited networks—the state uses several mechanisms:

Transportation and Mobility Solutions

Spatial mismatch, or the disconnect between where youth live and where jobs are located, is addressed through the MassMobility initiative, which coordinates transportation resources for unserved populations. Regional Transit Authorities have increasingly adopted micro-transit models to bridge these gaps, such as the MetroWest Catch Connect and Cape Cod's SmartDART services, which provide on-demand, point-to-point connections to employment centers. Additionally, the state's Community Transit Grant Program offers grants to help expand transportations for people with disabilities to attend school or go to work. These interventions

are intended to reduce transportation as a barrier to labor market participation and expand the range of accessible job opportunities for youth without private vehicles.

Regional Sector-Based Training and Alignment

Shifts in youth employment from retail to sectors such as healthcare, construction, and manufacturing are addressed through Regional Workforce Blueprints, which align training investments with labor demand.

- **New Bedford (Blue Economy):** Strategy is coordinated with the offshore wind and marine sectors, and the local vocational high school's Marine Trades Accreditation creates a pathway into these industries.
- **Cambridge (Life Sciences):** The Just-A-Start Biomedical Careers Program offers a tuition-free, nine-month route into the life sciences sector for low-income residents, requiring only a high school diploma.
- **Worcester (Construction & Trades):** The Worcester Jobs Fund employs a unique municipal model, utilizing city tax levy revenue to finance Building Pathways, a pre-apprenticeship program that prepares residents for union construction jobs.
- **Northeast Region (Advanced Manufacturing):** The Northeast Advanced Manufacturing Consortium (NAMC) unites four workforce boards (Metro North, Greater Lowell, Merrimack Valley, and North Shore) to standardize training in high-demand technical roles. This collaboration allows for shared curriculum in computer numerical control (CNC) machining and welding, facilitating a scaled response to regional labor shortages.

These models provide access to high-growth sectors without the costs of a four-year degree, utilizing diverse funding streams to ensure accessibility.

Coordinated Placement and Mentorship Intermediaries

Intermediary organizations facilitate youth hiring by acting as connectors between employers and young people, reducing administrative barriers while preparing participants for workplace expectations. The Boston Private Industry Council (PIC) embeds career specialists in public schools to prepare students and match them with anchor employers in finance and healthcare. For youth with justice system involvement, organizations such as UTEC in Lowell operate social enterprises that combine paid work with transitional coaching. These models are intended to lower the threshold for employer participation and provide structured environments for skill acquisition and recidivism reduction.

Intermediaries also serve to address gaps in social and professional networks that many youth face. In Lynn, for example, Lynn Public Schools partners with the Lynn Community Health Center to pair high school students with healthcare employees for one-on-one mentoring

focused on career exploration, job readiness, and post-secondary planning, while providing exposure to a range of health careers. Similarly, LEAP for Education’s Summer Work Program integrates mentorship into a structured summer employment experience, combining career readiness instruction with individualized mentor support and transportation assistance. Together, these approaches formalize access to professional networks and complement skills training with relational supports linked to improved employment outcomes.

Inclusive Transition: MassAbility Youth Programs

Addressing the 15.4% disconnection rate among youth with disabilities (see Section 3), MassAbility (formerly the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission) has restructured its transition services to engage youth earlier in their developmental trajectory.

[Pre-Employment Transition Services \(Pre-ETS\)](#) are available to students with disabilities ages 14 to 22, operating independently of traditional Vocational Rehabilitation eligibility. This federally funded initiative delivers five core services: job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, workplace readiness training, post-secondary counseling, and self-advocacy instruction. In addition, the NextGen Careers initiative pilots a team-based model in which young adults ages 18 to 30 are supported not just by a counselor, but by a dedicated team including peer mentors and employment specialists. This approach prioritizes distinct career pathways rather than generic job placement, aiming to address the underemployment often seen in this demographic.

Removing Financial Barriers: MassEducate and MassReconnect

Recognizing that educational attainment drives the wage gap (see Section 2), Massachusetts has expanded access to public higher education through the MassEducate and MassReconnect programs.

MassEducate now allows all Massachusetts residents who have not yet earned a bachelor’s degree to attend any of the state’s 15 public community colleges tuition-free, regardless of age or income. This removes the cost barrier for the credentials required in growing sectors like healthcare and biotechnology, and can serve as a low-cost pathway to a four-year degree. MassReconnect specifically targets adults 25 and older, a key demographic for disconnected youth aging out of traditional systems. In addition to tuition, these programs include stipends for books and supplies (up to \$1,200 annually), addressing the material resource constraints identified in Section 3.

Expanding Technical Skills: Chapter 74 and the Career Technical Initiative (CTI)

To address the contraction of entry-level retail jobs and the simultaneous demand for skilled trade workers, the state has expanded the capacity of its Chapter 74 vocational-technical

education system and extended training opportunities beyond the traditional high school day. Recent initiatives are designed to add 3,000 new career and technical education (CTE) seats over three years, with 18 new programs approved across 16 schools in August 2025 alone, resulting in 900 additional spots for students. A \$60 million capital grant program, launched in late 2025, supports equipment and facility expansions at both dedicated technical schools and comprehensive high schools. Priority for these expansions is given to regions with high waitlists and to programs aligned with high-demand industries such as healthcare, manufacturing, and aviation.

The Career Technical Initiative (CTI) further increases access by transforming vocational high schools into three-shift training centers. By utilizing Chapter 74-approved facilities and equipment after school hours—including evenings and weekends—CTI provides adult learners and disconnected youth with industry-recognized credentials in high-demand trades such as plumbing, heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC), and advanced manufacturing. This expansion is intended to address the “limited or no work history” phenomenon by offering hands-on, technical training that leads directly to licensure and employment.

Reducing Administrative Frictions: Permitting Modernization

Regulatory constraints and administrative burdens represent significant transaction costs that can delay or deter youth labor force participation. To address these systemic frictions, Outside Section 63 of the Governor’s FY2027 Budget Recommendation proposes a modernization of Chapter 149 of the General Laws, transitioning the youth employment permitting process from a rigid, paper-based “job-first” model to a streamlined, “work-ready” digital infrastructure.

Historically, the requirement for sequential, physical approvals—including signatures from employers, medical professionals, and school superintendents—has created inefficiencies in the labor matching process. By decoupling age and medical verification from the specific job offer, the proposed legislation enables pre-qualification. This shift reduces the time-to-hire, minimizing the administrative costs borne by youth job seekers and prospective employers alike.

Furthermore, digitizing the permitting framework yields significant positive benefits for regulatory oversight and workplace safety. Centralized electronic records allow state and local authorities to efficiently monitor compliance with statutory hour restrictions and occupational hazard regulations. The modernization proposal would also reduce frictions in the medical certification process by expanding the medical sign-off to include school or family healthcare providers professionals such as Nurse Practitioners and Physician Assistants, and integrates a direct digital channel for employees to report labor standards violations, thereby bolstering institutional protections for the youth workforce.

Implications

The Massachusetts youth workforce policy landscape offers a comprehensive suite of interventions designed to mitigate multiple, intersecting barriers to employment. By integrating structural supports—such as transportation infrastructure, technical skills acquisition, financial subsidization, and the reduction of administrative frictions through modernized digital permitting—the state addresses both supply-side constraints and demand-side transaction costs. Used in tandem, these policy levers expand the opportunity frontier for youth across demographic groups, countering the contraction of traditional entry-level labor markets and persistent disparities by race, disability, and geography.

However, the efficacy of these mechanisms in optimizing labor market matching and improving long-run outcomes is highly contingent upon sustained capital allocation, rigorous execution, and seamless inter-agency coordination. The Youth Employment Gateway Cities Learning Community Pilot offers a critical experimental framework to iterate on these strategies, testing the combinatorial effects of linking administrative modernization with targeted programmatic support to clear structural barriers to youth employment.

Conclusion

The analysis of youth labor market outcomes in Massachusetts demonstrates that both structural economic forces and differences in barriers across groups shape workforce engagement. Over the past decade, youth unemployment has declined and disconnection rates remain below the national average, indicating a high level of engagement with work or education. However, this aggregate stability conceals important shifts in labor force participation, early work experience, and the distribution of barriers across subpopulations.

Labor force participation among youth has declined modestly since the Great Recession, with the reduction concentrated among students and those from higher-income backgrounds. The share of young adults entering their mid-20s with limited or no work history has increased, particularly among low-income and White young adults, reflecting a shift in early labor market engagement. This trend reduces the pool of entry-level workers with prior job experience, which has implications for employer recruitment and training needs.

The structure of youth employment has also changed. Traditional entry-level sectors such as retail and accommodation & food services have contracted, while health care, construction, and manufacturing have expanded their share of youth jobs. These sectoral shifts potentially alter the accessibility of early employment, as growth sectors are often more geographically concentrated and may require specific skills or credentials. As a result, youth in regions with limited access to these sectors, or those facing transportation barriers, may encounter reduced opportunities for early work experience.

Disconnection from both school and work remains concentrated among specific demographic groups. Hispanic or Latino and Black youth experience higher disconnection rates than their peers, and youth with disabilities face a four-fold higher risk of disconnection compared to those without disabilities. Transportation access further differentiates outcomes, as disconnected youth are less likely to live in households with adequate vehicle availability. These patterns reflect the influence of structural barriers in shaping labor market attachment.

Regional analysis highlights substantial variation across Massachusetts' Workforce Development Areas. Youth labor force participation, employment-to-population ratios, and disconnection rates differ widely, influenced by local economic structure, educational infrastructure, and the presence of major colleges and universities. Tourism-dependent regions display higher youth workforce participation, while university-centered areas report elevated school enrollment and lower employment rates. The scale of disconnected youth is high in populous regions, even where rates are lower, emphasizing the importance of both prevalence and absolute numbers in resource allocation.

Educational attainment remains a key determinant of long-term labor market outcomes. Young adults with a bachelor's degree are more likely to transition into higher-wage, career-track sectors, while those with only a high school diploma remain concentrated in lower-wage, less mobile roles. The sorting of youth by education level directly influences wage trajectories and economic capacity.

In summary, the Massachusetts youth labor market is characterized by high overall connection rates but persistent disparities by region, race, disability status, and socioeconomic background. The evolving structure of early employment, combined with demographic and geographic variation, shapes both the supply of entry-level workers and the distribution of barriers to labor market participation. These findings synthesize the mechanisms that influence youth workforce outcomes and provide a foundation for understanding the policy response.

Youth workforce policy in Massachusetts is characterized by a range of policy tools designed to address the specific barriers identified in this analysis. These tools—such as YouthWorks, Connecting Activities, MassMobility, sector-based training initiatives, MassEducate, MassReconnect, and MassAbility—target different mechanisms including transportation, technical training, financial support, and services for specific populations. Used together, these tools can expand the range of accessible opportunities for youth across demographic groups and regions, responding to the contraction of traditional entry-level jobs and persistent disparities by race, disability, and region.

However, the extent to which these mechanisms reduce barriers and improve outcomes depends on sustained funding, effective execution, and coordination across agencies. The Youth Employment Gateway Cities Learning Community Pilot offers a unique opportunity to develop strategies that link these and other programs to address barriers to youth employment in a more coordinated way.

The effectiveness of the current policy landscape will ultimately be determined by how these tools are implemented, coordinated, and adapted to local labor market conditions. As these policies evolve, ongoing analysis will be required to assess whether the intended reduction in disparities and expansion of opportunity is realized across all youth populations.